

Grassroots Activism and Resistance in the Rhodope Mountains (Bulgaria)

ZLATINA BOGDANOVA



DOI: <https://doi.org/10.31577/SN.2024.2.19> © Ústav etnológie a sociálnej antropológie SAV
© 2024, Zlatina Bogdanova. This is an open access licensed under the Creative Commons

Zlatina Bogdanova, Bulgarian Academy of Sciences, Institute of Ethnology and Folklore Studies with Ethnographic Museum, Ethnology of Socialism and Postsocialism Department, Moskovska 6A Str., 1000 Sofia, Bulgaria; e-mail: zlatina_bogdanova@abv.bg

The ongoing research discussed in this article is focused on grassroots activism and resistance in the Rhodope Mountains (Bulgaria) where people from small village communities fight against private business interests and investments – the opening of quarries for the extraction of marble and ballast that would disrupt the established regimes of environmental protection in the region of the Middle Rhodopes Mountains – protected areas included in the UNESCO biosphere reserve *Chervenata sténa* (Red Wall) and the European ecological network “Natura 2000”. The paper addresses the following questions: What are people’s strategies of coping with change and uncertainty? How do their protests and social resistance movements mobilize public support through social, kinship and political networks? The following issues are discussed in more detail: the emergence of new political, cultural and ecological awareness of mountain communities fighting against the environmental exploitation of their territories; the role of the inhabitants and their families in preserving local livelihoods and traditions; and the many forms of negotiation on how to live together, including different visions and even conflicts over practices of resource management, sustainability and heritage.

Keywords: grassroots activism, resistance, protected areas, rural communities, Bulgaria

How to cite: Bogdanova, Z. (2024). Grassroots Activism and Resistance in the Rhodope Mountains (Bulgaria). *Slovenský národopis*, 72(2), 251–267.

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.31577/SN.2024.2.19>

Based on empirical research (since the end of 2022)¹ this paper will address one current issue: how people from small village communities in the Rhodope Mountains have united to take measures against the realisation of private business interests and investments – the opening of quarries for the extraction of marble and ballast that would disrupt the established regimes of environmental protection in the region of the Middle Rhodopes. These are the protected areas included in the UNESCO biosphere reserve *Chervenata sténa* (Red Wall) and the ecological network “Natura 2000”. The ongoing study is focused on people’s strategies for coping with change and uncertainty in the affected villages (Bogdanova, 2023). This case is a classic example of small-scale activism where some of the local inhabitants have become activists and even political candidates. Throughout the country, local groups pursue a common aim of enhancing the participation and resilience of local populations, forging transformations in communities, and reimagining societies by focusing on ecology and the environmental protection of settlements. Even if these initiatives are small in scope and mostly invisible to a larger public, they can be seen as important vehicles bringing a direct change to people’s lives, especially in marginalised settings. They can also be viewed and studied as “a laboratory of ideas and practices that may inspire wider societal changes, ranging from reformatory to revolutionary” (IUAES-WAU World Anthropology Congress, 2023).

Theoretically, these cases “do not fit easily in the social movement literature because they do not have the predominantly organised structures, explicit aims, broad claims or adequate resources that define a social movement” (Tilly, 2004; Johnston, 2009; Jasper, 2014; Nash, 2005) (IUAES, 2023). They can rather be seen as forms of resistance that challenge politically established interests and business lobbies, corruption practices and administrative decisions that have negative consequences for certain marginalised populations, “or as prefigurative practices which, at the local scale, test various ideas and attempt to forge alternatives to the status quo (Yates, 2015)” (IUAES, 2023). Despite their small scale, the combined effect of the initiatives taking place in a certain field “may work as a ‘quiet encroachment’ (Bayat, 2013) through which marginalised communities directly work towards envisioning alternative futures” (IUAES, 2023).

The examined case fits within the frameworks of the following discourses: environmentalism and grassroots activism (Bevington, 2009; Bullard, Johnson, 2000; Mihaylov, Perkins, 2015); “extractivism” as an economic and development model (Kröger, 2022); and “Green Deal” politics and political ecology (Brock, Savacool, Hook, 2021). The study could also be considered through the dichotomy of two concepts: “protected areas” (Guerrón-Montero, 2005) versus “sacrifice zones” (Shade, 2015).

Most often such cases reveal the uneasy relationship between the citizens and the state. They additionally exemplify the widening gap characterised by increasing

1 The ethnographic research was carried out in the villages of Cherven, Dolnoslav, Gornoslav and Dobrostan and the town of Asenovgrad.

dissatisfaction and estrangement towards the legal system, state institutions and office holders. In Bulgaria, this context is reflected in lower levels of social and political trust,² questionable regime legitimacy and limited electoral participation.

Methodology and Conceptual Basis

In this text, I will present my ongoing ethnographic research conducted in the Municipality of Asenovgrad (Plovdiv district), located in South Central Bulgaria. The study is being carried out through participatory observation, interviews and informal conversations in the field, as well as on the Internet. The work focuses on the local initiatives and social networks that have become my field site in the last few years. Mostly I do “anthropology at home”, which takes into account the position of the researcher working in an environment that is culturally close to him/her and among people who are part of his/her environment (Jackson, 1987). I used my insider position (as a researcher permanently residing in Asenovgrad) to gain access to respondents and to observe daily lifestyles and special events. My personal history is also among the characteristics that influenced the research: I have relatives and friends from Gornoslav and Dobrostan. In addition, I wrote my doctoral thesis following a year of fieldwork and observation of Cherven (see Bogdanova, 2012)³ conducted in 2004–2005.

To build case studies, I use the Internet to follow posts on the Facebook groups of the villages Cherven, Gornoslav and Dobrostan and the town of Asenovgrad, as well as to posts by the committees of local initiative. The main observations and interviews presented here were conducted between November 2022 and June 2024. Therefore, my study combines two methodological fields: digital ethnography, which focuses on cyber culture and cyber communities on the Internet, and anthropology at home. In addition, the research project covers the following study areas: anthropology of uncertainty, anthropology of economy and environment, social movements and protest – from a cultural perspective, social and political networks, and heritage and resource management.

The town of Asenovgrad is a centre of the municipality and has a population of approximately 50,000 residents. Plovdiv is the district capital and the biggest city in the region, with a population of circa 367,600. Some of the villages belonging to Asenovgrad Municipality have the following population numbers: Cherven (712), Dolnoslav (264), Gornoslav (92), Oreshets (46), Lenovo (394), Muldava (1,431), Topolovo (2,475), Stoevo (661), Dobrostan (30). Cherven is located 10 km from Asenovgrad,

2 For a discussion on the culture of social (dis)trust in Bulgaria, see Luleva, 2021.

3 In November 2011, I defended my thesis, “Studying inclusion and exclusion in rural Bulgaria through kinship and social networks”, as part of a comparative project funded by the VW Foundation focusing on contemporary processes of inclusion and exclusion in Poland and Bulgaria. The project team was based at the Max Planck Institute of Social Anthropology in Halle/Saale, Germany: https://www.eth.mpg.de/3538879/project_sie (accessed 7 June 2024).

Dolnoslav – 13 km, Gornoslav – 14 km, Oreshets – 21 km and Dobrostan – 27 km. Local livelihoods include biological beekeeping and saffron crocus plantations (in Gornoslav), viticulture and a few hotels catering to rural tourism. Farmers plant their gardens with herbs, walnut trees, cherry and apple trees, and many other kinds of fruit trees. In addition, the area is an attractive location vacation homes – families from Asenovgrad and Plovdiv have bought and renovated properties in the villages. The increased demand for houses in this part of the Rhodopes has led to increases in real estate prices. In recent years many young families have migrated to reside in the villages, this process accelerated due to the COVID-19 pandemic.

Resistance to Marble Quarrying in Gornoslav and Cherven

In November 2022, the Council of Ministers approved a concession for quarrying marble and ballast near the village of Gornoslav – the quarry is to be located at a distance of 800 m from the village. The beneficiary is a local construction firm known for its privileged connections to the municipality, having been awarded many construction projects in Asenovgrad.⁴ On 26 March 2024 the concession agreement was signed with the Ministry of Energy Resources.

The marble deposit in the region of Asenovgrad covers part of the northeastern slope of Dobrostan Hill. It is located in the Middle Rhodopes area, protected under the European ecological network “Natura 2000”⁵ within the buffer and transitional zones of the UNESCO Biosphere Reserve *Chervenata sténa*⁶.

The concession contract covers a period of 35 years, and it is in fact a follow up to an investment proposal from 2015.⁷ In order to dispute this already-granted concession, some of the residents of the villages of Gornoslav, Dolnoslav, Cherven, Oreshets and Dobrostan initiated active protest against the opening of the quarry. Since late 2022, they have united into a local initiative committee, supported by the NGO Green Balkans and the Biodiversity Foundation. Among other civil initiatives, the committee has opened a petition for a local referendum on the private investment in 2023 (thus employing direct democracy).

4 The recent reconstruction of the town's central square was undertaken by this construction firm in the period 2020–2024.

5 *Ministerstvo na okolnata sreda i vodite* (2020). *Obshta informatsiya za ekologichnata mreza NATU-RA 2000*. Available at: <https://www.moew.government.bg/bg/priroda/natura-2000/natura-2000-v-bulgariya/obsta-informaciya-za-ekologichnata-mreja-natura-2000/> (accessed 27 May 2023).

6 Ministry of Environment and Water, Regional Inspectorate of Environment and Water – Plovdiv (2024). “Chervenata sténa” Biosphere Park. Available at: <https://chervenatastena.com/en/the-biosphere-park/> (accessed 27 May 2023).

7 A check of the register of the Ministry of Energy Resources makes it clear that this is the second concession for the firm. The first one, in a location named “Chaikyra” (Asenovgrad region), was in 2006. Source: *Ministerstvo na energetikata. Kontsesii za dobiv*. Available at: <https://www.me.government.bg/bg/themes/koncesii-za-dobiv-735-1613.html> (accessed 7 June 2024).

In January, 2023 the leading newspaper *Capital* presented a short review of cases concerning locally based resistance movements against the opening and operating of quarries in the district of Plovdiv (Grivova, 2023). Grivova's article, "New quarries have sparked protests in villages around Plovdiv", sets out the history preceding the current protests against the quarry near Gornoslav. As early as 2015, the construction firm submitted an investment proposal for quarrying in the southern part of the concession area "Delchevoto-2" – in the lands of the villages of Gornoslav and Cherven. Back then, Plovdiv's Office of the Regional Inspectorate of Environment and Water had decided in favour of the concession, without even conducting an Environmental Impact Assessment. This administrative decision was legally challenged by people from Cherven. The court battle lasted two years (2016–2018), but eventually the administration won the case at the Supreme Court. Despite this, the legal confrontation blocked the concession for a few more years, until 2024.⁸ Meanwhile, another quarry was opened by other investors in 2016 (still functioning) close to Muldava village, on the road connecting Asenovgrad and Cherven.

In Cherven, there are family-run hotel and restaurants that have expanded their facilities since my doctoral research (2004–2005).⁹ When Cherven initiated the battle against the quarry in 2016, they were supported by thirty-seven residents of Gornoslav (back then the total population was no more than forty). The situation has now changed, since in recent years young couples with children have come to reside in Gornoslav. At present, they form the backbone of the protests. Most of the activists, old and new, are property owners residing in the villages; some are local farmers and a few own or/and manage hotels or restaurants and have made considerable investment in the area. All of them are now affected by the prospect of having a quarry nearby, which would negatively affect the development of organic farming and tourism.¹⁰ The activists have estimated that the population of the ten villages that are going to be directly affected by this investment is close to 7,500 people. My respondents anticipate significant damage to the environment, their properties, their livelihoods and the

8 As of June 2024, the construction firm is suing the Regional Inspectorate; the activists have now sided with the administration against the firm. The problem is that the concession could not be opened without a valid decision from the Inspectorate, and the old one expired in 2023.

9 For more details about rural tourism in the area, see Bogdanova, 2008.

10 In the new wave of resistance, the local initiative committee took legal action and brought the case to the Administrative Court in Sofia. In March 2023, the court made its ruling without considering the appeals against the concession in Gornoslav and terminated proceedings with the motive that the decision of the Council of Ministers did not infringe upon or prejudice the rights, freedoms or legal interests of the appellants. According to this ruling, the residents have no legal claim because their properties are located outside the concession area. This preliminary ruling was appealed at the Supreme Court, where the termination of the case proceedings was confirmed in December 2023. Meanwhile, a request for a preliminary inquiry was made to the Court of the European Union. The two cited rulings basically nullified the many years of efforts by organizations and activists fighting for human rights and environmental protection. The courts denied legal protection of the public interest in matters affecting the environment, and more specifically, when disputing concessions. As a result, the administration now has unrestricted opportunity to grant uncontrolled concessions following the example set by this case, already known as the "Gornoslav precedent". The prosecutor's

health of their families. They also fear that the only available water source, which supplies clean spring water to six villages in the region, will be compromised by blasting in the quarry. This source is located in karst – that is a landscape underlain by limestone that has been eroded by dissolution. For years, Cherven has suffered from undersupply of clean water, and in the summer limits on its use are imposed by the administration.

In an attempt to rekindle public opposition and protest, a new initiative committee was established on 12 January 2024 with the purpose of holding a general assembly in Gornoslav on the following issue: “Do you agree that the municipality of Asenovgrad, through the mayor and/or the municipal council, should allow changes to the status of state properties – forests located on the land of Gornoslav – in order to open quarries for the extraction of underground resources, or for landfill or polluting industries?”¹¹ The hopes are that through this act of direct democracy Gornoslav’s villagers will permanently halt the concession and force local authorities listen to the voice of the people and take the appropriate action.¹²

Imagining a Cultural Landscape¹³ as a Resistance Strategy

Because of the conservation status of the landscape (UNESCO, 2019), local resistance has received the support of environmental protection NGOs. Protected area status can greatly help the cause by presenting an argument against the realisation of private business investments and exploitation by heavy industry of the natural resources of the region. Besides nature, wild flora and fauna, there are ancient rock sanctuaries in the region around Asenovgrad. The Eneolithic Dolnoslav temple complex is an archaeological site in Lopkite area near the village of Dolnoslav, excavated by the Regional Archaeological Museum, Plovdiv between 1983 and 1991. The archaeological findings confirmed that the complex dates back to the second half of the fourth millennium BCE. According to Ana Raduncheva, it was an integral part of the high mountain system of rock sanctuaries in the Rhodopes and functioned as its lowest link. The locations of twenty-seven temple buildings occupying the entire sacred area have been identified (Raduncheva, 2008). The complex has been declared a heritage

office is now the only legal body that can defend the public interest by disputing a decision made by the Council of Ministers. Source: Published statement made by lawyer Snezhana Stefanova. Available at: <https://defakto.bg/2023/12/11/как-вас-загърби-практиката-си-и-отр/> (accessed 18 February 2024).

11 3 *zheni ot Gornoslav*. [Three women from Gornoslav]. Post from 20 January 2024. Available at: <https://www.facebook.com/profile.php?id=61555958903020> (accessed 18 February 2024).

12 In the months that followed, the mayor of Asenovgrad refused to call a General Assembly in Gornoslav. His decision was legally appealed and the court ruled in favor of the assembly and against the decision of the mayor. This assembly is, however, still pending because the mayor has not approved the procedure despite the court ruling.

13 For an extensive review of the concept of cultural landscape in human geography, see Jones, 2003.

site of national significance. Since the 1990s, it has been practically abandoned and has fallen into ruin due to negligence and lack of interest on the part of local institutions. There is not even a clear sign marking the location of the site. In the museum in Asenovgrad, there is only one artefact from Dolnoslav – a clay idol; a few more are exhibited in the permanent exposition of the Regional Archaeological Museum – Plovdiv. Most of the findings (about 4,000) have been stored and forgotten in the Museum funds. Therefore, there is still a large body of material evidence from the complex that needs to be rediscovered and revalued in terms of its status as cultural heritage.¹⁴

As a strategy to protect the place they live, a few activists have engaged in popularising the archaeology and heritage of the region (the aforementioned temple complex near Dolnoslav). As a step towards realising this goal, Ruslana, activist from Gornoslav organised a meeting. The announcement was posted in Facebook under the title “‘Lopkite’ – spirituality, cultural heritage, ancestral memory and restoration”, specifying the purpose of this talk as imagining and creating “‘Lopkite’ – a possible European educational and tourist centre”.¹⁵ Dr Dimcho Radev, a conservation specialist who was part of the excavation team from 1980 to 1982, was invited to give a presentation at “Hristo Botev” Community Centre in Cherven on 17 December 2022. It was poorly attended and did not provoke active involvement on the part of the community or local officials, as intended. Nevertheless, Ruslana did not entirely give up the idea of raising awareness and promoting the idea of “restoring” the temple complex as an integral part of the cultural heritage of the locality.¹⁶ In conversation with me, she stated her goal as doing research and making a plan to integrate this abandoned archaeological site into the conservation regime of the area.

Another initiative related to reclaiming the cultural landscape of the area and engaging local communities in its conservation focused on locating, repairing and conserving water fountains (*cheshmi*) in the villages Dobrostan, Oreshets, Gornoslav, Cherven and Dolnoslav. The first meeting of activists and volunteers was held in the centre of Gornoslav on 1 July 2023. The local initiative was part of the “Revive a water fountain” campaign, which was recruiting volunteers to restore fountains on the outskirts of populated areas and along the wild paths of Bulgaria. This project was launched in May 2023 by the “Science for nature” Foundation team with the aim to repair sixty fountains in poor condition as part of their “Living fountains” mission (Stoeva, 2023). Throughout the summer of 2023, the volunteers from the villages around Asenovgrad got together and started work on locating, cleaning and repairing all the fountains in the region.

14 Increased public interest owing to recent activism has produced one institutional feedback: the “The Magic of Dolnoslav” exhibition, dedicated to the heritage of Lopkite. Its opening took place on 20 June 2024 at the Archaeological Museum of Plovdiv. See <https://www.facebook.com/events/1971968569903299> (accessed 17 June 2024).

15 Available at: <https://www.facebook.com/events/3113736765438675> (accessed 20 February 2024).

16 For a discussion about the cultural heritage of Asenovgrad Municipality, see Bogdanova, 2015.

One of the latest attempts to consolidate the community of Gornoslav and revive its “memoryscape” is the initiative undertaken by the three female activists who, on 12 January 2024, formed a committee for new initiative (on 12 January 2024) to hold a general meeting of the population of Gornoslav. They called themselves “3 women from Gornoslav” in response to an article from 17 January 2024 in *Maritsa* newspaper that published the statement of the businessman who was granted the concession under the title, “Quarries pose zero risk to neighbouring villages, the laws apply to all” (Arnaudova, 2024). One of his main defence strategies was to deny the legitimacy of the protests by the local population and to claim that their resistance was being organised by outside forces. To substantiate his claims, in the article he cited personal data of the three women from the committee with the intention to expose them as faking their Gornoslav residency and origins. This statement has raised concerns (Zheljazkova, 2024) that the leakage of personal data was tolerated by the municipal administration and further heightened the fear of personal persecution and retaliation against the protestors.¹⁷ As a reaction to this allegation, the three female activists created the “3 women from Gornoslav” Facebook profile to serve as a virtual memory reservoir for the residents of Gornoslav, focused on exploring and making visible local genealogy, kinship and family history.¹⁸ The profile regularly posts photos and information about prominent families originating from the village, tracing the proliferation of Gornoslav’s “indigenous” inhabitants. In this way, public support is mobilised through kinship and family networks as a strategy of local resistance. More notably, these activities outline the parameters of a shared cultural landscape that people can revive in their minds and memories.

“Anxious Politics”: Protesters and Politicians (2023–2024)

This section seeks to explore the relationship between feelings of (in)security, experiences of social anxiety and popular demands for protection on the one hand, and the political responses to those feelings and needs on the other.¹⁹ A media and political environment characterised by fear, uncertainty and threats of various kinds has been conceptualised as “anxious politics” (see Albertson, Gadarian, 2015). In the current age of uncertainty, the political process is deeply affected by citizens’ perceptions of security and insecurity and the needs and fears (e.g. feeling (un)appreciated, (un)safe,

17 These fears are grounded in past events that happened in Gornoslav and Cherven – death threats made against one family, killing the dogs of one activist, and cutting off the tail of a dog owned by the chairwoman of the initiative committee, who was later badly injured in a car accident under unknown circumstances.

18 3 *zheni ot Gornoslav*. Available at: <https://www.facebook.com/profile.php?id=61555958903020> (accessed February 18, 2024).

19 These topics were covered in a conference at the University of Saarland in 2024, entitled “Emotional Dynamics of (In)security and Politics”. Available at: <https://www.uni-saarland.de/lehrstuhl/wenzel-burger/forschung/emotional-dynamics.html> (accessed 10 June 2024).

(un)accomplished or (un)belonging to a community) associated with these perceptions. Negative emotions such as fear, anxiety, anger and hatred are crucial influences in severing the bonds between citizens, institutions and the state. Here, I conceptualise “anxiety” and “uncertainty” as politically relevant contexts that have roots in perception of threat. They are reflected at “the micro level of an individual’s values, affects, identities and social positioning, the meso-level of discourses, social representations and communication” (e.g. environmentalism, nature conservation, heritage preservation, grassroots activism, “extractivism”, political corruption, neoliberalism, social inequality, clientelism), “and the macro-level of political reactions through policies that promise to enhance protection together” (e.g. “green” policies, legal reforms, environmental and political justice) (University of Saarland, 2024). In the case reviewed here, fear and insecurity are driven by actual crises – the imminent danger of environmental destruction, the high risk of property devaluation and negative impacts on local business investments – in addition to harmful consequences (e.g. deteriorating health and personal wellbeing). It matters who constructs and communicates potential threats and how this is done, because “Politicians not only engage with shared perceptions and collective insecurity. They may also manipulate and exploit these perceptions, creating demands for more protective policies” (University of Saarland, 2024).

In addition to holding rallies in Asenovgrad, the activists have also organised protests blocking the Asenovgrad-Kardzhali highway near Cherven on several occasions. Initially, the protestors did not make their cause politically bound. Nonetheless, they were almost immediately supported by local members of the opposition parties *Democratichna Bylgarija* [Democratic Bulgaria] and *Vazrazhdane* [Revival]; a deputy elected from the latter raised the issue during a session in the National Assembly. The case was politicised insofar as the protests were organised during active political campaigning for the parliamentary elections on 2 April 2023. Politicians, mostly from opposition parties, took active roles in addressing participants during a demonstration organised in front of the municipal building on 22 March 2023.

Later that year, the local elections for mayors and members of municipal councils in Bulgaria (on 29 October with a runoff on 5 November 2023) presented new opportunities for the activists to pursue the support of political parties. So far, they have not succeeded in persuading the members (mostly from the two ruling parties) of Asenovgrad Municipal Council to pay attention to their needs. Several attempts were made by the protestors to promote their case and get it on the council’s agenda. Council members twice refused to discuss and sign a declaration in support of the activists.

For the local elections in late 2023, the hopes were moderately high that members of a newly elected council would be more attentive to and supportive of the cause. The protestors took on active roles addressing all politicians – both in the ruling and opposition parties. To this end, the candidates running to be Mayor of Asenovgrad Municipality were invited to take part in a pre-election debate and discussion in the

centre of Gornoslav on 22 October 2023.²⁰ This meeting was organised on the initiative of activists from the village and the main issue discussed was, again, the approved concession and “the vision regarding the construction of a quarry on the land of the village of Gornoslav and the village of Dobrostan. Are there ways to fulfil the wish of the local residents to have no quarries?” Four candidates from one major and three small opposition parties were present. They declared their support for the villagers and promised to contest the procedures for opening the quarry if elected to office. None of them became Mayor of Asenovgrad and only one made it onto the council. Two more candidates who were not present at the meeting sent written declarations of support that were read during the event. The remaining three candidates for mayor (two from the ruling parties) made no statements.

In addition, some activists have become political candidates themselves: two women (Kremena and Sofia) from Cherven ran for council endorsed by a leftist opposition coalition (Levitsata). At the same time, a male activist (Aleksander) ran for the mayor’s office in Cherven, supported by another opposition party (*Vazrazhdane*). Their participation in the elections, although unsuccessful, was a strategy for seeking political influence and active involvement in municipal affairs. The affiliation with political opposition parties was indicative of the motivation to sway the local government in favour of the protesting villages. For years prior to that, the owner of the construction firm and beneficiary of the concession sponsored his own political project – “Bulgarian Democratic Union – Radicals”. In the local elections, this political party won four seats in the council for the period 2023–2027. The previous council included three representatives of the firm, one of whom also chaired the assembly. This explains why the protesters had failed to get the support of the municipal councillors when trying to submit a proposal for a declaration and hearing during several protests in front of the Municipality building.

The latest double elections for the National and European Parliaments, scheduled on 9 June 2024, have presented new opportunities to change the political status quo in Bulgaria and Europe. Many small civil coalitions and political parties have been leading exemplary campaigns by involving local activists in direct politics. Among the eco-activists from Gornoslav, the Green Movement Party²¹ in particular was seen as an expert organisation that “owns” the issue of “environmental protection”. Its leader, Toma Belev, a former Deputy Minister of Environment and Water and a long-time expert in the management of protected areas in Bulgaria, came to support the local cause. He gave a public lecture on nature conservation through civic activism on 17 December, 2022 at Asenovgrad Library. Associated experts from the Green Laws project have also provided consultation and help. The eco-activists from Gornoslav expressed their appreciation of the political response to their needs and

20 *Mesten initsiativen komitet*. Available at: <https://www.facebook.com/mik.gdchod> (accessed 25 January 2024).

21 <https://zelenodvizhenie.bg/> (accessed 16 June 2024).

concerns, and two of them (Maya Hristozova, Chair of the Local Initiative Committee, and Dr Dimcho Radev) joined the party's ranks and became candidates for the National Parliament. In the elections, the Green Movement Party did not pass the entry barrier of 4% to become part of the next Assembly. In any case the evolution of this grassroots movement towards direct political participation testifies to the emergence of a new political, cultural and ecological awareness within the mountain communities fighting against the environmental exploitation of their territories.

“Green” politics as contentious politics

As the history of the protests shows, the state and its institutions privileged one economic activity – the extraction of underground resources on state lands (making “extractivism” the dominant economic model), thus putting local populations at a disadvantage and in a constant struggle to maintain their claims to the landscape, its environmental protection, water resources and clean air. The ongoing public and media dispute presents conflicting visions about how the landscape and its resources should be used – a conflict over the values attached to the environment and to the collective interests and identity of local societies. To protect their villages, the activists from Gornoslav united with residents from other places who have faced similar problems opposing quarries in the villages of Belashtitsa, Parvenets and Shishmantsi. Thus, there is now a growing social resistance fighting against quarries and other polluting industries near populated settlements.

One of the contentious issues regarding the protective “green” policies is centred on Regulation No. 7 of 25 May 1992 on the hygienic requirements for the health protection of the residential environment (*State Gazette* No. 20/05.03.1999). This legal act was repealed in May 2011 (*State Gazette* No. 38/17.05.2011) and since then the number of quarries has risen to 239, according to a reference check made and posted by the local initiative committee.²² In the graphic representation, the number of approved concessions for each year is given in relation to the political affiliation of the Minister of Environment and Water over the period from 2011 to 2023. At this point, the local resistance has acquired a clear political dimension: the illustration shows zero approved concessions under the Minister Borislav Sandov (from 13 December 2021 to 2 August 2022), a member of the Green Movement Party then ruling in coalition with the Democratic Bulgaria Party. This post was an open endorsement of one political figure and party.

On 19 December 2023, I attended “How close is dangerously close – a debate about the need for sanitary zones” organised by the Green Laws initiative of the Association for Research Practices. The discussion was attended by representatives

²² *Mesten initsiativen komitet*. Post from 27 March 2023. Available at: <https://www.facebook.com/-mik.gdchod> (accessed 28 May 2023).

of initiative committees from many Bulgarian towns and villages (Gornoslav, Belovo, Belashitsa, Bryagovo, Burgas, Vetren Dol, Gornoslav, Dalbok Izvor, Pavlikeni, Plovdiv, Ruse, Turkmen, Shishmantsi and Yambol) that had been affected by quarries, incinerators, waste dumps and chemical plants – all located near people's homes. Members of various organisations and institutions and a few deputies (to the national parliament) and lawyers commented on the need for regulation of sanitary and hygienic zones around settlements when new polluting industries are established. The main questions addressed were: how did the mass emergence of industries in the immediate vicinity of populated areas come about, and why does the state not see this as a problem? Future actions were discussed to bring about change to the legislation and restore the Regulation No. 7. The need to review the Environmental Impact Assessment procedure was emphasised (Staevska, 2023). The public's concerns and responses were reported on Bulgarian national radio on 26 January 2024 and published on their website under the title "How investment proposals became more important than citizens' health. There is no institution to which you can turn and protect your rights, claims lawyer Snezhana Stefanova" (Petrova, 2024).

By organising a national protest on 14 April 2024, the eco-organisations managed to alert the public to the envisaged changes affecting Bulgaria's environmental legislation. The proposed amendments, made through the Investment Promotion Act, were seen as favouring only large investors: "at the same time, the environmental procedures for small investors will be many times longer and cumbersome. It would be easier to obtain an Environmental Impact Assessment for the construction of a nuclear power plant than for a hotel" (moreto.net, 2024). At the national Parliament, the two dominant parties, GERB²³ and DPS²⁴, proposed major changes to three key laws – the Environmental Protection Act, the Territorial Planning Act and the Renewable Energy Act. The amendments were seen as paving the path to the complete destruction of nature and small businesses in Bulgaria. People feared the country would become a "sacrifice zone" and that, if changed, the laws would facilitate foreign investment in so-called "green energy" projects such as building infrastructure, offshore and onshore wind turbines and solar parks with "eco-motives", as well as other "large projects with a high corruption risk, including fuel and chemical installations, storage facilities for acids, pesticides or radioactive waste, gas pipeline networks, power lines, dams, highways, etc." (moreto.net, 2024). These projects were seen as detrimental to the interests of local communities, some of which were already suffering the consequences of polluting industries. The proposed changes were envisaged as a way of limiting the power of local councils and regional institutions to such an extent that one ministry alone could decide the fate of millions, the organisers said. In such cases,

23 GERB is abbreviation for "Citizens for European Development of Bulgaria" – a center-right, populist, conservative and pro-European party founded in 2006 (ruling 2009–2021).

24 DPS is abbreviation for the "Movement for Rights and Freedoms", an ethnically based party formed around the ideology of social liberalism, founded in 1990, usually ruling in coalition with GERB.

municipalities' general development plans could be changed by order of the minister or the regional governor, which would eliminate the powers of local governments and the democratic rights of local people. In view of these threats, the eco-activists initiated a petition addressed to the President, who immediately imposed a veto on the introduced amendments. The veto was voted on in the national Parliament on 30 April 2024, and supported by the opposition parties (108 votes). GERB and DPS, seen as the parties of the political status quo, voted against the veto (99 votes).

Conclusion

The recent attempts to privilege large investors by changing legal environmental procedures in Bulgaria were seen as a provocation to the social order and political justice. Efforts to exclude local governments and populations from the decision-making process regarding the realisation of large-scale projects hint at "behind-the-scenes" intentions and shady interests. It was these interpretations of events that provoked protest and political mobilisation.

The conflicts between large investors and the collective interests of affected populations and small businesses are mostly dealt with in the media and through the mediation of civil society organisations. The discussions on this case, including media coverage, addressed the many forms of negotiation about how citizens and industry can divide and share environmental resources. It became evident that these disputes could not find a satisfactory resolution via the public administration or in court.

Despite the gloomy prospects, the activists around Asenovgrad have devised several resistance strategies – political networking and lobbying, influencing public opinion thorough kinship and family relations, and imagining a cultural landscape whose resources are shared and conserved by the local communities. Behind these activities is the desire to demonstrate the collective and determined willpower of the protestors to defend the place in which they live, which includes not only the environment, its biological diversity and scenery but also local traditions, family history and genealogy, memory and cultural heritage.

If the protests and lawsuits do not succeed in stopping the quarries in the region, the activists fear the complete devaluation of their property and the destruction of organic farming in the area. In this negative scenario, young people and their families, who are now activists opposing private business interests, could be forced to leave the affected villages thus contributing to the pervasive depopulation in the rural areas of Bulgaria. So far, the local landscape has been misread by local policy makers: there is conflict and contradiction over managing this territory due to its status as a conservation area. The dispute highlights virtually incommensurable views about the way the resources of this distinctive environment should be transformed into economic value. In this case, and in many other similar cases, popular viewpoints run into conflict with the legal system and state institutions.

The examined case also demonstrates how feelings of (in)security and experiences of social anxiety make people look for answers from the political system. They ask for protective policies and hold out hope that, through direct involvement in elections, they can defend the interests of their communities. Where environmental exploitation, degradation of nature and “extractivism” as a dominant economic model have caused anxiety, people have reacted by seeking out protection from “green” parties to break down status quo political configurations. In doing so, the activists have realised that personal involvement matters, and some of them have started out on the road of becoming politicians themselves.

The presented research started in small villages around Asenovgrad and subsequently progressed to consider the major issues of environmentalism and the “big context” of nationwide ecological networks united through grassroots activism. The study could be further developed to describe in greater detail the connections between political, economic and social factors with environmental issues and changes (political ecology) in Bulgaria. The application of Green Deal politics, investment in renewable energy sources, future economic development and nature conservation are all relevant topics that provoke fear and anxiety. People living in conditions of uncertainty devise coping mechanisms but, above all, negotiate change and try to limit the insecurity it brings.

The picture so far has presented a constant struggle over the landscape and its resources where activists and small business owners interested in organic farming and rural tourism (around Asenovgrad, in particular) oppose large investors (“extractivism” and so-called “green” projects, in general). The resolution of ambiguity in the contested future possibilities lies in finding the right balance between nature conservation and development. In this complicated situation, the political system and environmental legislation should ideally guarantee equal treatment and fair access to resources benefitting small as much as big investors.

Acknowledgments:

The study was carried out in the framework of the research project “Anthropology of Uncertainty. Continuities and Changes in Post-socialism”, supported by the Bulgarian Science Fund (KP-06-N55/12).

REFERENCES:

- Albertson, B., Gadarian, S. K. (2015). *Anxious Politics. Democratic Citizenship in a Threatening World*. New York: Cambridge University Press.
- Arnaudova, D. (2024). *Vakril Zapryanov: Karierite sa nulev risk za sasednite sela, zakonite vazhat za vsichki*. [Vakril Zapryanov: Quarries pose zero risk to neighbouring villages, the laws apply to all]. Available at: <https://www.marica.bg/region/asenovgrad/vakril-zapryanov-karierite-sa-nulev-risk-za-sasednite-sela-zakonite-vajat-za-vsichki> (accessed 21 February 2024).

- Bayat, A. (2013). *Life as Politics: How Ordinary People Change the Middle East*. Stanford University Press.
- Bevington, D. (2009). *The Rebirth of Environmentalism: Grassroots Activism from the Spotted Owl to the Polar Bear*. Island Press.
- Bogdanova, Z. (2008). Class and Identity Construction: The Case of Rural Bulgarian Business. *Changing Economies and Changing Identities in Postsocialist Eastern Europe: Halle Studies in the Anthropology of Eurasia*, Vol. 20 (pp. 95–108). Münster: LIT Verlag.
- Bogdanova, Z. (2012). *Studying the Processes of Exclusion and Inclusion in Rural Bulgaria: The Significance of Kinship and Social Networks* [Doctoral dissertation, Martin Luther University Halle-Wittenberg]. Available at: <http://digital.bibliothek.uni-halle.de/hs/content/titleinfo/1120994>.
- Bogdanova, Z. (2015). A Glimpse Towards the Cultural Heritage of Assenovgrad in the Perspective of Cultural Tourism. In: A. Luleva, Iv. Petrova, S. Barlieva (Eds.), *Contested Heritage and Identities in Post-socialist Bulgaria* (pp. 281–299). Sofia: Gutenberg Publishing House.
- Bogdanova, Z. (2023). “Privileged” and “Deprived” in the Rhodopes: How Local Inhabitants Become Activists Fighting to Keep Small Mountain Communities Alive. *Balkanistic Forum / Балканистичен форум*, 32(3), 196–211.
- Brock, A., Sovacool, B. K., Hook, A. (2021). Volatile Photovoltaics: Green Industrialization, Sacrifice Zones, and the Political Ecology of Solar Energy in Germany. *Annals of the American Association of Geographers*, 111(6), 1756–1778.
- Bullard, R. D., Johnson, G. S. (2000). Environmental Justice: Grassroots Activism and Its Impact on Public Policy Decision Making. *Journal of Social Issues*, 56(3), 555–578. <https://doi.org/10.1111/0022-4537.00184>
- Econ.bg. (2024). Наредба № 7 от 25 май 1992 г. за гигиенните изисквания за здравна заштита на селищната среда. [Regulation No. 7 of May 25, 1992 on the hygienic requirements for health protection of the residential environment]. Available at: https://econ.bg/Нормативни-актове/Наредба-7-от-25-май-1992-г-за-хигиенните-изисквания-за-здравна-защита-на-селищната-среда_1.1_i.128890_at.5.html (accessed 28 May 2023).
- Grivova, V. (2023). *Novi karieri sabudiha protesti v sela okolo Plovdiv* [New quarries have sparked protests in villages around Plovdiv]. Kapital. Available at: https://www.capital.bg/politika_i_ikonomika/gradove/plovdiv/2023/01/04/4434848_novi_karieri_subudiha_protesti_v_sela_okolo_plovdiv/.
- Guerrón-Montero, C. (2005). Marine Protected Areas in Panama: Grassroots Activism and Advocacy. *Human Organization*, 64(4), 360–373.
- IUAES-WAU World Anthropology Congress (2023). Abstract for Panel on Small-scale Activism. Activists Aiming towards Community Transformations through Grassroots Projects in Marginalized Settings. Available at: <https://iuaes2023delhi.org/panelabstract-detail.aspx?pid=199>(accessed 20 February 2024).
- Jackson, A. (1987). Reflections on Ethnography at Home and the ASA. In: A. Jackson (Ed.), *Anthropology at Home* (pp. 1–15). London and New York: Tavistock.
- Jasper, J. (2014). *Protest: A Cultural Introduction to Social Movements*. Polity Press.
- Johnston, H. (2009). Protest Cultures: Performance, Artifacts, and Ideations. In: H. Johnston (Ed.), *Culture, Social Movements, and Protest* (1st ed.) (pp. 3–29). Ashgate Publishing, Ltd.
- Jones, M. (2003). The Concept of Cultural Landscape: Discourse and Narratives. In: H. Palang, G. Fry (Eds.), *Landscape Interfaces. Landscape Series*, Vol 1. Springer, Dordrecht. https://doi.org/10.1007/978-94-017-0189-1_3.

- Kröger, M. (2022). *Extractivisms, Existences and Extinctions: Monoculture Plantations and Amazon Deforestation*. Routledge.
- Luleva, A. (2021). *Kultura na (ne)doveryeto v Balgaria. Antropologichni perspektivi* [Culture of (mis)trust in Bulgaria. Anthropological Perspectives]. Sofia: Gutenberg.
- Mesten inišiativen komitet. [Local initiative committee]. (2023). Available at: <https://www.facebook.com/mik.gdchod> (accessed 25 January 2024).
- Mihaylov, N. L., Perkins, D. D. (2015). Local Environmental Grassroots Activism: Contributions from Environmental Psychology, Sociology and Politics. *Behavioral Sciences*, 5(1), 121–153. <https://doi.org/10.3390/bs5010121>
- Ministry of Environment and Water (2024). *Obshta informatsiya za ekologichnata mreža NATURA 2000* [General information about the ecological network NATURA 2000]. Available at: <https://www.moew.government.bg/bg/priroda/natura-2000/natura-2000-v-bulgariya/obsta-informaciya-za-ekologichnata-mreža-natura-2000/> (accessed 15 June 2024).
- Ministry of Environment and Water (2024). *Zakon za opazvane na okolnata sreda*. [Environmental protection legislation]. Available at: <https://www.moew.government.bg/bg/zakon-za-opazvane-na-okolnata-sreda-6671/> (accessed 10 June 2024).
- Ministry of Environment and Water, Regional Inspectorate of Environment and Water – Plovdiv (2024). *Chervenata sténa Biosphere Park*. Available at: <https://chervenatastena.com/en/the-biosphere-park/> (accessed 10 June 2024).
- Ministry of Energy (2024). *Kontsesii za dobiv*. [Mining concessions]. Available at: <https://www.me.government.bg/bg/themes/koncesii-za-dobiv-735-1613.html> (accessed 10 June 2024).
- moreto.net (2024). *Natsionalen protest sreshtu promeni, zasyagashiti ekologichnoto zakonodatelstvo* [National protest against amendments related to the environmental legislation] (14 April 2024). Available at: <https://www.moreto.net/novini.php?n=494309> (accessed 10 June 2024).
- Nash, J. (2005). Introduction: Social Movements and Global Processes. In: J. Nash (Ed.), *Social Movements. An Anthropological Reader* (pp. 1–26). Blackwell publishing, Ltd.
- Petrova, V. (2024). *Kak investicionnite namerenija stanaha po-vazhni ot zdraveto na grazhdanite. Njama institucija, kym kojato da se obyurnete i da zashtitite pravata si, tvyrđi advokat Snezhana Stefanova*. [How investment proposals became more important than citizens' health. There is no institution to which you can turn and protect your rights, claims lawyer Snezhana Stefanova]. Available at: <https://bnr.bg/horizont/post/101940330> (accessed 20 February 2024).
- Raduncheva, A. (2008). Prehistoric Rock Sanctuaries in the Eastern Rhodopes and Some Other Mountain Regions in Bulgaria. In: R. I. Kostov, B. Gaydarska, M. Gurova (Eds.), *Geoarcheology and Archeomineralogy. Proceedings of the International Conference 29 – 30 October, 2008* (pp. 180–184). Sofia: “St. Ivan Rilski” Publishing House.
- Shade, L. (2015). Sustainable development or sacrifice zone? Politics below the surface in post-neoliberal Ecuador. *Extractive Industries and Society*, 2(4), 775–784.
- Staevska, V. (2023). *Grazhdani ot cjalata strana obediniha sili za pravoto si na zdravna zashtita na selishtnata sreda. Zeleni zakoni*. [Citizens from all over the country joined forces for their right to health protection of the settlements. Green laws]. Available at: <https://www.zelenizakoni.com/novini/pravo-na-zdravna-zashtita> (accessed 22 January 2024).
- State Gazette No. 20/05.03.1999. *Naredba za izmenenie i dopylnenie na Naredba № 7 ot 1992 g. za higiennite iziskvaniya za zdravna zashtita na selishtnata sreda*. [Regulation amending

- and supplementing Regulation № 7 from 1992 on the hygienic requirements for health protection of the residential environment].
- State Gazette No. 38/17.05.2011. Zakljuchitelni razporedbi. § 25 [Final provisions, § 25].
- Stefanova, S. (2023). *Kak Vyrhovnijat administrativen syd zagyrbi praktikata si i „otrjaza“ ot pravosydie zashtitata na okolnata sreda* [How the Supreme Administrative Court abandoned its practice and “cut off” environmental protection from justice]. Available at: <https://defakto.bg/2023/12/11/как-вас-загърби-практиката-си-и-отр/>.
- Stoeva, M. (2023). “Syzhivi cheshma” - kampanija za vyzstanovjavane na cheshmi v razlichni kraishata na Bylgarija. [“Revive a fountain” - a campaign to restore fountains in different parts of Bulgaria]. Available at: <https://uspelite.bg/sajivi-cheshma-kampaniya-za-vazstanovjavane-na-cheshmi-v-razlichni-kraishata-na-balgariya-1> (accessed 20 February 2024).
- Tilly, C. (2004). *Social Movements, 1768–2004*. New York: Routledge.
- UNESCO (2019). Chervenata Sténa Biosphere Reserve, Bulgaria. Available at: <https://en.unesco.org/biosphere/eu-na/chervenata-stena>.
- University of Saarland (2024). Abstract for Conference on Emotional Dynamics of (In)security and Politics. Available at: <https://www.uni-saarland.de/lehrstuhl/wenzel-burger/forschung/emotional-dynamics.html>.
- Yates, L. (2015). Rethinking Prefiguration: Alternatives, Micropolitics and Goals in Social Movements. *Social Movement Studies*, 14(1), 1–21.
- Zheljazkova, S. (2024). *Borci sreshtu karierata kraj Gornoslav sys symnenie, che njakoj snasja lichnite im dannii do “Zapryanovi-03”*. *Obshtina Asenovgrad zapochna proverka po signala im*. [Fighters against a quarry near Gornoslav with the suspicion that someone is leaking their personal data to “Zapryanovi-03”. The municipality of Asenovgrad started an investigation based on their report]. Available at: <https://trafficnews.bg/plovdiv-region/bortsi-sreshtu-karierata-krai-gornoslav-sas-samnenie-che2-301307/> (accessed 20 February 2024).
- 3 zheni ot Gornoslav. Available at: <https://www.facebook.com/profile.php?id=61555958-903020>.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

ZLATINA BOGDANOVA (ORCID: 0000-0002-3647-3032) is a senior Assistant Professor at the Institute of Ethnology and Folklore Studies with Ethnographic Museum, Bulgarian Academy of Sciences. She obtained her doctoral degree in Ethnology from the Martin Luther University Halle-Wittenberg after a successful defence of her thesis – *Studying the Processes of Exclusion and Inclusion in Rural Bulgaria: the Significance of Kinship and Social Networks*. She earned an MA degree in the Cultural Anthropology of Southeastern Europe from Sofia University “St. Kliment Ohridski”. The topic of her Master’s thesis was *Intercultural aspects of the youth short-term labour migration within the frameworks of the “Work and Travel” program*. She holds a BA degree in Political Science – International Relations from the American University in Bulgaria (AUBG). She has published studies in the field of urban anthropology, cultural policies and heritage. In addition, her research has covered topics associated with rural communities in Bulgaria.