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**Rampant Development in a Park of the People: Save Pirin and
Lessons in the Resistance against Neoliberalism**

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Abstract

Understanding neoliberalism as a many-headed heterogenous global tendency, this thesis aims to investigate, analyse and gather lessons in the global resistance against it. It is particularly focused on Pirin National Park in Bulgaria, where government changes to its management and development have sparked year-long protests. I ask how neoliberalism manifests itself in Bulgarian environmentalism and how and why protesters exercise their democratic right to contest Bulgaria's future through the politicisation of a national park. Speaking in the vein of political ecology, I bring together theories on neoliberalism, environmentalism and conservation in order to conceptualise and outline the contours of an environmental resistance to neoliberalism in Bulgaria. I find that the campaign articulates its claims in the realm of legality and doesn't engage with the idea of neoliberalism or its ideology. This is a result of the historical, social and political context in Bulgaria. In conclusion, I argue that the complex ripples caused by such a movement, open the possibility for both radical and reformist changes. Entertaining the idea that neoliberalism is variegated, imply that its resistance is too, and cases such as these are not black and white.

Key Words: neoliberalism; environmentalism; campaign; Pirin; double movement

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1. Introduction

Me: Why Save Pirin?

Vasil [protest organiser]: Have you been there?

Me: I have.

Vail: Well, you know there's just this magical quality about it...unique. There's nothing like it. There's no other mountain range in Bulgaria like it.

The capitalist world system may have “executed works more marvellous than the building of Egyptian pyramids, Roman aqueducts, and Gothic cathedrals” as Marx (1963 [orig.1848], p.29) famously wondered in the Communist Manifesto. Indeed, the concept of development — the endless march of human progress — has too seldom been questioned. Alas, now it takes little effort to see the destructive capacity of our world-system. This is all the more so in recent history with the advent of neoliberalism. In the Niger Delta, Shell has long been embroiled in death and destruction to get at the oil which lubricates this very same system. In Brazil, toxic mud from a Samarco-owned dam was belched out following a collapse, taking out an entire village, reaching the Atlantic Ocean and destroying entire riverine ecosystems on the way, and of course those who lived within them. The list goes on and it is high time we see things for what they are. Political ecology provides us with the tools we need to do this. With a focus on the holistic thinking, power relations, cultural and social particularities and a host of other philosophical insights, we can accept that we live in a world-*system*, with its multi-spatial, temporal, scalar forces and processes. In this way, we recognise the global machinations of the capitalist system and its destructive tendencies. We notice, for example, that ideas thought up in Washington have an impact on fish in a river in Brazil. We can also arm ourselves with this knowledge and resist the tide.

I am interested in this process of understanding these global problems and the resistance against them. By looking at the case of Pirin National park in Bulgaria, I will shed light on the neoliberal encroachment into socio-natural relations and how we can resist them. Firstly, is an illumination of what neoliberalism consists of and how this emerges in the world in various ways. I take Bulgaria to be a place victim to neoliberal policies, including in the environmental sphere. Secondly, based on research carried out over the period of two months, I analyse how the

resistance to arguably neoliberal trends is unfolding. Finally, I attempt to draw out the lessons in understanding how neoliberal forces and their resistance interweave but also how we can work towards thinking of a more radical resistance. At heart, this thesis also recognises the complexity of the problem - its messiness. Nothing is black and white, nor even grey! It is vital to acknowledge this, and to work with it. Only then can we work towards bettering problem and avoid the loss of unique, magical places that Vasil laments above.

2. Aim & Research Questions

The aim of this thesis is to draw a link between global neoliberalism and the case of Pirin National Park in Bulgaria. Following this, I aim to analyse the campaign in an effort to better understand neoliberalism's variegated impact on local contexts and how this in turn, affects the resistance. Finally, this will help teach lessons on the global resistance to neoliberalism. I have delineated the following research questions:

1. In view of the thesis that Pirin's management decisions amount to a symptom of neoliberal environmental policy and ideology, how does the Save Pirin campaign formulate, articulate and navigate its democratic right to resist? Why?
2. In what ways does this affect the interaction between neoliberal and opposing forces; subsequently, the political ecological landscape of socio-natural relations in Bulgaria?

The first question amounts to an investigation of the way in which Save Pirin operates given the local particularities, be they historical, social or material. This is linked to the idea that neoliberalism is a variegated phenomenon, and it follows that so will be efforts to resist it. I accept that neoliberalism has entangled itself with socio-natural relations, such that activities like conservation and environmental management, previously a shield against unfettered capitalist expansion, have become targets or even vehicles for marketisation (Heynen et al., 2007). This will be discussed further. The second question looks at the impact this has on the network of relations, actors and power vis-à-vis socio-natural relations in Bulgaria; looking towards future research opportunities.

3. Background & Case Study

Pirin was established in 1962 - one of the oldest national parks in Bulgaria. Lying south of the capital Sofia, near the Greek border and spanning 403.56km², it is well-known locally and abroad for a variety of reasons (see Fig.1 & 2). One of its principal attractions is winter skiing. Two resorts lie in the north-eastern section of the park - Bansko and Dobrinishte ski resorts - the largest (Bansko) owned by the firm Yulen AD¹. Unfortunately, Bansko has been a site of criminality since its inception in 2001 (Raeva, 2014). Originally given a 99.5ha concession to build upon, satellite images showed Yulen had exceeded this limit by 2009 and double the amount of forest had been cleared for construction (*ibid.*). This was the beginning of a struggle which has erupted in recent months. Now the government and Yulen are both under fire.



Figure 1: A map of Bulgaria including its national parks. Pirin highlighted in red.
 Source: BGuide, 2018; <https://kartibg.files.wordpress.com/2012/03/bulgaria-karta-national-parks.jpg>

¹ AD is the Bulgarian abbreviation АД / Акционерно Дружество - a joint stock company

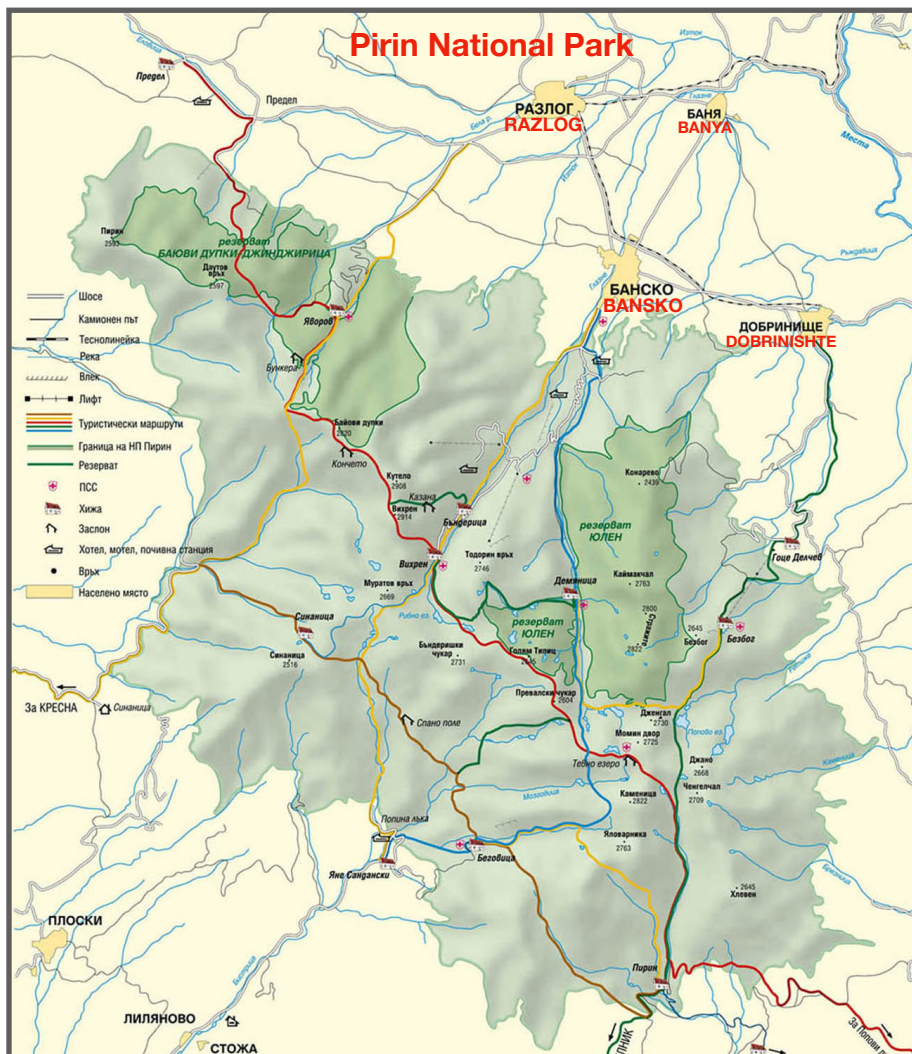


Figure 2: A map of Pirin, including trails, peaks, *hizhi*, features and nearby towns. Title and translated town-names added.
 Source: Association of the Parks in Bulgaria, 2018; [http://parks.bg/parks/pirin/](http://parks.bg/parks/pirin/map-pirin/)

The spark was a two-fold move by the leading cabinet in their efforts to pave the way for development in the park. The story has circulated heavily around Boyko Borisov, the prime minister and in particular Neno Dimov of the Ministry of the Environment and Waters (MOSV²). First, a new management plan was written up, as required after the last plan expired in 2014. This new plan intended to green-light more development in Bansko, Dobrinishte and other neighbouring towns. In the section ‘long-term vision’, the plan lays out their idea of registering the park under the UNESCO program ‘Man and the Biosphere’, which is actually a downgrade in the IUCN protected area categories from II to V (Proles Engineering, 2015; Sabev, 2015). Furthermore, the zoning proposals greatly increase the tourism zone and the unorthodox buffer zone to ~13% of the park’s area (Proles Engineering, 2015; Sabev, 2015). Campaigners blocked this plan from taking

² The Ministry of the Environment and Waters — in Bulgarian *Ministerstvo na Okolnata Sreda i Vodite*. I have abbreviated it phonetically to MOSV.

effect by appealing to the supreme court, arguing that the changes in the new management plan require a number of assessments and measures to be carried out before it can be approved. The plan having been blocked in court, the government decided to simply make amendments to the original plan, it still being in effect. In it, the government has effectively opened up 48% of the park to logging concessions and granted the firm Yulen permission to further develop the Bansko ski resort. 45% of this includes protected forest ecosystem and recreation zone; 2.2%, tourism zone; and 0.6%, infrastructure and facilities (Staevska, 2018). This is in comparison to the mere 2.8% zoned for such purposes currently (Bioraznobrazie, 2004).

According to Raeva (2014), the original overdevelopment is enough to warrant demands on the government to reclaim the park and punish Yulen for its breach of contract. The current issue goes further. The amendment represents an undemocratic measure pushed through by the government to open the park up to rampant development (Staevska, 2018). Worst of all was the lack of transparency and disregard of procedures regarding environmental impact assessment and public consultations required for taking such decisions. Votes were taken during the Christmas holidays, and amendments were accepted with mere days for the public to go through the process of appeals. This has all led to an ongoing protest movement grabbing the attention of global media and spurning the intervention of multinational actors. In a country gripped by neoliberal policies and its subsequent failings since the collapse of Communism, this represents yet another piece in the global tendency to relate to nature through a neoliberal lens; a deregulation or scaling back of conservation sites, which has been criticised by many as typical of a neoliberal assault on the nonhuman world. After Ryan Zinke, U.S.A's secretary of the interior, recommended Trump reduce the size of a number of national monuments established by his predecessors (Eilperin, 2017), the president shrank the territory of Bears Ears National Monument by around 85% (Korte, 2017). In Poland, the Białowieża forest has also been threatened by the Prime Minister's approval to triple logging in the area (Koper & Goettig, 2016). The list goes on. The common thread running through these cases is an unrelenting subordination of the world around us to the capitalist world economy; environmental management and conservation become yet another market frontier for capital to expand into (Büscher et al., 2012; Sullivan, 2006).

3.1 Pirin and the Nature State³

In *The Nature State*, Kelly et al. (2017) argue that “Nature made the State and the State made nature” (p.1). In other words, nature is undisputedly bound up in narratives of the State, it being another element in the State’s quest to proclaim absolute sovereignty over the territory within its borders (Dilsaver and Wyckoff, 2005). This concept is useful in beginning to understand the contours of Pirin. The State’s management of nature takes many forms, the national park being one of them. Before the 60s, the State created a number of bodies “that took nature [...] as the constituting discursive motif” (Kelly, et al., 2017, p.4). This is so in the Bulgarian case too, as the creation of the Union for the Protection of National Nature came about as early as 1928.

Interestingly, archival research revealed a link between this organisation and a similar one in Austria — at the time a fascist state. The ideological connection is beyond the scope of this thesis, but it serves to highlight the European-wide state-building project during those years and its link to nature conservation.

As Dilsaver and Wyckoff (2005, p.237, emphasis original) state, “a national park is a political entity with a political *raison d’être*”. For many countries in the world this reason for being revolves around the necessary protection of nature brought about by the modernist era and its mirror creation of a-modern peoples and their destructive environmental practices (Neumann, 2004). Such was the case primarily in the ‘global South’, which inarguably felt the brunt of this project (Siurua, 2006). However, the case in question here is somewhat different for a number of reasons. Firstly, the creation of Pirin took place in a space virtually devoid of settlement and so the exclusion of people from its territory did not rob people of their livelihoods in much the same way as in other corners of the world. Secondly, it was established in a different political climate, therefore serving different political aims. Whilst acknowledging how these differences affect the political reality of the national park, it would be hasty to let them obscure the fact that it is identical in most ways to parks around the world. This is to say, it is a space created in the tradition of ‘fortress conservation’, (Siurua, 2006) with the aim of “preserving and conserving [...] national and human wealth and heritage, [...] contributing to the development of culture and science and the

³ von Hardenberg at al., 2017

wellbeing of society” (Protected Areas Act, 2013, §2(1)). Clearly, Pirin is a park not interested solely in the protection of nature, but in the preservation of a common good and, as von Hardenberg et al. (2017) have also remarked, as a *global* common good, in this case, as a UNESCO World Heritage Site. This notion of heritage, global or Bulgarian, is important in understanding the protest movement’s resistance to government changes and will be returned to in the thesis.

Despite this notion of the Nature State as a state-building project, it is often one which happens in “fits and starts” (Kelly, et al., 2017, p. 9), as the Bulgarian case illustrates so well. As different regimes gain control, means and ends change accordingly. It helps to see the current episode in Bulgaria as one such fit or start. There are particular global and local forces at play which now interact, forming ripples and creating opportunities. The thesis aims to understand these interactions, ripples and opportunities. The following section lays down the theoretical groundwork necessary for analysing the case.

4. Theoretical Review & Framework

The theoretical undertaking of this thesis is to expand our understanding of neoliberalism and its resistance. As such, I aim here to 1) delimit neoliberalism generally and its various processes and tendencies and emphasise the heterogeneity of neoliberalisation(s), 2) scrutinise what these mean for environmental management and conservation, 3) look into the particularities of the Bulgarian context and its relation to neoliberalism and 4) provide a key insight by way of the idea of a ‘double movement’ (Polanyi, 2001). These can all be tied together into a theoretical framework which will move towards answering the research questions.

4.1. Neoliberalisation

Neoliberalism is most often traced to the 70s and 80s and the ideas of Friedman and Hayek, these later being carried out most infamously under Reagan and Thatcher and to varying effect around the world. It is perhaps best described as the encroachment of market logic (and therefore,

capital) into unprecedented spheres of our lives, led by the ideological belief that this is the best way of organising the economy; faith in the unrestrained 'free' market. (Peck and Tickell, 1994; Peck & Tickell, 2002; Brenner and Theodore, 2002; McCarthy & Prudham, 2004; Larner, 2009). Its employment brings a number of particular effects, but there are two fundamental forces of neoliberalisation which are of most importance to this thesis' grappling of the topic.

Firstly, is the marketisation of an increasing number of things in the world, including the nonhuman world. The contemporary capitalist imperative to do so was first theorised by the *Eco-Marxists* including, for instance, O'Connor's (1998) ecological capitalist contradiction, Foster, Clark and York (2010) and their recent expansion on the idea of the capitalist metabolic rift, and Harvey's (2004) theorisation of 'accumulation by dispossession', with its modern spatio-temporal expansion. Later, and specifically in regards to neoliberalism, a number of scholars have spoken of the increased 'commodificaiton' of the world (see Castree, 2003 for a synthesis).

The second core process in neoliberalism is the 'hollowing out' of the State apparatus (Jessop, 1994). This is a somewhat problematic statement, as the creation of the conditions for the unregulated 'free market' still relies necessarily on the State. In brief, the neoliberal State is still necessary for the creation of a space in which the market can operate, but is increasingly devolved of its own powers, capacities and responsibilities (Jessop, 1994; Castree, 2008). Within these two core effects are a number of processes which Castree (2008) has usefully put together in his two-part synthesis of geographic scholarship on neoliberalism. In this, he lays out the major processes as consisting of privatisation, marketisation, deregulation, reregulation, creation of market proxies and flanking mechanisms in society (Castree, 2008, p.142). I will not go into the ins and outs of these processes as they are not all relevant to the thesis. As mentioned, the two core processes of marketisation and a hollowed out State are inherent to neoliberalism. This suffices for a preliminary definition of neoliberalism. However, once one begins to look at the structural nature of these ideas and policies worldwide, a theoretical conundrum arises.

4.2 Neoliberal Hydra / Octopus

It is important to problematise the idea that neoliberalism is a monolithic global effort at market expansion. Yet, we must also question whether an insistence on heterogeneity is helpful. As one can see, this begins to be a difficult theoretical line to tread as it involves discussing on the one hand, the concertedness of neoliberalism as a global project and on the other, its infinitely multifarious manifestations in local contexts. Indeed we may even begin to question whether neoliberalism exists at all (Mirowski, 2014)! Thankfully, the concern can be quickly dispelled (*ibid.*), so let us begin with this. Mirowski eloquently takes one through an intellectual history of neoliberal ideas and paints a picture of what he labels the “Neoliberal Thought Collective” (2014, p. 39). This begins with the Mont Pèlerin Society and radiates outwards like a ‘Russian doll’, moving to academic departments, think-tanks, and single issue grass-roots organisations (Mirowski, 2014).

The Russian doll structure of the Neoliberal Thought Collective would tend to amplify and distribute the voice of any one member throughout a series of seemingly different organizations, personas, and broadcast settings, lending it resonance and gravitas, not to mention fronting an echo chamber for ideas right at the time when hearing them was most propitious.

(Mirowski, 2014, p. 49.)

The idea of the ‘Russian Doll’ is useful, particularly in understanding the genealogy of neoliberalism and how it has spread. Furthermore, despite claims to the contrary, Mirowski (*ibid.*) makes clear that neoliberalism can be described as a very specific set of ideologies and policies that have gripped the world since the 50s. This conceptualisation is eloquent but I feel, fixates on the monolithic idea of the ‘Neoliberal Thought Collective’. There is another side to the debate. Already early on, Peck and Tickell (1994) were questioning whether neoliberalism was even a thought out reformulation of capital at all, and instead “as a symptom of, not as a solution for, the after-Fordist crisis; [...] a kind of ‘jungle law’ which tends to break out” (Peck and Tickell, 1994, p. 319). Whether or not we abandon the idea that there is method to the madness, what they begin to emphasise is the idea that neoliberalism is a heterogeneous phenomenon.

Rather than this realignment representing a new global-local order, we argue that it is a geopolitical manifestation of the continuing crisis. If neoliberalism is the politics of the crisis, global-local disorder is its geography.

(Peck and Tickell, 1994, p. 322.)

This idea has been taken further by a number of contemporary academics. Brenner and Theodore (2002) first coined the term 'actually existing neoliberalism' in order to analyse urban restructuring going on around the world, which illustrated the fact that it "must be construed as a historically specific, ongoing, and internally contradictory process of market-driven sociospatial transformation, rather than as a fully actualized policy regime, ideological form, or regulatory framework" (Brenner and Theodore, 2002, p. 353). In the same edition of *Antipode*, Peck and Tickell (2002) again urged thinkers to focus on *neoliberalisation*, as opposed to any fixed and much less homogeneous form (Brenner and Theodore, 2002). As they advised, any analysis of neoliberalisation, inherently concerns itself with change (Peck and Tickell, 2002 in: Brenner and Theodore, 2002). Thus, we are presented with two seemingly divergent ways of approaching the problem.

I find it has helped to work with the metaphors of Hydra and Octopus. With the former - a mythical beast with many heads - it is implied that neoliberalism therefore has no central authority or 'ideological headquarters', which can be targeted exclusively as the origin and centre of the global project. If one head is chopped off, another grows back. It would, as the legend goes, take a Herculean effort to slay the best. With the latter - a central brain does exist, but its tentacles reach out to and wrap every nook and cranny it can fill. Here, one can target a central set of ideas but when all is said and done, little has been left untouched. Which is most helpful? I argue both. In terms of this thesis, this is to say that a look at neoliberalism as a global monolithic structure is a somewhat flawed approach and will provide little theoretical or empirical value to one studying the local resistance to forces paralleling neoliberalism but which are nevertheless, unique. At the same time, it *is* possible to outline similar institutions which have a common genealogy and act

around the globe to forward a set of ideas which can be labelled neoliberalism. Indeed, these institutions do exist in Bulgaria.

Without wanting to exhaustively discuss epistemological implications, this leaves me with some theoretical messiness but a messiness that I must acknowledge given the simultaneously structural and post-structural character of such a problem. Given a delineation of neoliberalism and an understanding its nature, how does this link to environmental issues and conservation?

4.3 Neoliberal Nature, Ecology and Conservation

The effect of neoliberalism on the environment is a growing theme in academia (Heynen et al., 2007; Castree, 2011), with some claiming neoliberalism is an *inherently* environmental project (McCarthy & Prudham, 2004). In brief, neoliberal natures follow much the same processes as described above. The way in which neoliberalism has become tied to the environment is a recent undertaking in academia — one laid out by Haynen, McCarthy, Prudham and Robbins (2007) in *Neoliberal Natures*. In this volume they aim to “consider the ways in which environmental governance, and environmentalism as a set of political movements, coincide, collide, articulate, and even constitute the emergence of neoliberalism.” (Haynen et al., 2007, p. 9). In other words, what does environmental management and (in the case of this thesis) conservation look like in a neoliberal world?

A synthesised critique of this form of conservation is offered by Büscher et al. (2012)⁴, who summarise their definition of neoliberal conservation as “an amalgamation of *ideology and techniques* informed by the premise that natures can be ‘saved’ through their submission to capital and its subsequent revaluation in capitalist terms” (p. 4, emphasis original). They also note that despite the image of conservation as a saviour of nature from the damage capitalism can cause, it has in fact become appropriated by capitalist ideas (*ibid.*).

McCarthy and Prudham (2004) note that alongside the well researched degradation of social and economic spheres, another central impact in the neoliberalisation process is the assault

⁴ It is of course, of no coincidence that this article is published in *Capitalism Nature Socialism*, co-founded by O’Connor, a previously mentioned eco-marxist.

on environmental regulation put in place precisely to shield socio-natural relations from the market. This is in part due to the contradictions mentioned before but also due to the ideological belief that the market is the best (and only) method by which the world should be organised. If regulations stand in the way of making a profit from nature, then they are scrapped. A parallel process is that of reregulation (Igoe & Brockington, 2007; Castree, 2011). Igoe and Brockington (2007, p.437) cite Büscher and Dressler's (2007) case of the Great Limpopo Transfrontier Park as an example similar to this case study, whereby state-owned territories are effectively rented out to investors, in an effort to make profit from the conservation of nature.

The process of commodification works by privatising and marketising elements of the non-human world (Castree, 2011). The above-mentioned reregulation comes into play here as areas must be made legally accessible to market forces. Following this, a process of commodification proceeds. Castree (2003) lays out the process as consisting of alienation, individuation, abstraction, valuation and displacement (p.279-82). I will not define everyone of these steps, but they essentially work to metaphysically disassociate elements of nature from their environment, and materially incorporate them into the world of capitalist economic valuation, thus subjecting them to exchange-value, allowing them to be traded for money (Castree, 2003). This is how, for instance, ecosystem services have begun to be discussed in terms of their monetary value. The idea that a river cleans water consumed by humans is excised from the ecosystem as a whole and valued economically. Furthermore, this leads to the rise of sectors such as biodiversity offsets, which claim that an environmentally damaging activity in one area can be 'offset' by replanting or restoring an 'identical' ecosystem someplace else (Benabou, 2014).

The metaphysical aspect of commodification is particularly interesting. Taking from Situationist theory, Igoe (2010) describes how "conservation promise[s] Western consumers escape from alienation through consumption, self-expression and connections to imagined places, people and animals" (p.389). Conservation produces and circulates images, thus emboldening the process of commodification in the discursive realm. This simultaneously represses other ways of relating to nature (Sullivan, 2006). Sullivan (2006) best summarises the overall impact:

Modern bio- diversity conservation, whether produced in parks, CBRNM programmes, or international meetings of donors and policymakers to discuss the fate of 'the global environment', thus requires and reproduces acceptable conceptualisations of, and relationships with, the presentable, packageable, consumable and manageable objects of 'nature', 'biodiversity' or 'the environment'. A 'nature' with which human relationships are reduced to sustainable consumption and custodial practices, whether direct or indirect, for livelihoods or for profit.

(Sullivan, 2006, p. 209.)

The final aspect of neoliberal nature is its structural presence worldwide. McDonald (2010) charts the apparently long-developing relation between business interests and conservation, pinning it as far back as the publishing of the World Conservation Strategy in 1980, arguing that from this point on there was a conscious structural manoeuvre in preemption of the new neoliberal environment to open space for capital in areas previously kept off limits. Other global structural links include, for example, the link between the US AID institution and global conservation (Corson, 2010), an institution equally infamous for its influence over global development during the first neoliberal assaults. Fuentes-George (2013) researched the Convention of Biological Diversity to point out also that neoliberal discourse has infiltrated global environmental institutions. Igoe, Neves and Brockington (2010) best theorise the whole of sustainable development and the relevant institutions as a Gramscian historical bloc, promulgating a hegemonic view on how, why and what conservation is.

Of course, numerous case studies exist: elephant-back tourism in Thailand and Botswana (Duffy and Moore, 2010), ecotourism development in Madagascar (Duffy, 2008), and the neoliberalisation of park management in Finland (Ryetteri and Puhakka, 2012). For other case studies, one can refer to the aforementioned volume by Heynen et al. (2007) and Volume 4, No.5 of *Conservation and Society* (Igoe and Brockington, 2007). The discursive implications of neoliberal conservation are not left aside either; the suppression of other ways of relating to and valuing nature is deplored by Sullivan (2006) and a Foucauldian analysis using the concept of

environmentality to identify the discursive core of varying conservation approaches is carried out by Fletcher (2010).

A note on terminology: Büscher et al., (2012) make the distinction between neoliberal *natures, environments, ecologies* and *conservation* (p.4), however, the difference, I hold is one of scale and area of effect. This is to say, although the thesis concerns itself with conservation, the work on all links between neoliberalism and socio-natural relations are useful and will be drawn on. The case study in question revolves around Pirin National Park, but to understand its contours, I must turn first to the Bulgarian experience of neoliberalism.

4.4 The Bulgarian Transition⁵ and its Neoliberalisation(s)

The Bulgarian context immediately presents us with a crucial difference to the typical historical process. Whereas neoliberalism is often seen as a response to the Fordist / Keynesian crises of the 20th century, Bulgarians lived under communism between 1946 - 1989. With the fall of the communist regime, Bulgaria was thrown into Peck and Tickell's (1994) 'jungle'. This presents us with a unique historical process, but one which parallels currents throughout the world. In fact, quickly after the collapse of communism in 1989, Bulgaria went through a quick series of tremendous politico-economic changes including the privatisation of its banking sectors and utilities. Pavlova and Sariiski (2015), in their economic overview of the neoliberal transition, refer to the "RahnUtt" Plan, conceived by Prof. Richard Rahn from the US Chamber of Commerce. Locating the document proved difficult but news clippings from the time hint at a typical modern-imperial arrogance inherent in "tak[ing] on the moribund economy of newly democratic Bulgaria and [drawing] up a plan for transforming it into a supply-side, free market" (Binder, 1990, p.20b). During this intervention, all of the usual neoliberal policies were implemented, however, as is also clear, the "starting conditions [...] were at best unfavourable" (Pavlova and Sariiski, 2015, p.64). Naming specifically the huge concentration of assets (95%) in state hands, "low competitiveness", an "irrational employment structure and a "considerable budget deficit", the result was a transition far below par (Pavlova and Sariiski, 2015, p.64). In all, the transition led to myriad ill-effects,

⁵ The period after the fall of Communist regime is known as 'prehodyt' or 'the transition'.

ranging from lost bank sovereignty to long-term hindrance to growth and many others (Pavlova and Sariiski, p.73). A read through research related to the issue indicates that many shared this pessimistic view of the what happened and what was to come (e.g. Mladenova & Angressano, 1997). It isn't crass to come to the conclusion that Bulgaria was indeed yet another victim of the Washington Consensus.

These changes took place in 90s, but the institutional presence of neoliberalism lingers on. Kofti (2016) carried out an ethnographic study on a glass factory near Sofia and found that workers would often conflate communism with neoliberal policies as they were often unjustly affected by both. Mirowski's (2014) 'Russian doll' is not far off either. The Atlas Network (formerly the Atlas Research Foundation) is a global organisation set up in 1981 to help set up neoliberal think-tanks around the world (Mirowski, 2014). In their own words:

Atlas Network is a nonprofit organization connecting a global network of more than 475 free-market organizations in over 90 countries to the ideas and resources needed to advance the cause of liberty.

(Atlas Network. 2018)

Of these 475 'free-market organisations', three are located in Sofia, Bulgaria. One is concerned with access to information while the other two are ideologically charged. The Bulgarian Libertarian Society, "is the only organization in Bulgaria that protects the ideas of individual freedom, the right to life and property and the principle of non-aggression" (Bulgarian Libertarian Society, 2013). It comes as no surprise that what they list as ideas which should pull website viewers into joining them is, for example, being of the opinion that "the market economy is the best and most affordable system for the allocation of scarce resources" or "spheres such as education, social affairs, health, and trade require a significant reduction of political and bureaucratic interference" (*ibid.*). The Institute for Market Economics (IME) busies itself with the mission "to advocate free market solutions to challenges citizens of Bulgaria and the region face in reforms" (IME, 2017). Although it distances itself from government support, it puts a lot of energy

into influencing policy-making. Overall, these institutions aim at promulgating the free market and developing the neoliberal capitalist system within Bulgaria. A problem they and most others in Bulgaria rail against is corruption.

4.5 Corruption

As can be seen, and which will further be discussed, corruption is a spanner in the theoretical works. In discussing neoliberalism, its ideas and policies, the immediate assumption is one of purity. How can we judge a political project if not in its purest form? This is of course a flawed assumption and one that goes back to the messiness previously mentioned. A set of ideas will never be implemented purely and homogeneously and corruption is one such example of how neoliberalism rears its ugly head in a specific locale. This locale, however, is not even so specific. Corruption is found worldwide in developed countries and at the highest levels (Williams, Moran, and Flanary, 2000, cited in: Holmes, 2006). Holmes (2006) lists off cases (to name just a few) ranging from illegal fundraising in Germany by Chancellor Helmut Kohl, to million dollar kickbacks in Belgium involving NATO, to the more infamous scandals of Silvio Berlusconi and other high-level figures in Italy (p.4-6). “The listing of countries and state agencies tainted by corruption allegations in recent years could continue for hundreds of pages” (Holmes, 2006, p. 8).

As will be seen discussed later, Bulgaria is no stranger to corruption either. According to the E.U., 86% of people feel that corruption is widespread (76% is the E.U. average) (E.U., 2014). It is widely accepted also that after the transition, private interests essentially captured the Bulgarian state (Barnes, 2007; Innes, 2014). Barnes (2007) argues that Bulgaria has actually suffered from waves of state capture, where competing private interests fight for access to State assets, consistently draining the country’s coffers. Protests against this corruption are also common, the largest of which took place in 2013-14, against the ‘Oresharski’ cabinet and its appointment of Peevski the media mogul as head of State Agency for National Security (DANS) (Ganev, 2014). Interestingly, these protests also included an environmental component, when an Investment Planning Minister involved in destroying a national park along the Black Sea was

appointed (*ibid.*). In the discussion, I will discuss the particularities of corruption for the case study at hand.

Nevertheless, this does not detract from the thesis that the situation surrounding Pirin National Park amounts to symptoms of a global neoliberal economic system. I, in line with Holmes (2016) theorise that corruption comes hand-in-hand with neoliberalism. In his own words:

[T]he spread of neoliberalism since the 1970s, which accelerated in the late 1980s, has significantly contributed to the apparent rise in corruption. Neoliberalism's focus on ends over means, flexibility, competition, *homo economicus*, consumption, free trade, and reducing the role of the state [...] helps to explain the connection.

(Holmes, 2006, p.11., emphasis original.)

Before concluding there is yet another point which sidelines the question of corruption. The decisions made by the Bulgarian government are an intrusion of market logic into the environment, which thus constitute a practice common to neoliberal ideology. Corruption aside, neoliberal free-market capitalism is still the economic system upon which it breeds meaning that whatever the means may be, the deregulation of the national park paves the way for further development and marketisation of Bulgaria's 'natural capital'. Like a shock to the immune system, it weakens the capability of Bulgarian citizens and society to resist further intrusions.

4.6 Polanyian Double Movement

In his seminal book *The Great Transformation*, Polanyi (2001 [orig.1957]) mentions the concept of a 'double movement' — on the one hand the “establishment of the self-regulating market [...]” and on the other “the principle of social protection, aiming at the conservation of man and nature [...]” (p. 139). The idea is simple and elegant. As capitalist ideology pushes the market to ever further frontiers, those eventually impacted by its deleterious effects will push back. In the case of Pirin, those who enjoy the park (assumedly all Bulgarian citizens), now feel their rights being threatened as private interests carve out larger spaces of the park for development. However,

there is a caveat in this theory which is the crux of this thesis. In order to understand the resistance (the counter-movement), one must look at the historical and cultural ground from which it emerges. Polanyi did not develop the argument that the counter movement is obviously integrated within the society within which market forces operate (Carton, 2014). This is to say, that as market forces encroach increasingly upon the social norms, values and cultures from which the counter movement springs, this resistance is likely to incorporate elements of those same market forces; the double movement becomes a dialectical phenomenon (*ibid.*). Moreover, the double movement can simply consist of a reformist project; “altering the market in order to maintain it” (Mansfield, 2004, p.571).

This is a key insight into analysing the case of Save Pirin. Whilst they do indeed resist symptoms of neoliberal free-market forces, their norms, values, cultures and history are bound up in the same norms, values, cultures and history of market forces and its actors (*ibid.*). In addition to this, the particular history of Bulgaria and its recent stark break with Communism would surely affect the nature of the double movement too. Simply put, a campaign in defence of something will inherently involve aspects of the culture from which it emerges. This thesis on Save Pirin necessarily takes this into account. Otherwise, one risks “resorting to essentializing typologies of ‘true’ and ‘false’ forms of social protection” (*ibid.*, p. 1004).

A good example of such research is the case of TIPNIS National Park in Bolivia (Hope, 2016). Here, a very unique historical and political landscape has pushed campaigners to create a platform based on constitutional rights and to politicise their cause as indigenous (*ibid.*). Interestingly, this has resulted in the coupling of conservation and indigeneity as inherent (*ibid.*, p. 926). Many of the claims are not specifically directed at shooting down development but rather focus on the grievance of not having control over it (*ibid.*). This is a prime example of how local interactions between the economic system (Hope (2006) labels Bolivia’s reality as ‘post-neoliberalism’) affect movements which emerge to resist its deleterious effects. This theoretical framework is vital to understanding neoliberalism worldwide.

4.7 Overview

Overall, the theoretical framework covers four points. Firstly, it treads a thin line of a structural understanding of neoliberalism which highlights the localised and variegated manner in which it manifests (Peck & Theodore, 2007), but also the common geographical and idealogical genealogy which can be traced (Mirowski, 2014). Secondly, it briefly demonstrates that neoliberalism is an *inherently* environmental project (McCarthy & Prudham, 2004), and reviews some literature on what can be called neoliberal conservation. Thirdly, it theorises that the Bulgarian case of environmental management and particularly that of Pirin National Park is such a form of neoliberalisation, despite corruption. Finally, it takes Polanyi's (2001 [orig. 1957]) idea of the double movement and Carton's (2014) necessary development as an explanatory insight for what the nature of Save Pirin might be. This theoretical framework brings together the necessary insights to approach the following research questions.

5. Methodology

5.1 Sampling

I often think that if the world is proverbially small, Bulgaria is the size of a living room. I have been consistently impressed by the random encounters I and other friends have had, only to learn that the seeming stranger is in fact somehow part of your network of friends, colleagues or acquaintances. It has always seemed to me that the six degrees of separation are markedly fewer in Bulgaria. Thus, snowballing has been my primary mode of sampling for organisations surrounding the campaign. These participants include individual protesters, members or leaders of organisations and other individuals which are connected through the coalition behind the campaign. After contacting these groups through social media or other connections, I was put into contact with others in an expanding network of contacts. I have held this to be an appropriate method in Bulgaria, given my experience. Having said this, I have been cautious and aware of the bubble that this thinking can create. It might seem obvious but it is always the least heard people that are least seen. This is to say that my snowball method risks forming a bubble of people connected by similar interests, class, gender and so on, while the ease of finding new

contacts masks that fact that a large section of people might end up underrepresented.

Nonetheless, this method suffices for finding participants within the key organisations surrounding the Save Pirin campaign and it still made room for unexpected and fruitful encounters.

Two individuals and organisations in government positions were contacted via email. These include Ska Keller, a Green EMP; and Ekoglasnost a historically important environmentalist party. Ska Keller's aides responded positively but a meeting could not be set up in time. I received no answer from Ekoglasnost.

For those outside of the campaign proper, including for example, those living around the national park, I have relied both on random and targeted sampling. In other words, I have targeted specific huts, and hotels, particularly if they are located around the controversial areas of the national parks (Bansko and Dobrinishte) or have experiences which help illuminate aspects of the story informing my research questions.

I have also included the possibility of unveiling interesting and valuable information by simply having informal chats with everyone I come across during the course of my research. Information may have been lacking, and the topic is certainly controversial, but most people in the country are in some ways aware of the issue, and their experience is of course as valid as anyone else's. Themes and sentiments which recurred in interviews would often be echoed in talks and this has proven to be an invaluable side to the research, as my overall understanding of the situation in the Bulgarian context was improved.

5.2 Methods

For those involved in the campaign I have carried out interviews, ranging from informal talks to slightly more rigid, formal interviews (see Fig.2). These lasted anywhere from 30 minutes to two hours. Most took place in the workplace of the given individual although most informal talks were in public spaces. The level of structure I have applied to the interview depends on how closely the participant is associated to the themes present in my thesis. For instance, if a participant is part of the campaign but interests themselves primarily in financing of the project, their thoughts on the relevant themes may need a more directed conversation to be elicited. Usually, I set aside a day of preparation and constructed a loose structure consisting of the main themes, ideas and information that I would like to discuss. All of my interviews with members of the coalition were taped upon agreement. Questions ranged widely, given the equally wide range of organisations

Interviews		
Anonymised Name	Organisation / Role / Job	Place of Interview
Vasil	Political Organiser	Stara Zagora - workplace
Liliana	WWF - Bulgaria	Sofia - workplace
Ivan	Association of Parks in Bulgaria	Sofia - workplace
Maria	EkoObshtnost	Sofia - workplace
Stoyanka	Greenpeace - Bulgaria	Skype

Informal Talks		
Anonymised Name	Organisation / Role / Job	Place of Interview
Georgi	Hizha A	Hizha A
Slavian	Hizha B	Hizha B
Pavel	Hotelier	Dobrinishte - workplace
Yordan	Forester	Sofia - public space
Nikola	Bansko Information Centre	Bansko - workplace
Informal focus group	Ecologists / Foresters / Misc.	Sofia - public space

Figure 2. Table of interviews and informal talks. This includes the most significant interactions i.e. those quoted in the analysis.

working within the coalition. Thus, topics included the valuation of nature to the state of civil organisation in Bulgaria to personal experiences in protests. I encountered a few of the individuals in the coalition later by chance and online via e-mail. I took the chance to update them on the progress of my thesis and bounce more ideas off of them.

The rest of my interactions were markedly less formal. I would often meet with people spontaneously and after informing them of my intentions, we would have a conversation, untaped, in which I tried to elicit the most important facts, experiences and sentiments that relate to the topic in question. This is due partly to a question of comfort and ethics, which I will deliberate on

further, and partly due to their working style. For instance, a *hizhar*⁶ (hut caretaker) does not necessarily have the time to organise an hour apart for an interview.

It is more likely that I can have a valuable interaction with them if I approach them as would anyone for a spontaneous conversation on a specific topic.

All of the above-mentioned interactions were in Bulgarian as my fluency is sufficient. The language barrier does however, still exist to an extent as the topics could become quite complex. This was a main reason for choosing to tape interviews, to allow for a second or third listening. I feel that I have understood enough to carry out the analysis although the interviews were perhaps less dynamic as I wouldn't recognise specific sentiments or themes in the moment, which a native speaker would. Nevertheless, I have a large group of friends and people with whom I could discuss ideas, so as to bolster my understanding and enter into interviews more prepared. Bulgarian is written in the Cyrillic alphabet but I have transliterated titles, phrases and so on into Latin letters, so as to give some access to readers.

Including these interactions, I have looked at a number of documents in trying to answer the research question. These include mainly the management plan for Pirin, reports by organisations and other official documents related to the park or campaign. Furthermore, social media was briefly included in the research to take a look at the discussion online, which can help reveal or confirm public sentiments or ideas involving the campaign.

4.3 Ethics

The nature of this thesis is perhaps not ethically problematic in and of itself but its case study deserves some thought on the matter. The government's behaviour since the beginning is particularly confrontational in what amounts, crudely said, to a right-wing assault on the environmentalists who have decided to protest against management decisions (Medarov, 2018). Without wanting to delve into a discussion on this, the point is that those involved are risking their well-being and many have in fact suffered as a result. This, of course, means that all participants are anonymised unless otherwise mentioned. As government members are public figures, their

⁶ A *hizha* is the Bulgarian version of a mountain hut or chalet, found along the footpaths in mountain ranges. They are managed and owned by a number of organisations, the largest of which is the Bulgarian Tourist Union (BTU). People can sign up to become *hizhari* (hut caretakers), responsible throughout the year for all of the huts activities. This includes feeding and boarding hikers who visit and maintaining the building. The job is understood to be difficult, particularly in more isolated huts and through the winter months.

names will be published. Many of those interviewed work for high-profile organisations present also in the media, so their identities are discernible. I have anonymised their names nonetheless. Furthermore, I will be very careful in the course of the research to respect the privacy of participants and not share incriminating information or details unless confident that it is inconsequential to the participants health and well-being. This attitude will extend to myself so as not to place myself unnecessarily in harm's way but also to avoid precluding potential meetings with participants as a result of my previous actions or interactions.

Those living or working around the national park, are understandably more sensitive to the issues at stake, especially if they are connected to institutions involved in the controversy. These people include, for example, *hizhari*, hoteliers, foresters and others. This sensitivity might be a matter of simple caution or indeed a real risk of harm to their livelihoods. Either way, this requires a more cautious approach to interacting with them, and handling their information. Thus, I have anonymised their names but also the name of their workplace (read: *hizha*). I have not taped any interactions, and names or information which might put them at risk have been censored. During the course of the research, this did not affect the ease with which I could communicate with people and I felt that the sentiments associated with the issues at hand were discussed to an appropriate degree. Of course there are those who just want to be left alone to eat, drink, sleep and get on with their lives, as is their right!

6. Results and Discussion

Here I will discuss the results of my research, including interviews, talks, events that happened at the time of writing and some documents relevant to the case. Firstly, is a discussion of the campaign's conceptualisation of the problem, their subsequent envisaging of a solution, and their articulation of interests and organisational style. I suggest towards the end a reason as to why this might be, effectively answering the first research question. This helps to inform the second research question and paves the way for further research.

6.1 It's all about the money

Before addressing the question on how Save Pirin articulates its interests, it is necessary to look into their conceptualisation of the problem.

Vsichko e svyrzano s pari / Everything is connected to money
(numerous interactions)

This phrase was uttered in every single interaction, in one way or another, during the course of my research, be it by those in the campaign, or those who take no sides in the struggle. Even outside of this research, the phrase comes up in daily conversation, almost as an idiom. It could be in regards to healthcare or building materials; this is a recurring social sentiment in Bulgaria. What does it signify? To some it was meant to explain why those in government positions consistently went against the will of the people to push through policies which put profit first. To others, it was an attempt at claiming that even those who campaign for the park, the “so-called environmentalists” are in some way or another bought or corrupted by money. For others yet, it was a blanket statement to deplore the state of corruption at all levels in the country. It often came at the end of a discussion on the various issues involved in Pirin. As such, it was the bottom line in the conversation; “Surely you know, everything in Bulgaria is connected to money” (informal focus group). This to me, represented and was linked to three issues in the conceptualisation people have of the Pirin problem.

The first is corruption. The problem is widely understood to be tied to the Bulgarian ‘mafia’. This is a small set of individuals who profited directly from the connections in the Communist regime and were able to appropriate a large share of public assets. As explained by Holmes (2006, p. 192), the problem was instigated by a process of quick privatisation in post-communist countries which took place without a local bourgeoisie or class with access to capital, lack of interest or funds from foreign investors, and a political elite which were already in positions favourable to gaining access to these assets. The entire network of corrupt individuals in Bulgaria is far beyond the scope of this thesis or indeed a volume of theses.

In connection to Pirin, the following summary suffices. As revealed in an investigation by Bivol (a local independent media organisation), the two largest shareholders of Fibank (the third largest bank in Bulgaria), Tseko Minev and Ivaylo Mutafchiev, are also the two largest investors

(through a network of offshore companies) in Yulen AD, the concessionaires of Bansko ski resort in Pirin National Park - they are the de facto owners (Bivol, 2014). This fact has been hidden from public knowledge for a long time, but as the investigation makes clear, a certain Georgius Georgiu from Cyprus, who was long fronted as the actual owner of Yulen, is in fact linked to Fibank (and therefore Tseko and Ivaylo) by way of 236M€ of debt (six times his net worth in Bulgaria!) (*ibid.*). In other words, a puppet. In fact, suspicions as to whether Georgius even exists were often raised in discussions. Furthermore, according to an article by Kapital (a mainstream news outlet), the two largest hoteliers in Bansko are Balkanstroy - accused of collaborating with Yulen to change the Pirin management plan (Bivol, 2014) - and Tseko Minev, through Fibank (Kapital, 2017). It is of course, of no surprise that Tseko Minev is also the president of the Bulgarian Ski Federation. In brief, two oligarchs own both the ski resort, the bank most heavily invested in the same resort *and* the majority of construction in Bansko town, and one of these is president of the organisation overseeing skiing in Bulgaria. As if this wasn't enough, suspicions were raised in one informal talk with a forester familiar with the industry, that Proles Engineering, the firm which wrote the draft management plan, is owned by Tseko Minev also. Of course, these are only suspicions, but the years of investigation and leaked documents are enough to reveal the iceberg of corruption in the Pirin case.

This was laid out in the interview with Liliana in WWF — “What we suspect is that it's not about skiing but it's about...in Bansko, they built a great many things, many of which remain unused or unfinished or unsold [...] to sell this concrete, something big has to be advertised” (interview). In others words, those few individuals who hold a monopoly of the ski-industry and its peripheral businesses dug themselves into a hole, with investments unlikely to make a return unless the main source of income - skiing - is developed.

The second issue in the conceptualisation of the problem is greed. This was primarily discussed in my interview with Ivan, when he suggested that the problem was the idea that “the future doesn't concern me, I want it now” (interview). This was illustrated with a metaphor of a cow which could either be eaten as meat, or fed and nurtured to provide milk and more cows over a longer period of time. In a rare discussion of the *global* nature of the problem, Ivan also suggested this “idea is everywhere, practically there are few places in the world that don't have this preconception” (interview). Although greed was mostly discussed in this particular interview,

the same notion came up many times, in reference to why certain individuals in government acted in the interests of business as opposed to those of Bulgarian citizens.

The third issue was that of broken institutions and civil society. Ivan deplored the state of civil organisations, stating that in practice there are far fewer environmental bodies than on paper (interview). Liliana also worried about the fate of the campaign asking, “what can we count on, if the institutions are cracking?” (interview). By institutions, they refer to everything from government ministries, to civil organisations, to the justice system. Maria, who works for EkoObshtnost to strengthen and empower civil organisations in the country, also complained that the “institutions don’t do their job”, citing an event that happened at the time of writing in a separate national park (Rila) (interview). A wealthy architect organised an event within the park which involved traditional dancing, ending with a number of participants illegally entering one of the ecologically sensitive and protected Seven Rila Lakes. This, Maria said was an example of the ministry not being “in its place” (interview). In another instance, Georgi, from Hizha A, located within the region of Bansko ski resort, admitted that the problems he faces were enough to drive him away; he will leave the hizha next year to look for permanent work in Bansko town. As too much water was being drained from the supply by the ski resort, the hizha was forced to shut during the winters (uncommon for a hizha). When asked if he voices his concerns, he replies “what is there to say?!” (informal talk). I asked about whether the Bulgarian Tourist Union (BTU) — responsible for the hizha — could support his cause, but he explained, “the BTU is not an organisation” (Georgi, informal talk). In other words, the institutions were so broken, that they cannot be relied on to support those they are responsible for.

Returning to the quote at the beginning of the section, it represents a pervasive (and justified) feeling of corruption in the country, which lead to two major issues which affect the formulation of the campaign.

First of all, there is a feeling of powerlessness which is sensed in discussions with people. In addition to Georgi turning his back on the hizha, another hotelier in Dobrinishte concluded, “if they decide to, they’ll build [the second lift]” (Pavel, informal talk). A third hizhar, Slavian, was also extremely upset with the state of management in the park. Having been brought up by his father (a famous hizhar) in the mountains, he compared the past management style with today saying that “every single soul in the park was accounted for” and monitored so as to avoid rule-breaking and ultimately the degradation of the park. Nowadays, he said, “there is no control”. The

sentiment was one of resignation. Having also lost faith in the institutions responsible for these issues, he said the solution is for the young, like myself, to come to the spot and ask locals what the problem is and help forge a solution together. This feeling was in fact touched upon by Ivan, as he discussed the differences between town and country. According to him, “you have to be in the big city to feel independent. You can make a living without being dependent on the mayor” (Ivan, interview). This divide could definitely be felt too, as the discomfort with which locals would discuss issues contrasted to the more empowered residents in Sofia.

Secondly, and more importantly, the root cause of the problem is identified as the rule of law. As Ivan described - “The protests are linked to the breaking of laws. Citizens do not protest just because they want a natural park. They protest because one man there broke the law to make some profit, steal it and pocket it. [...] That irritates people” (interview). This link to the rule of law is key to the campaign’s strategising, as will be discussed further.

6.2 Misinformation and Media

Another key issue in the emergence of the campaign is the role of the media in Bulgaria. Reporters Without Borders (2018) place Bulgaria in 111th place (out of 180) in the World Press Freedom Index, second only to Russia and Belarus on the European continent. The media is known to heavily spin or even censor the narrative. Ivan mentioned an instance where a referendum concerning Pirin, organised through a show on national T.V., was shut down by the chief of national television, effectively censoring the theme (interview). Liliana also mentioned the unfair treatment campaigners were subjected to on air; mere minutes allocated to their discussion of the problem, following a half hour by the opposition (interview). The media’s intentions were noticeable during my time in the country, as the news would focus exclusively on the story of a second ski lift at Bansko resort, as opposed to the more important changes to the management plan. In fact, many of those living and working near the park were unaware of the changes to the management plan.

The lack of information or coverage, combined with the general feeling of distrust work together to create a particularly stagnant political climate in Bulgaria. This has the double impact of polarising and factionalising the dialogue. As the mainstream narrative becomes dictated by the major media channels, those who campaign for the park are sidelined and are forced to operate in an ever shrinking political space. Those who live and work around the park, in addition

to a large proportion of citizens who are simply out of the loop, are kept in the dark through traditional channels, and would seldom come into contact with the information circulated by campaigners.

Also, it carves out specific and isolated political niches for either side of the debate. As the campaign is not welcome on public T.V. and efforts to influence events through there are simply shut down, their operations become focused in freer places, such as Facebook or independent media outlets. Theoretically, this would allow for everybody to tap into the campaign's side to the story. However, the general feeling of distrust breeds skepticism all over. Furthermore, it wouldn't be unreasonable to suggest that even if Facebook is an open platform, phenomena such as the 'filter bubble' (Viner, 2016) effectively limits users to seeing things which align with their views. Also, information coming from Facebook and less-known media outlets would tend to be viewed with more skepticism as they are less established.

In addition to the media, this polarised climate was apparently stoked by certain actors. During conversation, I was made aware of a number of calls that were made to the coalition from anonymous sources in Bansko and other towns, who recounted being paid or threatened to attend counter-protests. Ivan told a story of an acquaintance who was blackmailed at the voting booth during elections. Again, I cannot substantiate these claims but the fact that these stories circulate means that the fear is real. In Bansko town, the narrative is of consensus, and this is re-affirmed within the built environment, with banners, billboards and other images of Bansko, often associated with the logo of the ski-resort, as if to say the town and resort are one and the same (see Fig. 4).

In summary, the unfree press in Bulgaria creates a tense atmosphere with misinformation, censoring and polarisation. This suppresses the ability for meaningful dialogue. On the one hand the campaign mustn't further jeopardise its credibility by appealing to more radical claims and on the other, locals at the mercy of corrupt business interests must protect themselves.

6.3 The right side of the law

Towards the end of the research, I emailed those in the campaign who I had interviewed to get a comment on the thesis that the campaign amounts to a reaction to neoliberal symptoms. Answers confirmed the fact that the Save Pirin campaign concerns itself with the rule of law. It is in the courts and legality, that the battle takes place. According to Maria, the protests looked



Figure 4: A banner at the entrance to Bansko town. It reads “Bansko wants a second cabin [lift]. The name of the town is written with the logo of the ski resort. Source: author

towards the “appropriate protection of nature and the park by the State, in accordance with Bulgarian and E.U. law” (email). Similarly, Ivan assessed that the campaign “had a pro-democratic and pro-liberal direction” (email).

Two appeals are ongoing in the Supreme Court, the first against the draft management plan, and the second against the changes to the current plan. Furthermore, a mission in March 2018 was sent by the IUCN to assess the situation on the ground, which resulted in “a very good [report]” (Liliana, interview). The mission led to a “draft decision by UNESCO, [which] wanted very concrete measures from the government [...] a clear expert draft decision.” (*ibid.*). However, this UNESCO document was disappointingly watered down after heavy lobbying by the Bulgarian Minister of Environment and Waters. In other words, the debate is one of laws, facts, information and events, trying to position itself on the ‘right’ side of the law. This takes on a national and international character, as appeals to both Bulgarian, E.U., and UNESCO rules were instrumentalised in the campaign.

Parallel to the narrative on legality is that of rights. As the battle for Pirin raged on, the government also moved to defeat their claims in the judicial realm. Maria mentioned the idea of ‘shrinking civil space’, which is a useful way to describe how the campaign find itself cornered in many ways. The national assembly, on the 12th July, passed a movement to raise the fees for

making a public appeal against administrative decisions from 5lv to 70lv for individuals and from 25lv to 370lv for NGOs — an ~1,400% increase (MediapoolBG, 2018). This was a hot topic during my discussions with campaigners and seen as yet another affront on the public's democratic rights, particularly during the constant back and forth between campaigners, courts and the MOSV.

Bulgarians of course, feel incensed by the government's actions for a complex set of reasons, one of these being the status of the park as national; owned by the people. Thus rights take on a new dimension. This is interesting in that the park then enters into a discourse of local and global heritage, effectively forming the understanding that its value lies in being humanity's natural wealth, and thus deserved of protection within global institutions. This opens the debate to global institutions such as the U.N., E.U., IUCN, and so on. It effectively gives these institutions a say on the future of Pirin. This worldwide involvement was still somewhat impressive to campaigners. At one point, I was told at the surprise by a member of WWF when he was informed of WWF-Australia to get involved in the campaign. He also wondered at the advice given by an acquaintance to write to a certain Lord in the U.K. who shares their environmental values, the hope being that this Lord could then influence Theresa May (U.K. prime minister) to take action. These distant connections are indeed impressive, particularly in a country at the periphery of the world-system. Most importantly, however, it signifies the park's incorporation into global discourses on the value of nature. This links to the above-mentioned 'historic bloc of sustainable development' (Igoe et al., 2010). This silently begins to create the opportunities for interests to align in ways which would bolster certain hegemonic ideas. Sustainable development is something many of the actors within the campaign would agree with.

As these interests continue aligning themselves, Pirin slowly and silently becomes incorporated into global networks of 'neoliberal environmentalism'. However, this politicisation of the national park occurs without hindrance, as the campaign must be careful to articulate itself merely as a pro-democratic action. The ideological undercurrents involved in such a formulation of the park's values are left unspoken.

A very similar case has been researched in Northern Finland with regulations being juggled at the national level to make way for the expansion of a monopolistic hotel in a national park (Rytteri & Puhakka, 2012). The difference there is that the political climate is much less riddled with corruption and all the necessary ecological assessments were carried out (*ibid.*) As such, the

dialogue was predictably different as campaigners saw the problem more clearly associated with the expansion of the market into protected areas and the debate revolved around ideas of corporate responsibility and whether profit should be extracted from a national park at all (*ibid.*). Even so, the research notes neoliberal norms becoming “the common-sense way we interpret, live in and understand the world” (Harvey, 2006, p.145 In; Rytteri & Puhakka, 2012). It seems that local contexts indeed affect the interaction between neoliberalism and its resistance but its spectre always looms large.

6.4 Alliances and Interests

The nature of such a campaign requires a large presence both nationally and internationally as well as the energy, resources and momentum to keep up a fight taking place in the courts but also a presence on the streets and online. This is partly the reason for which the coalition ‘For the Nature’ formed in such a way, grouping together a large number of environmental and other organisations in Bulgaria and forging alliances worldwide. I was informed that the coalition was horizontal and most discussions and decisions took place on Facebook (Liliana; Gabriela, interview). The best explanation for this from a structural point of view was offered by Maria, —

the organisations, want to engage with different issues (such as research), but due to the problem, the energy quickly becomes concentrated, suddenly and spontaneously, because you can’t know what the institution [government ministry] will do, what new problem will come about and what decision will be taken. These organisations are forced to group together their resources to be able to react.

(Maria, interview)

The problem she refers to is that the government institutions don’t do their job correctly and act against the law and anti-democratically. As explained, this has resulted in the formation of the coalition. However, this is despite seemingly divergent interests. Of course, having settled upon an understanding of the problem as one of corruption and rule-breaking, most agree, although on a deeper level, certain issues are revealed.

WWF as part of its campaign efforts, published a report with the help of Dalberg - an advisory firm bringing “private sector strategy skills and rigorous analytical capabilities with deep

knowledge and networks across emerging and frontier markets” (Dalberg, 2017). Essentially the report is a call on government and relevant institutions to scrap the new management plan and amendments to the current plan, as it risks degrading the ‘outstanding natural value of the park’ (WWF, 2017). Furthermore, it is suggested that long-term sustainable business opportunities be investigated and assessed (*ibid.*). When asked about this, Liliana said that the diversification of the park’s economy would “mitigate the pressure on the park [since] the pressure comes from ski infrastructure and winter tourism” (interview). As such, the report amounts to the idea that “natures can be ‘saved’ through their submission to capital and its subsequent revaluation in capitalist terms” (Büscher, et al., 2012, p. 4). On the other hand, my discussion with Ivan, revealed — “I am against [the valuation of nature]. I work in the sphere but despite the trendiness I think it’s dangerous for humanity, for the simple notion that at the end of the day we will begin to put a value on human life” (interview). Whether these discussions took place regularly within the campaign is unknown but when I asked a number of campaigners about alignment of interests I was assured that everybody is in agreement. Another interesting episode can be seen on social media. Obviously, on a platform such as Facebook people have the time and freedom to comment whatever they like, but it still reflects sentiments that can be found within the country. Sometime around January a user commented that he saw “the real problem behind Pirin in capitalism” pointing out that the “aims of the organisers do not align with mine” (Borikin [facebook], 2018). Another user replied, “it would be a lot more useful if you didn’t come to the protest, instead of coming and raising communist slogans, which the media will lap up and trumpet that the protest is communist” (Aleksandrov [facebook], 2018). It would seem that some protesters are fearful of the protest being articulated as political, particularly if this were to mean an ideologically tinted image. The anti-capitalist placards were confirmed by Liliana, “the truth is, that part of the protesters even came with placards against capitalism. But the organisers of the protest, which includes myself, do not hold these ideas” (email).

Upon closer inspection there are divergent interests within the campaign. Again, the tense climate caused by corruption and the media mean these cannot be addressed. A politically neutral consensus must be articulated so that the campaign can effectively lodge its claims.

6.5 Save Pirin and the double movement

Following the above discussion, I hold that Save Pirin is a manifestation of Polanyi's double movement (2001 [orig.1957]). However, as rightly pointed out, "it seems reasonable to conclude that in a society where social institutions have become embedded in economic relations [...] those social and political forces constituting the countermovement might in part be consistent with the further expansion of market relations" (Carton, 2014, p. 1007). I do not suggest that Save Pirin is specifically interested in expanding market relations but I do believe the dialectic which Carton (2014) discusses is at play. This dialectic comes about in a number of ways.

The experience of corruption is one key aspect. Corruption itself makes the battle 'uneven' (Liliana, interview) and pushes the campaign in certain directions. Furthermore, it plays a role in the campaign's conceptualisation of the problem as one rooted in the rule of law. The sentiment of corruption is also coopted by government forces to resist the campaign. As Medarov (2018) has laid out, the counter-campaign amounts to a right-wing assault on environmental organisations and persons. This ranges from media spin to harassment but crucially revolves around an amplification of the idea that large institutions in Bulgaria are corrupt. The rumour that many of the coalition's organisations are financed by ski resorts in Western Europe, for example, was often thrown around. This idea is particularly prevalent in Bansko, where a discussion I had with a local at the information centre quickly turned to scepticism about the environmental organisations and their real interests (informal talk). Ironically, the same goes for certain campaigner's thoughts on Bansko. Why are there no protests in Bansko? "Because they [locals] are bought" (informal talk); obviously not the only reason locals don't take part as much. Such an environment, where the media can freely dictate the narrative and play on people's deep-seated mistrust, effectively lays down what is socially acceptable and politically effective in the campaign's movements. This also results in the campaign distancing itself from overtly ideological or radical claims, as it would play to the interests of the opposition. In brief, the campaign both centres its claims on a politically neutral grievance against corruption whilst simultaneously being cornered by the very same sentiment via the unfree media. This complex array of factors, results in the emergence of a campaign like Save Pirin, consistent of actors of all stripes.

Some within the campaign do in fact represent neoliberal interests. WWF, for instance, is an organisation which has historically aligned itself with business interests and professed the capability of the market to save nature (Fuentes-George, 2013). Their report illustrates this best

and clearly envisages a neoliberal conservation model in Pirin (albeit without the corruption). Here, the resistance is against the form of capitalism, the pace and way in which it is managed. Others take issue with the valuation of nature. Others still discuss the problem with capitalism on social media but become sidelined. Again, the politically neutral grievance against corruption and cornering by the polarised narrative, mean that such interests are not necessarily discussed. This amalgamation of interests nevertheless have an impact on the future of Pirin. Once all is said and done, the management must go on, and whether this means a reversion to the traditional conservation style within the older management plans or a 'green capitalism' espoused by WWF's report will depend largely on whose interests come out on top.

6.6 Overview

The results helped illuminate the case study. There is a complex array of forces which have come together in the emergence of this particular campaign. Corruption simultaneously pushes people together and becomes the root concept in understanding the problem. The media spins this narrative in such a way as to polarise the debate and maintain a level of censure and misinformation. Forced to operate within the ever-narrowing spaces, a divisive situation occurs, where organisations are pushed together out of a shared experience of suppression, whereas those left in the dark are instigated by general feelings of distrust and become skeptical of campaigners. This even has a geographical element, as those in the cities are apparently less influenced by corrupt elements of the State (Ivan, interview). This then leads to a coalition of various organisations, which agree to articulate their claims within the sphere of legality. Due to the universal perception of corruption as a social ill, it becomes a politically neutral topic around which people can rally. As such, protests were often directed at the specific 'rotten apples' behind the government's actions; particularly Neno Dimov of the MOSV. As the problem becomes politically neutral, so too does the discussion. This is despite the ideological undercurrents which surround the issue. Namely, the idea of free-market capitalism offering a solution to its own contradictions, or the notion that economic development trumps environmental protection. I suggest that this is all best theorised within the Polanyian 'double movement', especially in light of Carton's (2014) problematisation vis-à-vis the dialectic between neoliberalism and its resistance. Out of this dialectic, a campaign resisting the free-market's impact on nature but also aligned with

ideas which insist on the expansion of the free-market into natural areas such as Pirin. This effectively answers the first question.

The second question about the subsequent effects this has on the interaction of neoliberalism and its resistance is also illuminated. What the future holds for Pirin is still unclear. However, the alignment of interests that have taken place is beginning to mirror global groups of environmental actors. This is particularly so, when viewed through Igoe et al.'s (2010) idea of the sustainable development historical bloc - a Gramscian understanding. Seen this way, it becomes clearer that Pirin is being incorporated into the same historical bloc and a discourse on sustainable development is starting to emerge as the more desirable outcome. Of course, everyone would like to see the end of corruption. Unfortunately the fact that this alignment of interests might mean a deeper integration of neoliberal policies in Bulgarian environmentalism is not as visible. This suggests that the political ecological landscape of Bulgaria may shift towards a more unquestioned acceptance of neoliberalism.

There is, of course, another side to the story; that of local residents around Pirin. Although their view of environmental groups may be influenced by a certain misinformed skepticism, their ideas on what is right for their town and livelihoods are valid. This is to say that they as people directly affected by the park's ecology, have a right to make a claim on the future of the area also. What they have to say in the future may well affect the political ecological landscape.

7. Conclusion

My aim was to draw a link between global neoliberalism and the case of Pirin National Park in Bulgaria. Furthermore, I also looked to analyse the campaign in order to understand how it has emerged out of a specific local context in resistance to a variegated neoliberalism. This amounts to the question: In view of the thesis that Pirin's management decisions amount to a symptom of neoliberal environmental policy and ideology, how does the Save Pirin campaign formulate, articulate and navigate its democratic right to resist? Why?

This thesis has suggested that Bulgaria is most definitely in the grips of neoliberalising forces, since the fall of Communism in the 90s. The country is also plagued by corruption, ranging from the press to the judicial system. However, I understand this to be a symptom of

neoliberal values, as theorised by Holmes (2006). Furthermore, the lack of purity in neoliberalism's manifestation is not a reason to attack its critique (Castree, 2011). The impacts of neoliberalism have extended to Pirin National Park and due to its importance and significance locally and now worldwide, a resistance has emerged. This resistance is best theorised as an example of Polanyi's (2001 [orig.1957]) 'double movement'. It aims at "the conservation of man and nature" (*ibid.*, p.139), from the impacts of an expanding free-market. However, as Carton (2010) theorised, this movement arises within a complex societal context and thus emerges as a messy alliance of various interests. This means it takes on a reformist direction and does not engage with the concept of neoliberal capitalism. Instead its claims are articulated in the realm of legality. These insights effectively provide an answer to the first research question.

The second question aimed at looking how this affects things more widely and into the future: In what ways does this affect the interaction between neoliberal and opposing forces; subsequently, the political ecological landscape of socio-natural relations in Bulgaria?

Pirin's incorporation into global ideological currents is helpfully analysed through the Gramscian notion of a hegemonic bloc (Igoe et al., 2010). Framing the issue as such begins to offer an answer to the second research question. As interests begin to align in such a bloc, a hegemonic ideology of how society should relate to nature will begin to dominate and, in an effort to avoid scandals such as the current one, sustainable development or a 'greener, cleaner' capitalism might be espoused as a way forward. This might turn out as in WWF's report, for instance. Either way, I feel that the powerful actors which lie behind these interests would overpower more radical ideas of how to handle conservation. Furthermore, the campaign may be succeeding in halting the government's decisions but corruption and unfree media will continue as a hindrance to dialogue into the future. As such, future expressions and demonstrations of alternative ideas to conservation will continue to be hindered as they emerge from this local context.

Fortunately, the most damaging decision by government are for the moment stalled by the campaign. In April this year, the Supreme Court sided with the campaign and claimed that the changes to the management plan were indeed illegal, as they were not subjected to the required ecological assessments. The government has appealed, and the second decision is soon to be heard. In July, the Supreme Court again sided with campaigners in declaring that the further construction of ski infrastructure goes against Bulgarian law on protected areas. This represents

a victory against rampant development. However, the fight as I see it goes much further, as the root of these problems lies in the ideologies and policies of the neoliberal capitalist system. The privatisation and commodification of non-human parts of our world continues, and this market logic means that once nature stops selling, it isn't worth saving. Following again in Polanyi's ideas, "the very stuff of life has now been embedded in the marketplace — and disembedded from Nature" (Peet & Watts, 2004, p.xvi). I believe that this is the real evil that society must resist.

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