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Is degrowth emerging in Bulgaria?

A case study on degrowth practices and ideas at the local level

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Abstract

Degrowth scholars have been criticised for focusing too much on theory and macro-level of analysis, giving less attention to actual degrowth practices that happen at the local level. This thesis aims to make a contribution to this second field of degrowth research. Drawing on a practice theory approach, the objective of the study was to find whether degrowth practices and ideas have the potential to disrupt existing institutional arrangements in Plovdiv, Bulgaria. Plovdiv is currently one of the two European Capitals of Culture for 2019 and has introduced degrowth-related ideas and practices in its Programme of events. This curious emergence of degrowth prompted the conduct of this study, which was explored by conducting onsite interviews, analysing official documents, and making field observations. The empirical evidence was analysed via the thematic analysis approach. The findings show the existing institutional arrangements could indeed be disrupted by connecting the Plovdiv concept of *ayliak* with notions of wellbeing and by tapping into the local mentality of Plovdiv and using existing degrowth-related practices to propagate degrowth. It was also found that the European Capital of Culture currently has negligible effects on degrowth implementation despite the promotion of degrowth in its Programme.

Keywords: Degrowth; Bulgaria; European Capital of Culture; Institutional Change; Practice Theory.

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1. Introduction

1.1. Background information¹

In recent years, the idea of degrowth has emerged as a socially sustainable and necessary alternative to growth-driven economies. Degrowth, elaborated on below, is understood here as a democratic transition towards a smaller and sustainable socio-economic system that works with and within the planetary boundaries of Earth, while aiming to enhance human wellbeing (Cosme, Santos and O'Neill, 2017; Weiss and Cattaneo, 2017). Degrowth scholars and activists contend that the pervasive idea of growth, which is the main socio-economic objective of capitalist societies, is responsible for the emergence of climate change and rising social inequalities on a global scale.

The main idea behind degrowth is that on a world with finite resources, such as our own, exponential economic and population growth are not possible or sustainable (Meadows et al., 1972). Degrowth scholars argue that economic growth drives societies to overproduction and overconsumption, while disregarding the planetary limits in relation to resource availability and the absorption of waste matter and pollution. These processes have led to the concentration of anthropogenic greenhouse gases (GHGs) in the atmosphere which are the driving cause for climate change (IPCC, 2014), biodiversity loss (WWF, 2018), and increased exploitation of other resources, like forests, fisheries, and land (Steffen et al., 2015). And while growth proponents argue that economic activity can be decoupled from these mounting environmental pressures, degrowth scholars have shown that there is a difference between relative and absolute decoupling. Relative decoupling is a decline of ecological intensity per unit of GDP, which could still be growing, thus increasing the environmental impacts of growth. Absolute decoupling would refer to a scenario where even if GDP is growing, the environmental impact is stable or declining. However, as economist Tim Jackson (2009:67-86) has pointed out, there is some evidence for relative but none for absolute decoupling. Bearing in mind the abovementioned environmental issues, without absolute decoupling, more economic growth will still prove detrimental for the environment, making the argument for degrowth even more compelling.

Furthermore, despite the seemingly endless economic growth, income inequalities have been rising on a world-wide scale since at least the 1970s. It has been argued that this is due to the accumulation of wealth in the hands of a small number of people, made possible by economic growth and the capitalist system

¹ I would like to express my deepest gratitude to my thesis supervisor Max Koch for his invaluable comments and understanding throughout the thesis-writing period.

(Piketty, 2014; OECD, 2015), making an ethical argument for the adoption of degrowth as well.

Overall, as a consequence to the above-mentioned processes, we are currently witnessing several ongoing financial, social, and environmental crises that have converged into one, what economist Manfred Max-Neef calls, “crisis of humanity” (2010). With this in mind, it is imperative to forego growth if we are to bring human existence in-line with the carrying capacity of the planet. This will entail a major transformation of socio-economic and cultural values and practices, where people voluntarily forgo overconsumption lifestyles and adopt simpler ones (Alexander, 2013; 2015a).

1.2. Theory and purpose

The degrowth community has done excellent work at proposing how this change will come to be, developing various theories, practices, and initiatives that all aim to reinforce the degrowth paradigm. A degrowth society will produce and consume less resources and will organise differently, creating new values, jobs, and activities, structured around the ideas of sharing, conviviality, simplicity, and care. People will work fewer hours, which will allow them to have more time for leisure and recreational activities. These approaches should increase human welfare, building trust and social capital within communities, ultimately enhancing the functioning of democracy. In addition, degrowth will signify a reduction of the throughput of over-developed countries, halting the exploitation of developing ones and as such, allowing the latter space to produce their own notions of a good and prosperous life. Overall, degrowth advocates envision a world where all people, regardless where they find themselves, can flourish and thrive in accordance to nature and the planetary boundaries, without the need for constant economic growth (Kallis, Demaria and D’Alisa, 2015).

Despite the apparent urgent need for change and the multitude of degrowth initiatives and theories that have emerged over the years, all of which delineate a higher standard of living for all, degrowth has not been successful in impacting the global socio-economic system. Apart from several local initiatives of degrowth-conscious people, no government in the world has espoused to degrowth in their political manifestos so far.

With this in mind, a major hindrance to the emergence of degrowth is the lack of understanding how exactly any of the proposed degrowth ideas and initiatives can actually materialise under the current and dominant growth paradigm (van der Bergh, 2011). This is due to the fact that degrowth is presented in the literature as a panacea for the ills of every country. However, this one-size-fits-all scenario negates the fact that each country has its own version of capitalism based on its cultural heritage and history, and will most likely have its own version of degrowth as well. This is the main argument of Herbert Buch-Hansen (2014), who maintains that if degrowth is to emerge in any country, it will do so out of existing institutional arrangements, which need to be acknowledged. In this vein, Joutsertva (2016), asserts that degrowth “is faced with a very challenging institutional task” (p. 23),

which has not yet been properly researched. She argues that “a degrowth transition requires a disruption of existing institutional arrangements” and a practice approach to institutional change can offer great insights into how this can happen. According to Joutsertva, the practice approach offers great potential for “disrupting established unsustainable practices and transforming the ways in which actors think about and behave in relation to nature” (p. 24). In short, the practice approach to institutional change can help identify and examine practices and actors that can aid degrowth implementation (Lawrence and Suddaby, 2006). Several other studies have also employed a similar method, examining different degrowth practices at the local level and assessing their potentials for disrupting existing ones (Järvensivu, 2013; Bloemmen et al., 2015; Lloveras, Quinn and Parker, 2018). Bearing this in mind, Buhr, Isaksson and Hagbert (2018) argue that it is also vital for the degrowth community to have a better understanding of local interpretations of degrowth, which can elucidate how local institutional conditions can affect the implementation of degrowth.

Taking all of these criticisms and suggestions into account, the present paper aims to further explore the topic of degrowth implementation. This is done by utilising a practice approach in examining local interpretations and practices of degrowth in Bulgaria, an East European and former socialist country, that has undergone an unlikely and fascinating path towards degrowth in one of its cities.

Currently, its second largest city, Plovdiv, is one of the two European Capitals of Culture (ECoC, hereafter) for 2019, along with Matera in Italy. In its Programme of events, Plovdiv has introduced degrowth as a concept, having many degrowth-related events planned for the year. Specifically, the focus of its fourth platform, *Relax*, is on “sustainable living, slow life, slow food and degrowth” (Plovdiv 2019, 2019a). This is a fascinating prospect since degrowth is mostly considered a grassroots project and not usually supported by governmental or supranational entities like the European Union (EU). At the same time, degrowth ideas and activities are being actively promoted by the organisers of the ECoC project in Plovdiv throughout 2019.

Following the discussion above, this occurrence has the potential to disrupt existing institutional arrangements and promote degrowth integration at the local level, at least. This is further supported by a ECoC brochure from 2015, commemorating 30 years since the project’s creation, where the authors maintain that through its initiatives, the ECoC project managed to transform the culture of local residents, in the short and long-term (European Commission, 2015). This would imply that if the degrowth initiatives of Plovdiv 2019 are successful, then we might see a degrowth shift, which would be essential for the implementation of degrowth, if not on a national, then at least at the local level.

With this in mind, Plovdiv is an interesting case to be explored because of its unlikely, yet fascinating move towards degrowth. In addition to that, most of the degrowth research that is being done focuses on highly-developed western countries, like Spain and France (Weiss and Cattaneo, 2017:221). This leaves a gap in the literature for other countries that are not as developed as the aforementioned ones, but will nevertheless need to undergo a degrowth transition. Therefore, this study will aim to begin filling-up this gap with its exploration of degrowth in

Bulgaria, along the call for more examples of possible degrowth trajectories (Buch-Hansen, 2014). Furthermore, it is the belief of the author that degrowth, seen as a new socially-sustainable socio-economic system, can help ameliorate the liberal democracy of Bulgaria and enhance the welfare of its citizens. Bulgaria, a member of the EU since 2007, still lags behind its European counterparts in many aspects, considered to be the poorest and most corrupt country in the EU (Tsanov et al., 2014; Paskova, 2015; Transparency International, 2018). These drawbacks are not only detrimental for the quality of life of people in Bulgaria, but they also negatively affect trust in national institutions and ultimately the efficacy of democracy in the country. Therefore, taking the above arguments for degrowth into account, Bulgaria could potentially benefit greatly by adopting degrowth as its new socio-economic system.

1.3. Research question and outline of thesis

Following everything stated above, the aim of this study was to explore the implications for degrowth integration in Plovdiv. This was done by using a practice approach to explore the local interpretations of degrowth ideas and practices and trying to understand their potential for disrupting existing institutional conditions. With this in mind, the following research question was explored:

How can local practices and interpretations of degrowth ideas disrupt existing institutional conditions in Plovdiv?

This question was explored via a mixed methods research design, utilising the single-case study approach (Yin, 2018) and conducting on-field interviews, analysing official documents, and doing direct non-participant observations in Plovdiv at the beginning of May, 2019. The analysis of the data was done via thematic analysis, where the empirical data was coded and analysed for emerging patterns of how degrowth is understood.

The paper has the following structure. *Section 2* offers an overview of the existing literature on degrowth, which then provides the basis for the theoretical framework explored in *Section 3*. *Section 4* describes the case study and research approach. *Section 5* presents the results of the study, which is followed by a discussion of the findings and their implications for degrowth in *Section 6*. Finally, the conclusion will summarise the findings and propose recommendations for future research in *Section 7*.

2. Literature review

2.1. What is degrowth?

In the preface of *Degrowth: A Vocabulary for a New Era*, D’Alisa, Demaria and Kallis (2015), the editors of the book, state that degrowth “defies a single definition. Like freedom or justice, degrowth expresses an aspiration which cannot be pinned down to a simple sentence. Degrowth is a frame, where different lines of thought, imaginaries, or courses of action come together” (p. xxi). Indeed, it is no easy task to define degrowth and any one definition will be inadequate to capture all that is meant by the term. At the same time, degrowth can be described as an academic research agenda, an activist movement, a political slogan, an economic strategy, and a social objective (Demaria et al., 2013), all at the same time. It comes from the French word “décroissance” and is used as a catch-all term that encapsulates the multitudinous ways of transitioning towards a sustainable socio-economic system that is not based on the current and dominant idea of growth.

Turning to more specific definitions, degrowth is, first and foremost, a “ruthless critique of the dogma of economic growth” (Kallis, 2018:1) and aims to abolish it as a socio-economic objective. As mentioned in the introduction, economic growth is considered by degrowth scholars as the root cause for rising social inequalities and our planet’s increased environmental degradation (Max-Neef, 2010). The main postulate here is that exponential economic growth is perceived by capitalist societies as beneficial and desirable for human development and should be pursued at all costs. However, this pursuit of constant economic growth drives capitalist societies to overconsumption, especially in countries from the Global North. This overconsumption leads to an excessive production of material goods, which expedites the extraction and exhaustion of our planet’s finite amount of natural resources. The process diminishes the ability of people to satisfy their basic needs due to the increasing scarcity of resources, especially in countries from the Global South. The problem will only intensify, however, with a constantly growing world population, as predicted by the World Bank (2015). At the same time, from an environmental standpoint, the pursuit of economic growth puts enormous pressures on the biophysical processes of our planet. Certain planetary boundaries, such as climate change and biodiversity, have been reached and crossed already, threatening the future functioning of the planet’s biophysical processes, which will have dire consequences for human welfare (Rockström et al., 2009; Steffen et al., 2015). Therefore, in order to curtail these “negative externalities of [economic] growth” (Latouche, 2010:521), capitalist economies need to be contracted, sooner rather than later (Latouche, 2004).

Following the above critique and turning towards more constructive aspects, degrowth signifies a complete social, political, economic, cultural, and

technological transformation. This would entail that we use fewer natural resources, we produce and consume fewer products, and we work on enhancing human wellbeing (Schneider, Kallis and Martinez-Alier, 2010:512). This can be done via the creation of new commons, eco-communities, and urban gardens, and by nurturing values such as simplicity, conviviality and work-sharing (Helfrich and Bollier, 2015; Cattaneo, 2015; Anguelovski, 2015; Alexander, 2015a; Deriu, 2015; Schor, 2015), to name a few. The main idea is that “small can be beautiful” and human beings can live fruitful and flourishing lives without constant economic growth. With this in mind, it is the belief of degrowth scholars that the democratic and voluntary transition towards a degrowth society (Research & Degrowth, 2010) can increase subjective happiness and wellbeing (Sekulova, 2015).

Based on the above discussion, degrowth is understood in this paper as a desired and necessary transformation of the world’s socio-economic system, where economic growth is abolished as an objective in itself. This implies that under a degrowth trajectory, societies will consume fewer natural resources in order to live within the Earth’s planetary boundaries, while focusing more energy on the enhancement of human welfare and the quality of life. With these definitions at hand, there are a few facets of what is not denoted by degrowth, which need to be clarified.

First, degrowth is not a synonym for economic recession or depression, which are unplanned and involuntary periods of economic decline that have devastating effects on capitalist societies. Degrowth symbolises a planned reduction of capitalist economies that should enhance human welfare (Schneider, Martinez-Alier and Kallis, 2011:654). It should be noted that the mounting pressures of human economic activities on the planetary boundaries will, sooner or later, impose such an unplanned economic decline, which will significantly reduce the welfare of people in all parts of the world. Degrowth aims to forestall this decline, while it is still possible.

Second, degrowth is also not synonymous with sustainable or green development. While the two have a common cause, the degrowth movement criticises sustainable development and views it as an oxymoron because development, whether sustainable or not, would further the use of resources and promote economic growth (Kallis, Demaria and D’Alisa, 2015:2; Baker, 2018).

Third and final, degrowth scholars question the idea that technological advancements can actually reach environmental sustainability and prevent climate change and further economic degradation (van den Bergh and Kallis, 2012:912). This is so because, as mentioned in the introduction, absolute decoupling of energy and material throughput is currently unviable with currently available technologies (Jackson, 2009:67-86; Hickel and Kallis, 2019).

With these definitions and clarifications at hand, the next subsection will contextualise degrowth by presenting a short history of its emergence in order to fully grasp its urgency and necessity.

2.2. A brief history of degrowth

Historically, degrowth developed as a response to “the urgency of the present physical, ecological, social and economic limits in a complex society” (Sekulova et al. 2013:5). Its origins lie in Western environmentalism that emerged in the 1970s with the *Limits to Growth* (Meadows et al., 1972) report and the major works of Nicholas Georgescu-Roegen (1971) and his student Herman Daly (1974). What these authors have argued is that our planet cannot support exponential economic and population growth indefinitely because it has limited resources, which will eventually deplete due to human exploitation. And, while this entropic process is inevitable due to the laws of thermodynamics, as argued by Georgescu-Roegen, it is being accelerated by human economic development, driven by growth. As mentioned before, what makes matters worse is that by pursuing endless economic growth we pollute and damage the environment on which we, and all other living organisms on this planet, depend on to survive. Therefore, if we do not stabilise the world’s population and abandon economic growth as the staple for development and progress, we are to reach a state of overshoot and collapse by the middle of the twenty first century (Meadows, Randers, and Meadows, 2004).

Following these concerns and the ideas of Georgescu-Roegen, Herman Daly (1974) advocated that a steady-state economy (SSE) is the only economy that can be sustainable in the long-term. A SSE is one “with constant population and constant stock of capital, maintained by a low rate of throughput that is within the regenerative and assimilative capacities of the ecosystem” (Daly, 2008:3). Throughput is understood as “the materials and energy a society extracts, processes, transports and distributes, to consume and return back to the environment as waste” (Kallis, 2011:874). According to Georgescu-Roegen (1977), however, even a SSE is not enough to postpone the economic entropy of our planet in the long-term. Nevertheless, the SSE and degrowth, which is seen as a transitional phase towards a SSE (Kerschner, 2010), are currently the only viable solutions for sustainable human existence within the planetary boundaries.

The intellectual debate around the limits to growth that emerged in the 1970s established the ground for degrowth to develop as a movement of activists. This happened in France in the early 2000s, following anti-consumerist and anti-capitalist protests. Taken up as a slogan by green and anti-globalisation activists, it then spread to Italy and Spain in 2004 and 2006, and subsequently to other countries (Kallis, Demaria and D’Alisa, 2015:2-3). This sparked a wave of initiatives that culminated in the first international conference on degrowth, held in Paris in 2008 (Research & Degrowth, 2010). Since then, the international degrowth community has been growing (ironically), with conferences being held every two years in different countries (Kallis, Demaria and D’Alisa, 2015:3). This has helped to firmly establish degrowth as a scientific field of research that has produced a multitude of theories and practices that have helped to elaborate our understanding of degrowth and its implications. The next subsection explores these theories and practices, which will help to build the theoretical framework for this paper.

2.3. Degrowth in theory and practice

The degrowth literature is replete with various theories and practices that would consider the manifold aspects of the transition towards a post-growth world.

Scholars have focused on the implications of prosperity without growth (Jackson, 2009; Fritz and Koch, 2014; Raworth, 2017), how will a new post-growth economy function (Martinez Alier, 2009; Kallis, Kerschner and Martinez-Alier, 2012; Germain, 2017; Kallis, 2018), what will be the implications for human wellbeing (Andreoni and Galmarini, 2014; Büchs and Koch, 2017; 2019), and have given overarching templates of a prospective degrowth society (Trainer, 2012). Others have shown how economic growth came to be the dominant economic paradigm of the 20th century and seen as the only way to achieve prosperity and success (Dale, 2012; Haapanen and Tapio, 2016; Koch, 2018).

There have also been many policy proposals that aim to bring societies closer to a degrowth trajectory. From a top-down perspective, some of these include carbon taxes, caps on resource use, and the elimination of subsidies for dirty industries, which aim to reduce material throughput and further environmental degradation (Jackson, 2009:172-185; Gough, 2013a; 2013b). Job guarantees and minimum and maximum incomes are intended to reduce income inequalities (Unti, 2015; Alexander, 2015b). Reduction in working hours and work-share have been advocated by several degrowth scholars (Victor, 2008:211-214; Schor, 2015) and are seen as vital for reducing unemployment by sharing the overall work that can be done and free up time for leisure, family time, and recreational activities.

Other degrowth practices include low-tech living that demands less intensive energy use to perform everyday tasks, like cycling as an alternative mode of transportation, for example (Alexander and Yacoumis, 2016). Using local currencies and time banking are also proposed as having the potential of increasing the social capital of communities and social networks of individuals (Dittmer, 2015; Joutsenvirta, 2016). Furthermore, community supported agriculture (CSA) has been proposed as yet another way of working outside the capitalist economic system, where farmers sell their produce to local communities that encourages trust and comradeship (Bloemmen, et al., 2015). All of these latter proposals showcase the bottom-up approach of degrowth. As the prominent degrowth scholar and activist Serge Latouche (2009) puts it, “the utopia of de-growth implies thinking at a global level, its realization begins at [the] grassroots level” (p.44).

From the above it becomes clear that there are plenty of alternatives to growth-driven economies, where communities work together, share the workload, and build social capital and trust, which are both necessary for the proper functioning of any democratic society (Fukuyama, 1995; 2001; Putnam, 2000). Indeed, as mentioned already, degrowth advocates emphasise that a degrowth transition will not only bring humanity within the planetary boundaries, but will enhance human wellbeing as well, in both the short and long term. In addition, having in mind the pressing issues of climate change, world-wide growing inequalities, and environmental degradation, it seems logical that we begin to “degrow” our economies and societies on a global scale, starting with the most developed countries. Yet, this is not happening. Apart from small and localised

efforts in some countries, there is no government in the world that actively pursues degrowth policies. As mentioned in the introduction, there have been several explanations for this, elaborated on in the next subsection.

2.4. Impediments to degrowth implementation and basis for theory formulation

Degrowth scholars have recognised several obstacles that might be hindering degrowth implementation. Perhaps unsurprisingly, one major obstruction comes from the vested interests of banks and big businesses, who would use their political and economic power to influence governments in order to maintain their dominant positions on the global market (Maxton and Randers, 2016; Hardoon, Ayele and Fuentes-Nieva, 2016). Another concern is raised with the term *degrowth* itself, where scholars have argued that it is hard to define and it has a negative connotation, which puts people off, despite all the positive things degrowth stands for (Raworth, 2015; Drews and Antal, 2016).

More crucially, however, scholars have tried to understand why degrowth remains politically marginalised, despite its thorough theoretical and practical considerations and implications. Buch-Hansen (2014), for example, argues that degrowth is presented as a panacea that will work equally-well in every country despite the myriad of differences that come with each country's cultural, historical, and capitalist legacies. This is a major limitation of the current degrowth literature because it fails to consider the capitalist diversity of institutional arrangements in different countries. He argues that if degrowth and the SSE are to emerge, they will in all likelihood "be hybrids that combine radically new elements with elements from the institutional configurations characterising currently existing forms of capitalism" (p.172). Therefore, he maintains that the creation of new degrowth institutions will be based on and influenced by the existing capitalist ones. Something that was argued by Herman Daly (1991:190), as well. With this in mind, degrowth transitions will be different for France, China, and the USA (Buch-Hansen, Pissin and Kennedy, 2016), and therefore, for every other country that attempts this transition.

In addition to this, Buch-Hansen (2018) has also argued that the preconditions for a deep socio-economic change have not yet been met. Drawing from critical political economy, he contends that there are four general prerequisites that can engender a degrowth paradigm shift. These are: a deep-crisis of the existing system; an alternative political project; a comprehensive coalition of social forces; and, at least passive consent from the population. While the former two have been met, as discussed – there is a deep crisis of the capitalist system (Max-Neef, 2010) and degrowth can be considered an alternative political project, the latter two prerequisites have not yet been met. Based on this, Buch-Hansen concludes that the current prospects of a degrowth paradigm shift "look bleak" (p.162). Nevertheless, he maintains that there is room for optimism, especially when one considers the many degrowth grassroots initiatives that have been observed over the years. Koch

(2018), who showcases how economic growth has been naturalised over the years in relation to production and consumption patterns and has become deeply rooted in people's minds, also argues that the success of degrowth depends on the existence of a crisis and on the transformation of "economic, political and cultural structures of society" (p.24).

Büchs and Koch (2019) aim to contribute to this line of thought by arguing that the degrowth movement requires more deliberation on whether "high levels of objective and subjective wellbeing that Western countries presently enjoy can be maintained during degrowth" (p.156) if it is to gain broader social and political support. They argue that the birth of the idea of economic growth, which happened in the 19th century with the onset of the Industrial Revolution, also gave life to a range of institutions, like "current legal, financial, labour market, education, research, and welfare systems" (*ibid.*:160), amongst others, that have become entrenched in a growth-based capitalist system. This, on the other hand, has been deeply embedded in people's lives, which influences their identities, life goals, and "ideas of social progress, personal status and success through careers, rising income and consumption" (*ibid.*). With this in mind, the rapid and complete transformation of the socio-economic system that degrowth aspires to will have effects, not only on the system itself, but on people's welfare as well. Therefore, it is imperative to maintain satisfactory levels of welfare while undergoing a degrowth transition, where at least the basic needs of people are satisfied. In order to achieve this, Büchs and Koch propose a deliberative process, based on the ideas of needs theorists, where experts and citizens review together perceptions of wellbeing and determine the best policies and ideas for them and their society, while taking into account the planetary boundaries, their own welfare, and that of future generations.

Such a deliberative process can represent a certain type of social practice (Büchs and Koch, 2017) that is performed habitually by individuals. Practices represent social rules, norms, and institutions that are based on the dominant structural properties of a society, like economic growth. These structural properties of any society create and reproduce its "institutions, norms, discourses, culture, technologies, competences, identities and ecosystems" (*ibid.*:93). With this in mind, any practice that is performed by an individual enforces the dominant structural features. Büchs and Koch give an example of someone who buys a coffee, who might simply enjoy the taste of coffee, but nevertheless by purchasing it, this person is unconsciously reproducing the existence of commodities and money (*ibid.*). Coming back to welfare, Büchs and Koch argue that conceptions of wellbeing are connected to social practices. Having certain ideas about what constitutes wellbeing under cultural or technological values and life goals can have an effect on a person's welfare as well. Consequently, this means that by changing existing social practices, we can change the way people think about welfare and the capitalist system altogether.

The above discussion has shown two things. First, degrowth scholars need to acknowledge and take into account existing institutional arrangements of capitalist countries if degrowth institutions are to emerge. Second, more political and social support from the broader public needs to be amassed if such a transition is to be engendered. These processes would need to include more deliberation on whether

welfare needs can be met during a degrowth transition, which can be achieved via social practices that can change how people understand wellbeing altogether. This, on the other hand, can affect existing institutions, which, as highlighted, is essential for degrowth implementation. Such a practice approach to institutional change has been advocated by other degrowth scholars as well.

Järvensivu (2013), for example, studies social practices through which everyday market relations are carried out. The author tries to find practices that can disrupt existing market practices, while guiding market exchange towards sustainable use of natural resources. Drawing on practice theory, the main premise is that habitually performed practices constitute established rules and understandings that the practitioners follow. However, these practices are not set in stone and can be challenged by introducing new ideas and practices to the market. Following this, the introduction of degrowth ideas and practices to a local populace may start disrupting their existing practices, propelled by the growth mentality, enabling degrowth implementation. Järvensivu showcases this reasoning with an example of market practitioners establishing and engaging in a market exchange of a partly virgin forest in Finland. The forest became a highly contested site for markets because of its “tremendous value in terms of biodiversity and cultural heritage” (pp.197-198). The author finds three market practices, two commonplace in-line with existing practices of market engagement based on profit and growth, and one alternative practice that questions these goals. Järvensivu concludes that the third practice has the potential to disrupt the established practices and open-up space for reflection and a different way of thinking when it comes to virgin forests and their use in Finland. The implications of the study are twofold. First, there needs to be an understanding of existing practices if we are to determine alternative practices that can disrupt them. Second, the disruption needs to happen within established realm of practices in order for that disruption to become visible and prompt reflections within practitioners that subsequently can open space for change.

In another example, Joutsenvirta (2016) argues that a practice approach can shed light on “transformations in consumption and other market activities” (p.24). Having in mind that degrowth requires a radical break with established growth-driven imaginaries and structures, the practice approach can help researchers identify which practices can advance or deter degrowth implementation. As she puts it (2016:25):

“[The practice approach] helps to understand crucial aspects of the radical social transformation aspired to by degrowth. [...], it helps to understand practices that can advance disruption of current institutional arrangements. In doing so it takes into consideration an ongoing obstructive force of institutional persistence by making visible practices that support the present ‘status quo’. It acknowledges that the study of alternative initiatives can lead us to focus too optimistically on their potential to create new institutions and disrupt existing ones. To avoid this, we need to give attention also to practices that may prevent the success or scaling-up of the creative and disruptive attempts”.

In addition, the approach avoids “both over-optimism and overdeterminism” (*ibid.*) understandings of how social transformation can take place. Joutsenvirta applies

this approach to a struggle between Timebanking activists and tax authorities in Finland, in an attempt to “uncover important institutional dynamics and challenges involved in a bottom-up organization and scaling-up of alternative economic activity” (*ibid.*). She demonstrates the various practices used by proponents and opponents of the existing status quo and finds out that the status quo was defended by a powerful group of actors, motivated by established habits and business-as-usual mentalities, which ultimately deterred the Timebanking initiatives, to an extent. However, the advocates of the Timebanking scheme received national attention because of their struggle with the tax authorities, eliciting some support from other social and political forces. Joutsenvirta concludes that while the power of defenders to maintain the status quo is strong it should not be exaggerated. Such struggles have the potential to disrupt established practices and more research into how such positive transformations can happen need to be done.

A third example is presented by Lloveras, Quinn and Parker (2018), who focus on degrowth-minded activism in an urban context that becomes “interwoven with the production and consumption of space and place” (p.189). The authors study how degrowth activists produce and consume space in an area called *El Pumarejo* in Seville, Spain. They illustrate how the activists try to make *El Pumarejo* an “accessible, participative, gender-sensitive and convivial place”, which is “central to degrowth’s anticapitalist endeavour” (p.199). They conclude that the transformation of urban life through degrowth is limited due to existing institutional arrangements. Nevertheless, this activism challenges the status quo and if it is to be disrupted, the degrowth activism in *El Pumarejo* needs to be preserved and expanded.

Finally, Buhr, Isaksson and Hagbert (2018) maintain that the degrowth literature lacks succinct analyses of local interpretations of degrowth that are vital for the implementation of degrowth ideas into local policy. They argue that we need to have better understanding of how “degrowth can be integrated at the local policy level”, which “requires [the] identification of the dimensions of degrowth that local actors perceive to be relevant for local policy and of the experiences of actors engaged in attempts to influence local policy” (p.2). In their study, they explore local interpretations of degrowth in the small town of Alingsås, in Sweden. The municipality was chosen as a case-study because of its stated interest in degrowth in some of its municipal policy and planning documents. Through several interviews and on-field observations, the authors find that there is a local critique of growth along with a number of actors who actively discuss degrowth ideas. However, their attempts to influence local policy has so far been negligible. This is due to the fact that the established institutional context, which consists of “prevailing norms, values, and regulations about the type of development that is desirable” (p.11) limits their opportunities to act. Nevertheless, the authors contend that fusing the local interpretations of degrowth with more concrete degrowth-related practices will be key to understand how to integrate degrowth in local policy. They conclude that future research should be linked to the established institutional context as well as understanding the challenges local actors face when trying to integrate degrowth locally.

These examples tie into Buch-Hansen's (2018) argument about the need for public consent and alliances from social and political actors as the final two preconditions for a degrowth paradigm shift. If there are more disruptions to the established order, like the ones above, we might see degrowth implementation flourish in the near future.

Following everything stated above, it becomes apparent that the future implementation and integration of degrowth will happen by disrupting existing institutional arrangements. A favourable way to do this is by introducing new degrowth practices and ideas, which could disrupt institutionalised social practices and thus engender a system transformation. At the same time, the introduction of such degrowth practices can start altering people's understandings of welfare, eliciting broader support for degrowth. This, as seen above, is an essential component for the implementation and integration of degrowth in national policies. The conclusions from this discussion form the basis for the theoretical framework employed in this study and described in the next section.

3. Theoretical framework and research questions

3.1. Institutional change from a practice theory perspective

From an institutional economics perspective, institutions are “the humanly devised constraints that structure political, economic and social interaction. They consist of both informal constraints (sanctions, taboos, customs, traditions, and codes of conduct), and formal rules (constitutions, laws, property rights)” (North, 1991:97). Jepperson (1991) views institutions as an “organised, established, procedure” (p.143), where social patterns are repeated routinely, thus supporting and sustaining this pattern, furthering its reproduction. Pacheco et al. (2010) make sense of these definitions by stating that institutions are “socially constructed rule systems or norms that produce routine-like behavior” (p.978).

Institutions are in a continuous state of change and evolution, and can be influenced, formed, or destroyed, by purposive human action. From an institutional change point of view, this highlights the concept of institutional entrepreneurship, where individuals “act in self-interest to transform their institutional environment by aligning it with their particular goals” (*ibid.*). Institutional entrepreneurs want to change the existing institutional context in their environment for various reasons – they believe existing institutions have become obsolete or have other motives, like increased profitability brought with a new set of institutions. They make use of various strategies and practices that will bring them closer to altering existing institutional arrangements (*ibid.*:979-984).

With regards to this, Lawrence and Suddaby (2006) argue that existing institutions and the creation of new ones is made possible not by the solitary institutional entrepreneur, but by a wide range of actors who engage in a variety of practices that collectively allows them to change or maintain the existing order. Thus, the authors highlight the importance of practices as an effective way to change institutions, rather than overemphasising the role of individuals. Therefore, this practice approach to institutional change takes into account “the work of actors as they attempt to shape... processes, as they work to create, maintain and disrupt institutions” (*ibid.*:219). Following this, Lawrence and Suddaby conduct an exhaustive overview of existing empirical studies that have been done on institutional change through practices. They organise the findings of their analysis into 18 forms of institutional practices, devised into three main categories that aim to *create*, *maintain*, or *disrupt* institutions. Having in mind the need for further elaborations on how degrowth can be implemented, such insights from the sociology of practice become highly relevant.

Elaborating on Lawrence and Suddaby, the practice approach has the potential to investigate transformations in both practices and consumption patterns. As Røpke (2009:2490) describes it:

“the point of departure is that people in their everyday life are engaged in practices – in doings – they cook, eat, sleep, take care of their children, shop, play football, and work (which covers a variety of different practices). Practices are meaningful to people, and if asked about their everyday life, they will usually describe the practices they are engaged in. Consumption [...] comes in as an aspect of practices: performing a practice usually requires using various material artefacts, such as equipment, tools, materials, and infrastructures; however, this aspect does not make people conscious of the fact that they are consuming resources in their daily activities. Primarily, people are practitioners who indirectly, through the performance of various practices, draw on resources”.

By performing such everyday practices, individuals follow a set of rules that make sense to them and continue to perform these practices without giving much thought to alternatives. In turn, their actions formulate:

“patterns of social relations, characterized as social systems. Social systems are thus relations between actors, organized as repeated social practices and reproduced and transformed by the actors. The systems are said to have structural properties or institutionalized features”, which “offer rules and resources that agents draw on in their practices, such as the rules of language and various procedures for action. The rules and resources are both enabling and constraining for the agents' social practices, and simultaneously they are reproduced and transformed by practices” (*ibid.*:2491).

This makes people path-dependent when it comes to various practices, making the subscription to new practices harder. This is also influenced by the availability of time. As Røpke puts it, “time is limited [and] practices can be said to compete for the attention of practitioners. When new practices emerge, they can only be taken up by pushing aside existing practices” (*ibid.*:2493).

In addition, practices can be seen as routines that provide people with stability in their everyday life. Therefore, it becomes hard to alter existing practices, especially when they are as ingrained in people's minds as is economic growth, for example. However, this does not mean change is impossible, as implied earlier. Røpke argues that the emergence of a new practice can happen by “making new links between existing or new elements” (*ibid.*:2494). In other words, by making connections between old and new practices and reinventing them to mean something else, practitioners begin to circulate the old practice with elements of the new until the old practice is transformed or disregarded. If degrowth is taken as an example, such a change can be expected by introducing degrowth ideas and practices alongside existing ones. In particular, having a local currency or a time bank together with the established national currency and banks opens up space for the degrowth elements to circulate in society. If, as the theory goes, enough people adhere to these new practices they can effectively transform the old system. This strategy is congruent with the idea of *mimicry* in the creation of new institutions, as

per the taxonomy of Lawrence and Suddaby (2006:225-226). In mimicry, practices are made easily understandable because they are not so dissimilar to old ones. At the same time, they have the potential to point out the shortcomings of existing practices. In my example, the new practices of the time banks can show the immediate benefits for people who use them, while pointing out how existing banks work for their own profit and not that of individuals.

Following this, the great influence practices have on people's understandings, their social values and norms, and how they perceive the world around them, becomes apparent. It is no wonder that degrowth is not successful when one considers how radical it is in its attempt to completely transform a society based on growth. Nevertheless, following the theory above, once degrowth becomes established and people begin to practice it, or vice-versa, it should self-reproduce itself and create new norms, values, and understandings.

Overall, the practice approach to institutional change shows great potential for understanding how a degrowth transformation can emerge. It can help us comprehend how practices can create and maintain degrowth institutions, while disrupting the existing growth-driven ones. Having in mind the several studies, mentioned above that have used this approach to study degrowth implementation, makes the practice approach a desirable method for the study of degrowth at the local level, which is elaborated on in the next subsection.

3.2. Applying a practice approach to degrowth analysis at the local level

In this study, the focus of analysis is on degrowth practices and their potential for disrupting existing institutional arrangements, following an already established line of such research (Järvensivu, 2013; Joutsenvirta, 2016; Lloveras, Quinn and Parker, 2018). In addition, as Buhr, Isaksson and Hagbert (2018) argue, we still need to broaden our understandings of local actors' perceptions of degrowth and what institutional challenges they face when trying to implement degrowth ideas and practices. This ties back to what Buch-Hansen (2014) argued about capitalist diversity and the need to appreciate differences in degrowth transitions for different countries. As there would be many different transitions to degrowth, there would also be numerous different interpretations of degrowth as well. In one country there might be differences in degrowth perceptions from municipality to municipality. This means that understanding local interpretations of degrowth is also key to understanding how degrowth practices can enforce change in that particular local. In their study, Buhr, Isaksson and Hagbert focus on "actors and arenas within a geographical municipal area" (p.3), which is something employed in this study as well.

According to Wächter (2013), municipalities will have an important role to play in a degrowth transition because of their capabilities as spatial planning institutions, where "spatial planning forms the basis for the very important decision on where and how to live" (p.1073). This effectively impacts social organisation

and the inhabitants of a particular place. Therefore, spatial planning practices can influence and change existing institutions in-line with degrowth ideas and practices. In this sense, an example of degrowth-minded spatial planning is the revitalisation and management of old buildings for new purposes instead of simply building new structures. In addition, spatial planning can be useful in assigning spaces, land, and buildings, where people can meet, establish new social connections, form community networks, and start introducing community-based services, like community gardening and child care, amongst others. Such initiatives form the basis for a new degrowth society, where communities complement existing welfare institutions and is a way to further enhance human wellbeing. Furthermore, Wächter maintains that spatial planning institutions open room for the creation of, or enhancement of, local economies by introducing new employment opportunities in the form of “worker co-operatives, community development corporations or even community land trusts” (p.1074). Naturally, self-sustainable local economies are some of the core pillars of a degrowth society. In this regard, seeing municipalities as spatial planning institutions that can influence how degrowth is implemented at the local level is of vital importance to understand how degrowth can emerge.

Following this, Varvarousis and Koutrolikou (2018) argue that cities have been built, at least since the 1970s, around the idea of growth, trying to expand, both in population and GDP, and can be perceived as the actual materialisation of the growth imaginary. Of course, following the limits to growth debate, Varvarousis and Koutrolikou argue that cities nowadays need to reimagine themselves and begin degrowing. The authors imagine a degrowth city as:

“a field of experimentation with innovative forms of urban agricultural production, with widespread connections with the peripheries of the same bio-region. As part of efforts to transform the whole urban fabric into a broader food production ecosystem, local food networks that directly connect producers to consumers, urban gardens, green terraces, and vertical indoor and outdoor food production can have both material and symbolic impact in the ways urban dwellers live, produce, and connect to each other” (Varvarousis and Koutrolikou, 2018).

The authors also maintain that the ‘degrowth city’ will challenge the idea of consumption, both physically and symbolically, in an attempt to disrupt the growth imaginary.

These examples showcase the potential of degrowth to flourish at the municipal and local levels, which can happen through the transformation of existing institutions via practices. These concepts form the theory that is utilised in this study and help to generate the research questions that guide it.

3.3. Research questions

Based on the above discussion, it has become apparent that a practice approach to institutional change has great potential to understand how degrowth can emerge. However, disrupting existing institutional arrangements will not be enough. If

degrowth is to be successful, it needs to amass political and social support, which could happen by addressing welfare concerns and whether or not people in highly-developed countries can maintain satisfactory levels of welfare, while undergoing a degrowth transition. While there is no evidence for this because degrowth has not yet been employed as a national strategy in any country, the transformation of people's perceptions of welfare can help in this regard. This transformation can also be achieved via the alteration of existing practices. In addition to this, it has been shown how the city can be an important arena for experimentation, where degrowth practices and ideas are fused with existing local practices.

Employing this theory to the case study of Plovdiv, it becomes important to understand how social practices at the local level can bring about a degrowth transition to the city. Understanding how people perceive wellbeing and the use of space within the city become important aspects of the research as well. Based on this, the main research question of this study is:

How can local practices and interpretations of degrowth ideas disrupt existing institutional conditions in Plovdiv?

This main research question is explored through the following sub-questions:

1. How is degrowth interpreted by the organisers of Plovdiv 2019 and by the local populace?
2. What degrowth initiatives are being enacted in Plovdiv and how, and what are their results, if any?
3. How do the implemented degrowth practices and ideas influence people's perceptions of welfare and the use of space in Plovdiv?

These questions guided the research approach and the methods that were used to collect the empirical data for this study, as shown in the next section.

4. Research approach

4.1. Case study: Plovdiv

The empirical material for this research was acquired in a single-case study of the city of Plovdiv, the second largest city in Bulgaria and the administrative centre of the Plovdiv County. Generally, degrowth scholars focus on over-developed, western countries like France, Spain, and Italy, making Bulgaria an unusual choice. However, as mentioned, Plovdiv is currently one of the two ECoC's for 2019 and degrowth is the focus of one of its four platforms that structure the Programme of events for Plovdiv. The fact that degrowth has been chosen as a theme here is unprecedented because the ECoC, a project that promotes culture, history, and a shared sense of European community, also encourages development and helps to “create economic growth” (European Commission, 2019). In addition, despite the aspiration of its advocates, degrowth is not yet endorsed by governments or supranational entities like the EU. Yet, here we have a municipality that promotes degrowth through various initiatives under the banner of the ECoC project. All of these factors make Bulgaria, and Plovdiv in particular, an interesting case for the analysis of degrowth.

Plovdiv is situated on the banks of the Maritsa River in the Upper Thracian Plain in Southern Bulgaria, which is southeast of the Bulgarian capital city of Sofia, and is and has been historically an important centre of trade, culture, and education. The city's population numbers 345 213 citizens and around 669 796 with the people living in the greater metropolitan area (NSI, 2017). Plovdiv is also an important industrial and commercial centre. It hosts the annual Plovdiv International Fair, where sellers from around the world present and exchange various goods. The city is a major transportation hub, having three of the ten Pan-European transport corridors running through or near it.

In addition to all this, Plovdiv is a popular tourist destination, having a rich history that spans for more than eight millennia, making it more ancient than Rome, Athens, and Constantinople (present-day Istanbul). The city's governance has slipped in and out of the dominion of many nations over the centuries, including Thracians, Greeks, Persians, Romans, Bulgars, Byzantiums, Ottomans, and others. All of these nations have left a mark on the city's history, making it a melting pot for various cultures, traditions, religions, art, and ideas (Plovdiv Municipality, 2018). In this sense, perhaps, Plovdiv is the ideal place where degrowth might find a place to flourish as a new concept and way of life.

4.2. Research methods

A mixed methods research design has been chosen for this study. This included the use of document analysis, semi-structured interviews, and direct observations. The mixed methods research integrates the strengths of, and compensates for the limitations of, quantitative and qualitative research methods (Pluye and Nha Hong, 2014:30). This makes it a superior research method than the other two and is considered to provide “the most informative, complete, balanced, and useful research results” (Johnson, Onwuegbuzie, and Turner, 2007:129). This approach is highly pertinent in the social sciences because it allows for the triangulation of data sources, which then attributes to the validity and credibility of the research. Triangulation is understood here as “measuring the same concept using two or more methods” (Kadushin et al., 2008:47). The idea is that by having multiple methods of data acquisition the results of the phenomenon that is studied will be more reliable. In addition, the use of multiple methods may offer invaluable insights of the studied phenomenon that will otherwise be unavailable to the researcher if only one type of method is used to collect and analyse the empirical evidence.

As part of the mixed methods approach, the case study research approach (Yin, 2018) was employed in this research. The case study approach is an empirical method, which investigates up-close and in-depth a contemporary phenomenon (the case) that aims to explore and understand a complex social phenomenon. Usually, the case study approach is used when a “how” and/or “why” questions are being asked and it relies on multiple sources of evidence, such as document analysis, interviews, and direct observations that form the basis for triangulation (*ibid.*:4-15). Bearing in mind that what is being examined in this paper is currently unfolding (in Plovdiv) and relates to a complex social phenomenon (degrowth), makes the case study approach an ideal method to be used in this study. With this in mind, the following paragraphs give an overview of the three sources of data that were utilised.

Document analysis is used to derive information, insights, and context for the researcher. Documents provide the background information for the studied phenomenon, which is then used to better understand that phenomenon before it is examined in the field. Document analysis is also useful to generate interview questions and help the researcher focus on specific issues or areas of interests when doing interviews and observations. In addition, document analysis provides a means to track change and development in a project by reading, for example, the intended purposes of a project in a programme and then using that programme to determine whether or not those objectives have been achieved (Bowen, 2009).

Interviews are used to generate insights derived from human interactions through conversational question-answer sequences, whether they are done via telephone, face-to-face, or are computer-mediated. Interviews can have many forms of structure and form, and researchers may chose the one that is best suited for their needs and their research (Roulston, 2010). In general, interviews can generate insights about a project, a problem, or some other phenomenon, that cannot be unearthed from observations or reading through historical and other documents. In addition, they can provide useful information for understanding contemporary

political actions and outcomes (Mosley, 2013:5). In this way, they are an invaluable source of information.

As part of this research, direct observations were also conducted. Observations are defined here as “the act of noting a phenomenon, often with instruments, and recording it for scientific purposes” (Angrosino, 2007:54). The point of observations is to gain a deeper understanding into particular settings and groups of people and are a good source of primary data information. They are often seen as complementary sources of data to document analysis and interviews.

4.3. Fieldwork and data collection

The fieldwork took place in the beginning of May 2019 in Plovdiv, Bulgaria. I stayed for ten days at an Airbnb in the city centre from where I was able to respond quickly to interview offers, while having the opportunity to go out into the city to do direct non-participant observations. The document analysis was done prior and during the field work.

The interviews were ethnographic in nature, where the idea is to “explore the meanings that people ascribe to actions and events in their cultural worlds, expressed in their own language”, where the focus is “on generating participants’ descriptions of key aspects related to the cultural world of which he or she is a part – that is space, time, events, people, activities, and objects” (Roulston, 2010:19). This type of interview was done in order to understand how people in Plovdiv perceive the idea of degrowth, whether or not they practice degrowth in any way even if unbeknownst to them, and gain insights as to why degrowth plays a part in the Programme of Plovdiv 2019. The ethnographic interviews also correspond to the method of immersion in the field, talking to laypeople, participating in events, and making observations.

The interviews were conducted in two rounds. The first round of interviews were formal and included respondents that were part of the team that organises the Plovdiv 2019 Programme. Respondents included the current Deputy Director of the Plovdiv 2019 Programme; a projects and events expert; and a former member of the artistic team of Plovdiv 2019 and co-author of the bidding book that won Plovdiv the ECoC title. In addition, a formal interview was conducted with the founder of *The Thing* club, which is a social club that does a lot of degrowth-related events and initiatives in Plovdiv. These formal interviews were recorded and transcribed in Bulgarian to allow for a detailed analysis of the information (Roulston, 2010:11-14). The interviews lasted between forty-five and sixty minutes, where the actual empirical data that was generated from these interviews can be equated to somewhere between twenty-five to forty minutes. The questions that were posed were mostly short, open-ended questions, where the idea was to follow up or ‘probe’ on what has been previously said by the interviewee in an attempt to generate more detailed descriptions. Snowballing was used, where possible, as a way to gain more contacts for interviewing.

The second round of interviews included people working in local businesses and people on the street in an attempt to take-in their impressions of the Plovdiv

2019 project and the degrowth discourse. These interviews were informal and were conducted in the form of discussions, where recording was thought to be unsuitable and I only took notes. The selection of interviewees for these informal discussions was random, where I would stop and talk to someone on the street, or by finding myself in some sort of institution, like a museum or a house of culture, where I would engage in a friendly conversation with the people working there.

In addition to the interviews, a short questionnaire was sent to several people from Plovdiv via social media, who were interested in the idea of degrowth, but were otherwise unable to meet with me face-to-face or had no time to discuss the topic when approached on the street.

Overall, a total of 12 semi-structured interviews were conducted in Bulgarian. Of these, 4 were formal interviews and 8 were informal. Two or more respondents were sometimes present at the informal discussions. A total of 2 questionnaires were filled-in and sent back to me. Initially, it was not in my intention to have a questionnaire because the oral interviews and discussions were thought to be sufficient sources of information. However, when some respondents showed interest in the degrowth topic, but were otherwise unable to meet with me, I wrote the questionnaire, which happened at a later stage during the actual research. This explains the low number of questionnaire responses.

The two rounds of interviews and the short questionnaire contributed to the objective of the research in understanding how people in Plovdiv understand degrowth and whether or not their practices can help disrupt the existing institutional conditions in the city. A list of the interview respondents and those that filled-in the questionnaire can be found in Appendix A. The interview questions and the questionnaire can be found in Appendices B and C, respectively.

Other data collection methods included non-participant observations and document analysis. Observations were made on local businesses, cultural activities like the Ayliak Parade that took place on 4 May, and overall procedures that took place in the city centre and the surrounding neighbourhoods. The observations allowed me to gain insights about Plovdiv and its community and thus develop a better understanding of how and whether or not degrowth can take root in this community. In this sense, I adopted an *observer-as-participant* approach, where the researcher conducts observations for brief periods in an attempt to put things into context or prepare for interviews, while engaging in some sort of activities but more so to take notes, rather than submerge himself in his surroundings completely (Angrosino, 2007:54).

There were two main documents that was analysed for this research. The first one was the Bid Book of Plovdiv to become a ECoC. The Bid Book provides the basic principles why Plovdiv should become a ECoC and lays out the plan for the projects, events, and initiatives that were to be conducted prior to and during 2019, when Plovdiv was to be a ECoC.

The second document is the official Programme of Plovdiv 2019. The Programme leaflet is bilingual, written in Bulgarian and English that run side-by-side on each page. The Programme is structured around four thematic platforms that link the typical features of the city, such as history and cultural heritage, but also issues that the city is struggling with, like environmental degradation of its river

banks and integration problems of its ethnic minorities, mostly the Roma population.

While the first document provides information of the initial plans for Plovdiv 2019, the second provides information of what is currently happening in Plovdiv as it is being constantly actualised. This allowed me to find any discrepancies between the two documents that might have emerged over time.

In addition to the interviews and the Programme, news articles that describe the Plovdiv 2019 events, both in Bulgarian and foreign languages, were also analysed.

4.4. Data analysis methods

The analysis of the data sets has been done using inductive reasoning, where “inferences can be developed by examining empirical data for patterns” (Roulston, 2010:150). The idea is to locate patterns and commonalities by examining the empirical data that has been collected in an attempt to generate theory.

Following this reasoning, the main analysis approach was the thematic analysis, where the data is coded and categorised, eliminating irrelevant information in order to sort out important data into themes through assertions and interpretations (*ibid.*:150-151). This method of analysis has been used for all the collected data, i.e. the interviews, the documents, and the field observations. The initial coding has been done by reading through the data sets and formulating codes. In addition to this, memo writing was employed, where I wrote down ideas and reflections that were emerging during the period of analysis in order to develop better interpretations of the emerging patterns.

The analytical methods described above are a combination of the methods used in both thematic analysis and grounded theory (Glaser and Strauss, 1967). However, since it was not my intention to generate new theories, as in the case of grounded theory, the thematic analysis was used for this research. It is my belief that the methods used in grounded theory are also useful for this paper, which is why these methods were incorporated.

The thorough review of the Bid Book and the Plovdiv 2019 Programme allowed me to understand the degrowth discourse that was being used in Plovdiv and where it was coming from. The analysis of these two documents also helped to find connections between all the four platforms in the Programme and find degrowth-related initiatives that were not specified as such, making both the Bid Book and the Programme richer sources of information than I initially thought. The Programme was used as the main reference point for the intended goals of the Plovdiv 2019 project, which served as a basis for the analysis. In addition, the content of the two documents proved useful when I was writing the interview questions. The documents provided leads that were used to ask additional questions that might elucidate some parts of the research. Apart from that, the Programme provided me with information on key dates and events that were deemed worthy of observations. In this way, the document analysis proved instrumental to finding connections between the various events that had something to do with degrowth,

even if unintended. The direct observations helped me to make inferences about the city and its populace, which allowed me to make overall assertions why degrowth is seemingly emerging in Plovdiv and not somewhere else in Bulgaria.

Finally, the interviews provided invaluable information about the nature of the Programme and its events, how degrowth came to be a part of the Programme, what ideas and practices are being employed in Plovdiv and what are their intended results.

4.5. Ethics, sampling, validity and credibility

Due to the nature of the study and the questions that were being asked, there were no known ethical issues or risks for any individuals to be reported. Of course, when it was requested, the confidentiality of the interview respondents was assured. Informed consent was sought after throughout the research process. This included the dissemination of information about me and the purpose of my research project, how I was going to use the collected data and to whom, or in this case to which institution, was I going to present my results. This was done not only from an ethical standpoint, but also in an attempt to build rapport and trust with the interviewees in order to receive better answers and subsequent results.

When it comes to sampling, both random and non-random samples of interviewees were selected. The non-random ones included the interviews that were agreed upon with the organisers of Plovdiv 2019 and the founder of *The Thing* club, which were essential for the study. The random ones included unsystematic choice of people from all ages, sex, and genders, who wandered the streets of Plovdiv or worked in local shops, with the intention of gathering a general feeling of the atmosphere in the city and how people perceived the idea of degrowth. The random and non-random approach was also utilised when deciding upon the documents that were to be analysed. The Plovdiv 2019 Programme and the bidding book were obvious choices of non-random sampling due to the importance of their context for the research on degrowth. The selection of news articles was random when it came to the actual news agency, but was, nevertheless, based on the mentioning of specific references to the case study at hand, like: Plovdiv 2019, degrowth, European Capital of Culture, the slow life, and others.

All of the above steps were taken with the intention of providing validity and reliability to the research project, the collection of data, and the dissemination of the research results. This also ties in with the three sources of empirical evidence that were used to provide triangulation.

5. Findings

5.1. Empirical background: Plovdiv as a European Capital of Culture

Before moving to the actual findings of the study, some background information on how Plovdiv became a ECoC and the emergence of degrowth in its Programme is in order.

In 2010, a number of intellectuals and public figures from Plovdiv supported the idea that the city should apply to become a ECoC and signed a memorandum on 07.02.2011, showing their commitment to the project. On 27.09.2011 the foundation “Plovdiv 2019” (The Foundation or Plovdiv 2019, hereafter) was established with a decision from the Plovdiv municipal council. The main purpose of the Foundation was to implement the ECoC 2019 project by “supporting the sustainable development of the city of Plovdiv, promoting the development of cultural tourism and integration among culture, tourism, education, science and business” (Plovdiv 2019, 2016:2). Thus, the bidding process for Plovdiv to become a ECoC in 2019 began.

A Bid Book (Plovdiv 2019, 2014) was created, setting out why Plovdiv was suitable to become a ECoC, what will the main challenges for the city be if it wins, and what are its objectives for the year in question, in this case 2019. Under the motto *Zaedno* (Together), the organisers of Plovdiv 2019 wanted to bring Plovdiv and all of its inhabitants closer together. Describing their Programme, the organisers wanted to (*ibid.*:32, original emphasis):

“**fuse** the groups in Plovdiv to create ‘Plovdiv Together’ which leads to a will to **transform** the urban space into a shared place for people, which in turn helps in **reviving** the identity and the sense of ownership of culture and heritage and helps us **relax** in these times of pressure in order to create sustainable growth and development on a human scale with and for the citizens which again helps to **fuse** the different groups in the city closer together...”

The Programme of Plovdiv 2019 is structured around these four thematic platforms: *Fuse*, *Transform*, *Revive*, and *Relax*. These platforms are each structured into three clusters that focus on different parts of each platform. The four platforms are “related to the typical features of the city, the communities that inhabit it, its cultural heritage, history, pace of life, and problems and stereotypes of overcoming” (Plovdiv 2019, 2019a:5). With this Programme, Plovdiv won the title of ECoC in September 2014 and after an extensive four-year preparation, Plovdiv released an ambitious cultural Programme with a line-up of more than 300 projects and around 500 events scheduled to happen throughout 2019, not just in Plovdiv, but in other

major Bulgarian cities as well (Plovdiv 2019, 2019a:3). The most interesting part for this study is that degrowth has been utilised as concept within this Programme.

Degrowth is most visible within the last platform, *Relax*, which focuses on “sustainable living, slow life, slow food and degrowth. It aims to popularise the “green”, eco, bio-life through green technologies and products”.² From the three clusters in this platform, the *Ayliak City* cluster stands out as the one that aims to promote degrowth via its projects that focus on “increasing happiness and prosperity through non-consumerist methods (shared work, reduced consumption), while dedicating more time to culture, family and the community”.³ Many of the projects in this and other clusters can be described as degrowth-related and are given due notice further below.

Having a brief overview of the application process and the Programme, we now turn to the two themes that emerged during the analysis of the data.

5.2. The Case Study

5.2.1. Interpretations of degrowth in Plovdiv

The ayliak theme and its connection to degrowth started emerging in every interview and was present in the official documents of Plovdiv 2019 as well. A definition of *ayliak* is given in the description of the *Ayliak City* cluster in the Bid Book (Plovdiv 2019, 2014:71, original italics):

“Ayliak, from Turkish: 1. a state of relaxation and comfort; 2. a person who is not occupied with anything, who is free

The state of Ayliak has been recognised as an intrinsic characteristic of Plovdiv’s pace and everyday life to such an extent that it has become a common term for locals. That is why we want to expand its meaning in accordance with the way the younger generations use it nowadays and to demonstrate its connection to the Slow and the Degrowth Movements which focus on increasing happiness and prosperity through non-consumerist methods (shared work, reduced consumption), while dedicating more time to culture, family and the community”.

Interviewees described ayliak as something that is present in Plovdiv since they could remember. According to one of the co-authors of the Bid Book (the Co-author, Interview 3), ayliak is a concept that is intrinsic to Plovdiv. As she put it: “There is this sense of calmness for me here in Plovdiv. This thing they call ayliak. Truly, you can feel the slow tempo here”. In the informal discussions I held, people described ayliak as: “ambling around, drinking coffee and relaxing” (Interview 8), a “nonchalant way of life, relaxing, and the absence of stress” (Interviews 11 and 12). Maya, the founder of The Thing club, which is described below, explained

² *Relax*. Available from: <https://plovdiv2019.eu/en/platform/relax> [Accessed on 20 March 2019].

³ *Ayliak City*. Available from: <https://bit.ly/2Hlms2k> [Accessed on 20 March 2019].

ayliak as “serenity of some sorts [laughing]. Relaxing, yes, freedom...” (Interview 4). Finally, a respondent to the questionnaire gave a detailed description of the concept, defining it not only as a feeling but something you can do as well (Interview 13):

“Ayliak is a state of mind. To *do the ayliak* means to relieve yourself from the malicious worries that you might have and just let time run its course. To do the ayliak means not to look at your watch, but to measure time in people, in experiences, and in leisurely walks down the Main Street. Ayliak means to not be in a hurry to get back home, but to stop and chat with every acquaintance you might chance upon on your way home, to go through the bazaar, and just before you get home, to see your neighbours and ask them how they are and pass another hour in chit-chat and gossip”.

Ayliak has been picked up by international media outlets as well. CNN (2017) described it as “an untranslatable Bulgarian word, widely used to describe a certain desirable state of mind. To be aylyak means, roughly, to be supremely relaxed, unfazed by external pressures, and receptive to the pleasures of existence”. Something described as well by Robert B. Fishman in a German article dedicated to Plovdiv 2019 just before the opening ceremony in January 2019 (Soscheescho, 2018).

As shown, the ayliak theme has been connected to degrowth in the Programme, especially in its *Ayliak City* cluster. However, when asked, none of the respondents in the informal discussions (Interviews 5-13) knew about degrowth and confessed that they have never even heard about the term before I mentioned it to them. Only one person confirmed she had some knowledge of the term, but did not know that degrowth was employed as a concept in the Programme of Plovdiv 2019 (Interview 14). When I began explaining the concept of degrowth, trying to use non-terminological terms, people connected it to the idea of ayliak. They used the concept of feeling relaxed, not being in a hurry, and living a slow life to make sense of degrowth. Most connected degrowth to the environment and ecology, mentioning that they do their best to recycle and be mindful of their purchases, whenever they can (Interviews 5-7; 10-13). The same respondents agreed we need to consume less and were interested to hear about some of the degrowth concepts and ideas, like work-sharing and working fewer hours. Some respondents (Interviews 5, 8 and 11) were especially interested in the time bank concept and were keen to know more about it.

From the above it becomes apparent that people are not familiar with degrowth as a term and did not even know it was part of the Plovdiv 2019 Programme. This begs the question – why is degrowth part of the Programme in the first place?

According to the current Deputy Director of the Programme (hereafter, the Deputy Director, Interview 1), including degrowth as a concept in the Programme did not happen spontaneously, but emerged from the idea to involve people with the making of culture in Plovdiv and not just to consume it. This included engaging their attitudes towards life in Plovdiv by making them think about it in a more “meaningful, calmer, and shared fashion”. This was done by the team that had

created the initial Programme, laid out in the Bid Book, via their discussions with the local communities, artists, and civil society of Plovdiv. The Deputy Director explained that the four platforms in the Programme were created as themes that emerged from these discussions. At the same time, the themes had to be adjusted with emerging tendencies on a European level because Plovdiv was not going to be a national capital of culture but a European one. Thus, themes of sustainability that were present on a European level were combined with themes that were familiar to people in Plovdiv, like ayliak.

The Deputy Director did not actually provide a specific definition of how she, or the current team in Plovdiv 2019, understand degrowth. Instead, she said that degrowth was complicated and unknown to people in Plovdiv so the team that wrote the Programme in the beginning opted to use a more familiar concept to the local populace, i.e. ayliak in order to spread the ideas of degrowth.

When asked about this, the Co-author of the Bid Book confirmed that ayliak was used as a concept to familiarise people with degrowth. However, she also said that ayliak could be interpreted as “wastefulness – to sit down and consume and amble around in the shopping centres. Right? This could also be an interpretation of ayliak and maybe it is for a lot of people...” (Interview 3). Therefore, she maintained that the ayliak spirit could indeed be a prerequisite for degrowth in Plovdiv, but it was not enough on its own. If the concept was to truly develop within the minds of people, it needs “some sort of ideology, some form of understanding, it needs to have some kind of a value system on which it can grow” (Interview 3). However, according to her, such an ideology does not exist, despite the ayliak spirit. People have not yet comprehended the need for degrowth and not enough effort has been put to spread degrowth as a concept, especially by the current team of the Plovdiv 2019 organisers. The Co-author went on to criticise what is currently happening with the Programme because, according to her “the surface [of the initial ideas] was kept, the names [of the projects] were kept, but not enough work was put in to actually realise these ideas. And this is not only for degrowth, but for a lot of the other projects as well. The package was kept, but the contents and the [projects] that required depth, and work, and effort did not happen” (Interview 3). The Co-author clarified that this was due to several scandals and reshuffles of the artistic directors and members of the original Plovdiv 2019 team that wrote the Bid Book and the Programme.

The initial plan, as set out in the Bid Book, was for Plovdiv 2019 to be an independent foundation, free of political influence, in order to ensure artistic and decision-making freedom (Plovdiv 2019, 2014:76-77). However, all of this changed when the Foundation became a Municipal Foundation in 2012 with a decree by the municipality (Plovdiv 2019, 2017). Afterwards, when the city won the title of ECoC in 2014, the mayor of Plovdiv became the Head of the Foundation’s Board of Directors and in due course, most of the artistic team that wrote the Programme left the Foundation or was replaced politically (Conservative, 2018). All of these changes were in complete break with what was laid out in the Bid Book. This had limiting effects on the artistic freedom of the authors of the Programme and consequently on the effectiveness of the Programme and the ideas set out in it. According to the Co-author, who also left the Foundation because of

these reshuffles, the projects laid out in the Programme can “happen when the city and its inhabitants are ready. Unfortunately, I think, many people are not yet ready for more progressive ideas. The politicians especially”.

The Co-author said that at the beginning, they [the original Plovdiv 2019 team] had complete artistic freedom to write about ideas they cared about. She personally had many of her friends and acquaintances engaged with the Programme, including Filka Sekulova, a friend of hers and a degrowth scholar. The co-author said that when the team was writing the Programme, they wanted to “include new ideas that could change the city, the people, and to plant [the] seeds [of change] that will grow into the future”. She explained that Filka Sekulova made a few appearances in Plovdiv back in 2014, giving several talks and lectures on degrowth, one of which happened at The Thing club, elaborated on in the next subsection. According to the Co-author, the ideas of degrowth were spread to an extent in this way, or at least some sort of foundation was laid out. Thus, the writers of the Bid Book were inspired to include the concept of degrowth in the Programme as well.

In light of this, the Co-author went on to say that the initial idea of the *Ayliak City* cluster was to create an *Ayliak centre* in the Plovdiv neighbourhood of Trakia. The idea was that this centre is going to “have a garden tended by the people of Trakia. We thought to connect the centre with a nearby pensioners club, but also with younger people, and to share knowledge in some way” (Interview 3). The Trakia neighbourhood was chosen because the organisers observed that people there were already urban gardeners, tending to small garden lots around their apartment buildings. The organisers liked this sustainable practice so much that they decided to expand and develop it. The idea was that through such a practice, which is close and familiar to people, the organisers could start engaging people, and young people especially, with “more important topics like degrowth, why it is important, what does a green city entail, how can we consume less, use fewer plastics, and so on” (Interview 3). In addition, this *Ayliak centre* was meant to organise other events, like lectures, free markets, and other initiatives that can spread the notions of degrowth and instil its ideals within people, planting those seeds of change.

When asked if she believes that degrowth can still flourish in Plovdiv despite the setbacks, the Co-author said that she is sceptical about the prospect because no one really understands what degrowth means, at least not in Plovdiv. She does not see how any of the current projects can become sustainable and self-propelling because no one is actively working with them. However, she maintains that there will be effects for the city and they are already visible, especially in the cultural sphere of Plovdiv. However, the prospects of degrowth taking root in Plovdiv remain weak.

5.2.2. Degrowth-related practices in the Programme

As mentioned, it was possible to identify several degrowth-related practices in the Programme of Plovdiv 2019. From the *Ayliak City* cluster in the *Relax* platform, these included:

- **‘Shirting Info Point Plovdiv – Sip Plovdiv’** - a project with the idea to form a consumer-responsible community by sharing and passing-on a designer shirt that “directs attention to the social, ethical and ecological problems related to manufacturing and overconsumption of apparel”. The concept of Shirting comes from a platform for sustainable clothing that was founded by Slovenian designers in 2014. As described on the website of Plovdiv 2019, “the underlying concept is not of ownership but of co-ownership, of sharing and cooperation between users and designers. Further, it’s about the creation of a community with responsible values in which everyone has a relationship with clothing, thus giving rise to interactions outside consumerism”.⁴
- **Take Away Plovdiv** – a project that seeks to create meaningful and intriguing souvenirs as alternatives to the mass-produced low-quality ones by working with local artists, who are designing these new souvenirs from high-quality materials that are meant to last longer.⁵
- **Slow Food Plovdiv Network** – a project that works with the values of the Slow Food movement that brings together “local citizens, farmers and food producers who are effecting sustainable changes in food production and the culture of eating”. The goal is to “develop and strengthen the connection between city and countryside, and to illustrate their organic connection on the basis of a culture of sustainable production and food consumption”.⁶
- **Shared Garden – Shared Meals** – the project aims to popularise urban gardening, healthy dieting and cooking, and the making of traditional home food preserves, like jams, pickles, and *lyutenitsa* (a famous traditional Bulgarian vegetable relish, usually comprised of tomatoes, peppers, and carrots).⁷

Other degrowth-related projects were detected in some of the other platforms and clusters as well. For example, the *Mahala* and *RegionalE* clusters, part of the *Fuse* platform, include:

- **Various projects intended at the inclusion of Roma and other vulnerable groups from the Stolipinovo district in Plovdiv** –

⁴ *Shirting Info Point Plovdiv – Sip Plovdiv*. Available from: <https://bit.ly/2JB6zrs>

⁵ *Take Away Plovdiv*. Available from: <https://bit.ly/2vUvHkC>

⁶ *Slow Food Plovdiv Network*. Available from: <https://bit.ly/3odfwg9>

⁷ *Shared Garden – Shared Meals*. Available from: <https://bit.ly/3odgIAN>

some of these projects include: the building of sustainable structures in cooperation with local Roma participants that aims to connect both physically and metaphorically the district of Stolipinovo with the rest of Plovdiv⁸; breaking down standing stereotypes about the people that live in Stolipinovo⁹; the creation of a network of volunteers that can help “people and locations that have fallen short of access to culture, education and economic resources”¹⁰; and others.

- **Baba's** [Grandma's] **Show-How** – the project aims to connect urban young people and elderly people from Bulgarian villages, where the idea is that the later will show and pass on vanishing traditions and practices, like the preparation of preserves, the skirting of wool, and the shelling of corn. In addition, the project aims to bring the villages closer to the city and help preserve the local cultures and traditions from vanishing under the tide of globalisation.¹¹
- In a similar fashion, the project **Regionale** also tries to preserve local traditions and cultures through the promotion of festivals and community activities.¹²

Finally, the *Urban Dreams and River of Imagination* clusters, part of the *Transform* platform, can also be regarded as degrowth-related, especially with their projects to revamp, re-use, and re-cycle old and abandoned buildings, whole districts and areas, and utilise space for something new, instead of opting to build new buildings and use up more space and resources. Part of these transformative initiatives are:

- **Kapana Creative District** - Kapana (The Trap) is a creative district in the heart of Plovdiv that was revamped for the ECoC project. The idea of the project was to bring about “long-term sustainable interference into Plovdiv’s cityscape, as well as rediscovering and revitalizing deserted city spaces by filling them with cultural content”. This included the revival of the Kapana area as a busy commercial and artisanal centre of Plovdiv. This was done via the Foundation, which allowed artists and other merchants to use spaces and buildings rent-free for a period of 12 months, allowing them to develop their ideas.¹³
- **The Tobacco City** – the aim of this project was to preserve “the industrial and architectural heritage of the unique tobacco warehouses and factories, which still carry their onetime charm and the scent of tobacco in the heart of the city”. The main idea was to use the old and abandoned tobacco warehouses again, instead of demolishing them and building new structures. In 2018, as part of

⁸ *Building Together: Learning from Stolipinovo*. Available from: <https://bit.ly/2YrqA7S>

⁹ *Get To Stolipinovo*. Available from: <https://bit.ly/2JE4g6K>

¹⁰ *Social Innovations Incubator*. Available from: <https://bit.ly/2VCslCo>

¹¹ *Baba's Show-How*. Available from: <https://bit.ly/2Ynnim2>

¹² *Regionale*. Available from: <https://bit.ly/2VioWQX>

¹³ *Kapana Creative District*. Available from: <https://bit.ly/2VXQJou>

this transformation, the headquarters of the Plovdiv 2019 Foundation was moved to SKLAD, one of the former tobacco warehouse buildings.¹⁴ In a similar fashion, other buildings like *Kino Kosmos*¹⁵, an old socialist cinema building, and the *Banya Starinna*, a Turkish bathhouse, were re-cycled and used as spaces for art.

- **Bike Together** – a project that aims to promote cycling as an “alternative method of transportation in the urban environment, contributing to cleaner and greener city”.¹⁶
- **Adopting Adata** – the project aims to “use [] natural materials and ‘green’ art as tools of integrating, through education and art, the Maritsa River and Adata Island into Plovdiv's daily life” as a way to provide spaces for recreational activities in Plovdiv made by sustainable materials.¹⁷

Of course, some of these projects are not connected only to degrowth but are part of the wider attempt to achieve sustainability. Cycling, hand-made souvenirs, and attempts to be mindful in the consumption of fashion and food products are all well-established practices in Western countries and are present in Bulgaria as well, albeit not as developed as in countries like Sweden, for example. Nevertheless, these projects and the practices they promote could be considered degrowth-related because of their potential to disrupt existing institutional conditions.

As shown above, there are many projects that relate to the integration of the Roma and other minorities in Plovdiv. The Stolipinovo neighbourhood is especially marginalised. As the Co-author noted: “It is frightening there [Stolipinovo] when a person goes in for the first time because the poverty is evident, the fact that the neighbourhood has been abandoned [by the municipality] is evident” (Interview 3). Again, she is very sceptical that something is actively being done to improve the wellbeing of the people living in Stolipinovo, despite all the projects and initiatives that are set out in the Programme with regards to the integration of the neighbourhood.

The projects and events expert (hereafter, the Expert, Interview 2), on the other hand, was more positive about the prospect of integration. She described the many local initiatives that are being employed in Stolipinovo with the aim to integrate the Roma population. When asked about specific project and practices that can be related to degrowth, the Expert mentioned about the project *Lets Learn from Stolipinovo* that is part of the *Fuse* platform. The idea behind the project was that artists look at “the everyday public space and its transitory nature as a reflection of general social processes. Assigned to their own networks and craftsmanship the Roma have founded micro-manufactories of all trades here”¹⁸. The main idea was to work with the local craftsmen from Stolipinovo and “implement an architectural

¹⁴ *The Tobacco City*. Available from: <https://bit.ly/2JkrqzE>

¹⁵ *Kosmos Cinema*. Available from: <https://bit.ly/3orFTzk>

¹⁶ *Bike Together*. Available from: <https://bit.ly/3oi8lDK>

¹⁷ *Adopting Adata*. Available from: <https://bit.ly/2JFtUly>

¹⁸ *Lets Learn from Stolipinovo*. Available from: <https://bit.ly/2w2gv4Z>

intervention that connects Stolipinovo with the city of Plovdiv”. Despite the vague description, the project aims to bring people from different ethnicities and allow them to work together on a local project, which could bring down stereotypes and thus help integrate the people of Stolipinovo better. However, specific details on degrowth use as a concept to perhaps change how people perceive wellbeing in Stolipinovo, as per a degrowth trajectory, have not been made.

In terms of the use of space, as mentioned in the project above, re-using space and old buildings for something new has emerged as an effective degrowth practice that could prove disruptive. This is evident with the successful refurbishing of some of the old tobacco warehouses, where SKLAD, the current office of the Plovdiv 2019 team is located and some other buildings, like *Banya Starrinna*, mentioned above. The Deputy Director (Interview 1) maintained that these practices are quite effective and they have chosen their headquarters to be in SKLAD in order to show that these old buildings have potential to be recycled and reused, rather than being demolished. She went on to say that currently, there is stimulus for these kinds of initiatives, but since nothing of the sorts was done in the last 30 years (since the fall of socialism in Bulgaria in 1989), these current initiatives are unable to spread faster. However, she did say that the ECoC project was the absolute “catalyst” for these initiatives because these old buildings are private property. Therefore, it was through the ECoC that the owners of these buildings and prospective investors invested their money in the old structures and revitalised them.

On the topic, the Co-author (Interview 3) said that again, the ideas behind reusing and recycling buildings came from them, the original team that wrote the Programme. They had an ideology and the idea was that all of the initiatives in the Programme will fuse with each other and work together to bring about the change in the city and its inhabitants that they talk about in the Bid Book. Coming from this ideology, they realised the potential of the old buildings and decided to include them in the Programme.

5.2.3. Plovdiv as an arena for degrowth experimentation

While out on observations, I kept finding degrowth-related practices in the city that were not part of the Programme, but were developing on their own, much like the urban gardeners in the Trakia neighbourhood, mentioned by the Co-author.

One example of a degrowth-related practice, or at least something that is aspired to by degrowth scholars, is the existence of small local shops that are dotted around the city. Most of these shops are mixed, offering an assortment of goods, from food products to toiletries. Other shops are more specialised – some offered only dairy products, others – only meat, all sourced from local producers. This was an interesting contrast to Sofia, where these small shops are all but destroyed due to the large supermarkets, like Billa and Kaufland. Of course, these supermarkets exist in Plovdiv as well, but the sheer number of still functioning small shops was interesting to observe. The Co-author confirmed this observation when I asked her about it, and she added that “the further you go into the neighbourhoods, the more local shops you might find” (Interview 3).

In addition to the existence of these small shops, I stumbled upon two second-hand clothes shops in close proximity to each other in the centre. One was called *Humana*, which is part of the larger organisation called *Humana People to People* that connects companies from 42 countries around the world. The idea of the shop is to “deliver second-hand clothes to second-hand stores, with the aim of making a positive social and environmental impact in Bulgaria and in the world”.¹⁹ While second-hand shops are nothing new, there were placards on the walls inside this one, advocating sustainable fashion, the re-use and recycling of clothes, and the need to fight climate change by consuming less. The second shop was *Frea*, which had many provocative messages on its display windows, like *Fashion Revolution*, the need for sustainable fashion, and the slogan: *reduce, repair, recycle, repurpose, reclaim*. When I spoke to one of the shop assistants at *Frea* (Interview 11), he said that the owners of the shop were really engaged with the environmental topic and were trying to convey the message of reducing consumption through their clothing shop, which has several outlets in Plovdiv.

Apart from the above examples, I managed to get in touch with Maya, the founder of *Klub Neshtoto* (The Thing club) (Interview 4). On their website, The Thing is described as “an independent and free social centre”.²⁰ What caught my attention was that the club has three initiatives that are unmistakably degrowth-related. These are: a free market called *Ayliak boutique*, where people can exchange goods and services for free without any monetary exchange; a social cooperative, which connects people with local farmers and producers of organic food; and a time bank called *Time for everyone*.

I met Maya on Wednesday, the day the social cooperative is organised every week. The club is located outside the city centre, but not far from it, in a small garage-like space. We sat down on a bench in the street and I asked her how it came to be that The Thing has such initiatives, which are clearly degrowth-related. She explained that she and her husband founded the club in 2013, starting with the *Ayliak boutique* as a way to create a network of people that help each other for free. They were disappointed by the system and the governmental policies and decided to create the club and help each other [the members of the club], rather than wait someone to help them. The point of the club was that it would be free of entry and accessible to anyone who wishes to join.

Maya admits that when they founded the club she did not know about degrowth and it never occurred to her to think about their work in such a manner. Eventually, she did find out about degrowth through Filka Sekulova. Filka held a lecture at The Thing in 2014, explaining the concept of degrowth. After the lecture and over time, Maya began reading about degrowth and other similar concepts and decided to try out the social cooperative and time bank initiatives as well.

Both are ran via Facebook groups. The social cooperative works with around 20 farmers, depending on the season and what they have to offer as produce, and with around 10 people who order something every week. The time bank has around 80 members, and they have established rules who gets what and how you can accumulate *gifts*, their time currency. They have a shared google docs table, where

¹⁹ *Humana Bulgaria*. Available from: <https://www.humana-bulgaria.org/en/about-us/>

²⁰ *The Thing – About Us*. Available in Bulgarian from: <https://bit.ly/2W3GBmQ>

they would write the amount of *gifts* people had accrued. Maya said that “in the beginning, things were more active, but over time they died out. Now, there is around 1 request a month from someone needing help with something”. She went on to say that over time, people stopped caring about the *gifts* and just wanted to help each other.

When asked about the number of members the club has, Maya said they do not keep any statistics, but based on the likes they have on Facebook, it would be around 5000 people. “I am sure that at least 5000 have passed through here”, she noted. She explained that the club was located in the city centre initially, and a lot of people were active then. However, at one point the rent they were paying became too high and they had to move to the place where they are located now, which reduced the number of people that attended their events. Maya said that they don’t earn a profit from what they do, especially not for salaries, but they do have a donation box and a 10 per cent overcharge on the social cooperative products in order to pay for the club’s utilities’ bills. Everyone in the club has a job as well and the club is something done on the side.

When asked if the club was approached by the organisers of Plovdiv 2019 with some sort of collaborative event, perhaps around the idea for degrowth, Maya said they were not. However, even if approached, Maya maintained they would have declined the offer. Independence is a key value of the club. As Maya put it: “Its very important for us to be transparent about funding and we do not want to be associated with the European Union, any Swiss funds and other [benefactors], because every sponsor has some kind of demands for you and there is no way for you to be independent”.

When asked if they receive any help from the municipality to organise their events, Maya described their relationship with the local municipality as “strange”. They have a connection with the mayor of the Trakia neighbourhood, who is aware of the club and has attended some of its events. When they organise *Ayliak boutiques* outdoors during the warmer months of the year, they like to do it in the *Lauta* public park in Trakia, and have to go through the local municipality to ask for permission to take up space. Maya said that the mayor of Trakia is accommodating in that regard and allows them to organise the event. However, when The Thing applied for a room within the municipality to create an office space they did not receive an answer. “More than a year has passed and we still have no answer about the space. In general, the legal period to receive a reply from the municipality is one month. So in this regard, the municipality doesn’t help us at all”, Maya said. She went on to say that this lack of support was “disappointing because we try to do things from people to people, and the municipality is meant to be some sort of a representative of the people and to help with these citizen initiatives, but alas, no interest...” (Interview 3).

6. Discussion

6.1. Commentary on findings

This study set out to explore the seemingly spontaneous emergence of degrowth practices and ideas in Plovdiv and their potential to disrupt existing institutional arrangements and bring about a degrowth transition to the city. Two interrelated themes emerged from the empirical analysis.

The first theme is connected to the concept of *ayliak*. Through the formal interviews and informal discussions, it became apparent that, apart from the co-author of the Bid Book, no one in Plovdiv actually knows what degrowth is, at least not in the way it is defined in this paper. As it was revealed, the actual ideas behind the sudden emergence of degrowth in the Plovdiv 2019 Programme can be attributed, to an extent, to the discussions on degrowth held in 2014 by Filka Sekulova, a degrowth scholar. The original organisers of Plovdiv 2019 were inspired by these discussions and, finding local degrowth-related practices like urban gardening in the Trakia neighbourhood, connected the idea of degrowth to the concept of *ayliak*. *Ayliak* was described as a distinct mind-set that is intrinsic to Plovdiv and is connected to the idea of being supremely relaxed and living a stress-free life.

This idea of *ayliak* can be connected to the degrowth notion of “the good life” and what constitutes it (Alexander, 2015). As mentioned in the literature review, degrowth signifies a complete social transformation of society that will alter the way we perceive prosperity and how we live our lives in general. A great deal of degrowth research is connected to the idea of wellbeing and happiness (Sekulova, 2015; Büchs and Koch, 2017, 2019) and how these can be maintained while a society undergoes a degrowth transition. While perceptions of wellbeing and happiness are both subjective and objective, concepts such as *ayliak* can be utilised to transform how these subjective perceptions of wellbeing are understood.

As mentioned, Büchs and Koch (2019) propose a deliberative process to re-evaluate perceptions of wellbeing within local communities. Given the fact that *ayliak* is connected to the ideas of being relaxed and calm, it could be utilised in such a deliberative process within the populace of Plovdiv to start altering their perceptions of wellbeing. In the interviews, *ayliak* was associated to freedom, the slow life, and being able to connect with other people, be it acquaintances or neighbours. This plays into the ideas of instilling values of conviviality (Deriu, 2015) and caring, both for oneself and others, as in the idea of *Ubuntu* (Ramose, 2015), another such concept.

Thus, from a degrowth perspective, *ayliak* can be understood as a philosophy of life of sorts, where a person is not constantly trying to have more as per the growth imperative, but rather, just be content with life, as per the notions of

degrowth. Finding such local understandings of life and tying them with the notions of degrowth, wellbeing, and happiness can bring us a step closer towards understanding how degrowth can be implemented. Of course, as mentioned by the Co-author (Interview 3), *ayliak* should be taken with a pinch of salt, because it could be connected to wastefulness and slothfulness, which are not practices and values that degrowth aspires to. Nevertheless, *ayliak* is a concept that exists in Plovdiv and its inhabitants and will be an important part of the deliberative process espoused to by Büchs and Koch (2019).

Apart from being a state of mind, *ayliak* was also described as something that the people of Plovdiv practice. This connects *ayliak* to the sociology of practice and how social practices can transform existing institutional arrangements, as theorised in this paper. Clearly, the existence of *ayliak* plays an important role for the people of Plovdiv and perhaps permeates to how they structure their lives. This connects us to the second theme that emerged in the analysis that sees Plovdiv as a city that is susceptible to degrowth practices and ideas, making the experimentation with degrowth possible. As argued by Varvarousis and Koutrolidou (2018), a degrowth city will be a field of experimentation, where various degrowth ideas and practices can transform the perceptions of urban dwellers and how they live, produce, consume, and connect to each other.

As shown, there are many examples of how degrowth is flourishing in Plovdiv despite the term's lack of promotion in the Plovdiv 2019 Programme. The existence of small shops for food products in the neighbourhoods that work directly with local producers from the surrounding villages, along with the second-hand clothes shops that actively promote sustainable fashion, and urban gardeners, as mentioned by the Co-author, are clear examples of how degrowth-related practices are existing in Plovdiv. Of course, the people who work in these shops and those that consume their products are perhaps unaware of their own actions. However, as shown by the studies that deal with practice theory and institutional change, such unconscious practices have unintended effects. In this case, everybody that goes to their local food and second-hand clothing shops instead of the supermarkets or shopping centres, unconsciously breaks away from the growth-driven practices and institutions that dominate modern societies. As shown by Lawrence and Suddaby (2006), however, a multitude of practitioners are needed before existing institutions can be disrupted. Nevertheless, the fact that so many local shops exist in Plovdiv, means that the people who live there value these shops and through the social practice of purchasing from them, they maintain them. This signifies that this local mentality has somehow been preserved in Plovdiv. In comparison to Sofia, the capital of Bulgaria, such local shops are all but gone. Perhaps the existence of the small shops in Plovdiv is due to the *ayliak* spirit or because Plovdiv is not as big as Sofia, which allows for these shops to exist. Regardless, this example shows that there is a foundation in Plovdiv that could be utilised for the implementation of degrowth.

This foundation is aptly exemplified by The Thing club. The sheer existence of The Thing and its initiatives showcase that a local mentality is indeed present in Plovdiv and has seemingly emerged by itself. The club's initiatives provide evidence of how degrowth works in practice. Unfortunately, I was unable to gather

information of how these initiatives impact the lives of people in terms of their wellbeing and happiness. Nevertheless, some inferences can be made. The continued existence of the club, despite its relocation from the centre, which, as shown, decreased its active members, provides an example of how social practices can be reproduced and how they can create, maintain, or disrupt social institutions (Lawrence and Suddaby, 2006). If the club's initiatives did not provide some benefit to those who practiced them, i.e. some benefit for their wellbeing and/or happiness, the club would have most probably been abandoned by now. However, the club continues to exist, albeit with less members, which indicates the willingness of people to continue their engagement in the club's activities because they most likely *do* gain some benefit from being part of the club. This not only maintains the club's initiatives active, but showcases how given enough time for a practice to circulate within society can perpetuate its existence. With this in mind, the continued existence of these practices in Plovdiv have the potential to disrupt existing institutional arrangements if given more publicity and the right space, highlighting the importance of spatial institutions for degrowth implementation, as argued by Wächter (2013).

What becomes apparent is that these themes - the concept of *ayliak* as a philosophy of life of sorts and the city as a place for degrowth experimentation - have developed independently of the Plovdiv 2019 project. Rather, the introduction of degrowth as an idea in the Plovdiv 2019 Programme has happened due to the already existent practices and ideas that are present in Plovdiv. Of course, this became apparent via the interviews, but it makes for an interesting parallel. What will happen with the projects of Plovdiv 2019 that are degrowth-related once the ECoC project concluded? Will they have a role to play in the disruption of existing institutional arrangements and the further integration of degrowth in Plovdiv?

It is hard to say. According to the Co-author (Interview 3), the prospects remain bleak because no one in the current team of Plovdiv 2019 is actively pursuing a degrowth-agenda. This is indeed evident in the attempts to integrate the Roma population and the other minorities of Plovdiv through the various initiatives at the local level. While such local initiatives are being used, no one is talking about wellbeing or other important factors for integration, which makes these initiatives unsustainable. In other words, the projects are only being carried out without an attempt to actually make a change.

On a more positive note, however, the revitalisation of old buildings, like the old tobacco warehouses, and their transformation as spaces for art and other initiatives has the potential of furthering degrowth ideas that are part of the Plovdiv 2019 Programme. Again, this ties into the importance of spatial institutions for the propagation of degrowth (Wächter, 2013). The potential here is evident and could be promoted further, especially now, during the ECoC project, which, as mentioned by the Deputy Director, is the catalyst for initiatives like the refurbishment of old buildings.

Apart from that, cycling and the making of more recreational space around the Maritsa River correspond to the degrowth ideas of low-tech transportation and entertainment (Alexander and Yacoumis, 2016), but these can also be connected to a wider sustainability discourse rather than degrowth itself.

6.2. Implications for degrowth integration

The above findings suggest several things that aid in answering the main research question of this study, which was: *How can local practices and interpretations of degrowth ideas disrupt existing institutional conditions in Plovdiv?*

First, degrowth ideas and practices exist on the scene in Plovdiv independently of the Plovdiv 2019 project. While the actual concept of degrowth remains unknown, despite its existence in the Plovdiv 2019 Programme, the ideas behind the concept are, to an extent, familiar to the people of Plovdiv because of the idea of ayliak. Ayliak is considered both a state of mind and something you can do, making it a practice. Assuming, based on the empirical evidence, that most of the people in Plovdiv practice or do the ayliak every day, implies that ayliak in itself is a powerful social practice that is being reproduced by people constantly. As discussed, if degrowth is to emerge it needs to gain broader social and political support (Buch-Hansen, 2018), making discussions about wellbeing under a degrowth transition of vital importance (Büchs and Koch, 2019).

With this in mind, it can be argued that being and doing ayliak is connected to feelings of relaxation and contentment, and thus to subjective notions of wellbeing. Thus, drawing a connection between the concept of ayliak and the deliberative process of what constitutes personal wellbeing, advanced by Büchs and Koch (2019), can become a viable way to promote degrowth integration at the local level in Plovdiv. Such deliberative processes can be made via social clubs like The Thing, from where, through the reproduction of ayliak as a social practice, the notions of wellbeing, under the banner of degrowth, can start permeating in society. Once enough people start adhering to notions of wellbeing connected to degrowth, thus gathering enough social support, the process of integrating degrowth in Plovdiv will become much easier.

Second, the existence of a local mentality in Plovdiv, that is most likely connected to ayliak, allows for the experimentation with degrowth ideas and practices within the city. This local mentality is exemplified by the many local shops in the neighbourhoods, the instances of urban gardening mentioned by the Co-author (Interview 3), and the existence of local food networks, as shown by The Thing club with their social cooperative initiative. All of these instances challenge the status quo of existing growth-driven institutional arrangements in Plovdiv by promoting alternative ways for organising society. The very existence of these practices that have formed organically, makes this local mentality a viable tool for implementing degrowth at the local level. Again, utilising the social practices and tapping into the local mentality of Plovdiv, degrowth ideas could be spread via the reproduction of the existing practices in the city. This goes back to what that Co-author mentioned (Interview 3), namely, that existing practices are utilised and expanded on in order to plant the seeds for a degrowth transition in the future.

Taking the above into account, the answer to the main research question is that the existing institutional arrangements in Plovdiv can be disrupted by connecting the spirit of ayliak with notions of wellbeing, and by tapping into the local mentality and degrowth-related practices that exist organically in the city and reproduce them via the sociology of practice.

6.3. Limitations of the study and reflections of the researcher

One major limitation to this study is that the phenomenon (degrowth) that was studied is still emerging and changing, which makes the formulation of definite conclusions, based on the above analysis, hard. In addition, this phenomenon was studied half-way through the year while Plovdiv is still a ECoC. With this in mind, there is still a plethora of events that have not yet happened or are still unfolding and will surely have an impact on how people understand and perceive degrowth and how and whether they practice it. Therefore, any research value that might be derived from this study will need to be complemented by further investigation. Nevertheless, as mentioned previously, the specific context of the case study that is being examined provides an interesting example of degrowth in practice, which deserved this initial exploration. With this in mind, it is my hope that this research has provided relevant results that may further the promulgation of degrowth, in both theory and practice.

Apart from these limitations, from a self-reflective point, I found the experience of conducting an original research to be both challenging and rewarding in itself. It was especially interesting to see how the theory behind interviewing plays out in reality. It became apparent that no manner of prior preparation for the interviews can prepare you for issues such as trying to get in contact with various people, waiting for email replies and often not getting them, and adjusting questions to the mood of people, their availability, and their understanding of technical concepts like degrowth. Furthermore, dealing with my surroundings was an interesting aspect of this process as well. The experience of interviewing people indoors in a quiet office space, in a café with other people, while having music played, and outdoors with many distractions and noises, was completely different. Nevertheless, everything that happened was a learning experience that helped me further develop my research skills, which will surely have an effect on any future research.

7. Conclusion

In light of growing economic inequalities and increasing environmental degradation on a global scale, degrowth has proven a compelling and well-thought out alternative to current growth-driven socio-economic systems. However, despite the multitude of theories and practices the degrowth community has come up with, degrowth remains politically and socially marginalised. Scholars have explained this marginalisation via the lack of social and political support for degrowth (Buch-Hansen, 2018), and the need to understand how a degrowth transition will impact wellbeing in order to gain support (Büchs and Koch, 2019). Bearing in mind the necessity for rapid socio-economic change on a global scale, if we are to curtail the future degradation of our planet, ways to implemented degrowth need to be propagated.

This study set out to contribute to this call by exploring the implications for degrowth integration in the city of Plovdiv, Bulgaria. Plovdiv is currently one of the two European Capitals of Culture for 2019 and was chosen as a case study because of the seemingly spontaneous emergence of degrowth practices and ideas in its Programme of events.

Following an already established line of research dealing with the implications for degrowth institutional change (Järvensivu, 2013; Joutsenvirta, 2016; Lloveras, Quinn and Parker, 2018), this study employed a practice theory approach as a method to explore the case study. The practice theory approach highlights the importance of everyday social practices and how they influence people's values and norms, and their perceptions of the world around them. By habitually reproducing these social practices, actors can create, maintain, or disrupt existing social institutions (Lawrence and Suddaby, 2006). Having in mind the great social transformation that degrowth aspires to, the practice theory approach is considered of great value by degrowth scholars in understanding how social practices can transform existing growth-driven institutions. Therefore, the main research question of this study was: *How can local practices and interpretations of degrowth ideas disrupt existing institutional conditions in Plovdiv?*

This research question was explored by investigating local interpretations of degrowth ideas, what practices are being implemented and how, and what are their implications for a change in people's mentality. The research methods of collecting empirical data for this study included: interviews with the organisers of Plovdiv 2019 and discussions with people who work and live in the city, on-site observations, and the analysis of official documents. The collected empirical evidence was examined via the thematic analysis approach.

From the analysis, it became apparent that local practices and interpretations of degrowth ideas can disrupt existing institutional conditions in Plovdiv in two ways. The first one is to link the intrinsic for Plovdiv concept of ayliak - a state of

mind connected to feelings of idleness and relaxation - to notions of wellbeing through a deliberative process. Büchs and Koch (2019) argue that if degrowth is to gain broader social support more deliberations on whether high levels of wellbeing can be maintained during a degrowth transition must be made. Having in mind that notions of wellbeing are socially constructed, the use of practice theory can change how wellbeing is perceived. Thus, connecting the idea of ayliak to wellbeing, the argument was that by constructing a new degrowth notion of wellbeing, structured around the idea of ayliak, people who practice ayliak will have an easier transitioning towards degrowth.

The second way of disrupting institutional conditions in Plovdiv is to tap into the local mentality that exists in the city and use it to locate existing degrowth-related practices at the local level, like urban gardening. Again, using practice theory, the existing practices are promoted and expanded on until enough people start practicing them, thus bringing about the desired change.

Apart from these conclusions, it became apparent that the European Capital of Culture project has negligible effects on promoting a degrowth transformation to the city because no one really knows what is meant by degrowth. Nevertheless, having in mind the many seemingly degrowth-related events that are still part of the Programme of Plovdiv 2019, a disruption of existing institutional arrangements through the ECoC project could yet be observed.

Finally, this paper has contributed to an array of studies that look at practice theory and institutional change from a degrowth perspective. The contribution comes by highlighting the concept of ayliak, which shows how concepts connected to the idea of the good life can be important propagators of degrowth implementation if connected to notions of wellbeing. In addition, following calls for more examples of possible degrowth trajectories (Buch-Hansen, 2014), this study has contributed to the degrowth literature by exploring degrowth in a country that is less developed than Western countries but will nevertheless need to undergo a degrowth transition. In hindsight, a possible degrowth trajectory in Bulgaria, or at least in Plovdiv, could be through the concept of ayliak, showcasing the importance of specific examples.

Of course, further research should be done when the Plovdiv 2019 project concludes in order to assess the findings of this paper and hopefully build upon it. As shown, Plovdiv seems susceptible to degrowth ideas and practices and could prove a hub for degrowth research and implementation in the future.

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Appendices

Appendix A: Overview of respondents²¹

Interview number	Type of Actor	Organisation	Role	Date of Interview	Mode of interview	Selection criteria ²²
1	Organiser	Plovdiv 2019	Deputy director	03.05.2019	Face-to-face, formal	P19R-DR
2	Organiser	Plovdiv 2019	Projects and events expert	03.05.2019	Face-to-face, formal	P19R-DR
3	Former organiser	Plovdiv 2019	Co-author of the bidding book	08.05.2019	Face-to-face, formal	FP19R-DR
4	Civil society	The Thing - club	Founder	08.05.2019	Face-to-face, formal	DR
5	Civil society x 2 ²³	N/A	Members of the public	02.05.2019	Face-to-face, informal	RS
6	Civil society	N/A	Member of the public	02.05.2019	Face-to-face, informal	RS
7	Civil society x 2	House of culture/ museum	Curators	02.05.2019	Face-to-face, informal	RS
8	Civil society	N/A	Member of the public	02.05.2019	Face-to-face, informal	RS
9	Civil society	House of culture/ museum	Curator	02.05.2019	Face-to-face, informal	RS
10	Civil society	N/A	N/A	03.05.2019	Face-to-face, informal	RS

²¹ This table was modelled after the one presented by Buhr, Isakson and Hagbert (2018: 12).

²² Selection criteria. P19R-DR: Plovdiv 2019 representative – degrowth related; FP19R-DR: Former Plovdiv 2019 representative – degrowth related; DR: degrowth related; RS: random selection.

²³ Two or more respondents were present at the discussion

11	Civil society	Frea shop	Shop assistant	04.05.2019	Face-to-face, informal	RS
12	Civil society x 2	Humana shop	Shop assistants	04.05.2019	Face-to-face, informal	RS
13	Civil society	N/A	N/A	07.05.2019	Questionnaire	RS
14	Civil society	N/A	N/A	10.05.2019	Questionnaire	RS

Appendix B: Interview Guide

Note: The interview questions were originally written in Bulgarian. For purposes of readability, they were translated in English as follows:

1. How do you understand ‘degrowth’? / Can you tell me more about how you understand “degrowth”?
 - a. What does degrowth oppose? What is its purpose? What is your relationship to growth? Do you actively discuss degrowth?
2. Why did you choose degrowth and not green development, sustainable development, or other green initiatives?
 - a. According to the description of the Programme, the Relax platform aims to promote a slow life and eco-life? Why do we need to promote such lives?
3. What is the main motivation behind the degrowth initiatives?
4. What were/are the challenges to implement these initiatives and ideas?
5. Are people interested by the degrowth agenda?
6. How do you plan to continue implementing the degrowth initiatives in the long-run?
7. Can you provide me with any reference to discussions you might have had about degrowth?

Appendix C: Questionnaire

Note: As the interview questions, the questionnaire was also originally written in Bulgarian. For purposes of readability, it was translated in English as follows:

1. Do you know what it is / have you heard of the word degrowth before?
 - a. Answer (yes/no, or longer):

2. Do you know that degrowth is used as a concept in the Programme of Plovdiv 2019?
 - a. Answer (yes/no, or longer):

3. What is ayliak according to you? Is it something specific for Plovdiv? Do you use the word often and to describe what? What does it mean to “do the ayliak”? Please, describe at length:

4. Now that you know what degrowth is, can you describe degrowth practices that you perform or ones have performed without knowing that they are degrowth in nature? Please, describe at length:

5. Finally, if you consent, please indicate your sex, age, and your occupation (student, employed, other...):