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LAND IN THE CONTEXT OF RENEWABLE ENERGY SOURCE PRIORITISATION: MEANINGS, BOUNDARIES, AND ACTORS

(a case study of an RES park in two Bulgarian villages)

ABSTRACT

of the Dissertation

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The dissertation has been discussed and admitted for defending on a departmental session at the Department of Sociology at the Faculty of Philosophy of the University of Sofia “St. Kliment Ohridski”, Sofia, which took place on January 22, 2025.

The dissertation is structured as follows: Introduction, Three distinct chapters, Conclusion, Bibliography, Appendices (two). The total volume of the dissertation (excluding the Appendices which amount to 29 pages) is 232 pages, including 11 images and 2 tables.

The Bibliography comprises 17 Legislative Acts, of which 12 in Bulgaria and 6 in English and 82 scholarly titles, of which 3 in Bulgarian and 79 in English.

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Introduction

I began working on my dissertation having in mind a focus on the relationship between human and nature. How does it evolve, how does it transform in the context of the ecologic crisis and the emergent Green transition in Europe. As I delved into the subject and initiated attempts to empirically study the topic, I was faced with an unexpected challenge. The subject appeared to be as unfathomable, as were the definitions of both 'human' and 'nature'. In order to be able to distil this fundamental (to life and science) question, I defined human as action and nature as meaning. Therefore, my research queries shifted to investigating the ways in which nature obtains social meaning and in the ways in which humans act in a meaningful social way.

Led by this new focus, I identified a case fulfilling the following criteria: 1) to demonstrate the relationship between human and nature in flux, influenced by the Green transition; 2) to allow for empirical access to meaning-making and acting towards nature. Thus, in my dissertation's vocabulary, 'human' are the social actors having a stake in the selected case, and 'nature' is one of its manifestations, namely land.

Problem definition through the lens of the case

My dissertation investigates the contradiction, arising around an Austrian company's investment intent to build a photovoltaic plant (RES park) upon a large terrain of public unarrable agricultural land in the municipality of Haskovo. The land, owned by the municipality, is also used by the inhabitants of the two surrounding villages – Knijovink and Dolno Voyvodino. Who has the right to use this land? Who does it belong to? These are the two questions, which spur the contradiction and demand its resolution. The search for answers requires looking at the relationship between the land and the actors on one hand, and the relationships among the actors, holding a stake in the contradiction, on the other. The answers to these questions, i.e., the resolution of the contradiction, require the redefinition of *the land*, according to the prioritized practices, that it should entail. Therefore, setting the boundaries around the land is in fact the process of resolving the contradiction. And the relationship between human and nature in the multi-dimensional local context can be found in the processes of boundary work around public agricultural land.

In my case study, I account for four key specifics of the land, which shape it as a carrier of the natural in the context of the green transition and as a medium of the contradiction. Firstly, the contradiction has an economic and monetary dimension, as the magnitude of the intended investment suggests the attraction of upwards of 4 million leva in the municipal budget of Haskovo. Secondly, the investment has a global dimension, as the proposed RES installation provides the political framework of the contradiction – it is not merely an investment in an economic product, it is an investment in the future of humanity, supported by supra-natural political logics. Thirdly, the initial investment intent aims to secure over 400 hectares of land – the entire free land at the disposal of the two villages. This entails that there is no room for compromise, both figuratively and literally. Fourth, the contested land is agricultural, public, and inerrable – it is formally free but practically necessary and finite. The resource finitude of the land

here surpasses its classic dimension (recognized by the scholarly tradition) of a resource for which different actors compete. Land is finite (it can be depleted) and irreplaceable (there is no way to dig out or produce new land). This is exactly why it attracts such interest by RES producers and at the same time compels local defense mechanisms.

In my case study, I define the relevant actors through an empirical logic – each social agent, who has a part in the emergence and resolution of the contradiction, be they a group, an individual or an institution. I focus on three main actors:

1. The Local villagers from Knijovnik and Dolno Voyvodino, who inhabit the lands, intended for a photovoltaic plant. They are users of the land;
2. The municipality of Haskovo – the municipal council, the formal owner of the land and decision-maker of what is to be defined as priority use of the land, as well as the mayor and his administration, who is to execute this decision;
3. The investor – the *Enery* corporation, who wants to claim use of the land in order to erect and RES park, without acquiring ownership of the land.

Following this description, the contradiction is not so much a *valuation of alternative meanings of nature* rather an issue of solving a social problem – **how do we concede to a priority use of the land, i.e., how do we establish a preferential use of the common finite resource?** The resolution to the contradiction is an especially complex endeavor, as all competing uses of the land are within the boundaries of the law – therefore, the decision is not a judicial, rather a social issue.

My research aims to uncover and identify the processes for resolving the contradiction and to highlight the entanglement of meanings, ascribed to the land, and relations among actors.

Research interest, object, tasks and methods

The subject of interest for my research are the mechanisms for achieving the social consensus in the resolution of a contradiction and this resolution's establishment in accepted social boundaries.

The object of research are the symbolic and social boundaries *around* the land, which I uncover in the perceptions (narratives) and practices, employed by the relevant social actors (the local villagers, the municipality, and the investor).

Tasks:

1. To identify the symbolic boundaries *around the lad* in the relevant social actors' narratives (the meanings of the land, the significant differences that they perceive between themselves and other actors, narratives, symbols, etc.);
2. To uncover the present social boundaries *around the land* (unavoidable tangible carriers (normative acts, institutional pathways, built material objects, restricting the access to the

land and/or the practices established upon it) of unequal access to the land and its resources);

3. To analyse how the relationship between symbolic and social boundaries sets in motion the mechanisms, used to resolve the contradiction.

My empirical approach to the case rests upon two types of data:

1. In-depth, semi-structured, and go-along interviews with local villagers and municipal council representatives;
2. An archive of publicly available documents, describing the administrative bureaucratic aspect of the contradiction: protocols from municipal council meetings, report notes, the investment intent, orders, ordinances, regulations, municipal council decisions

Conceptual framework

In order to come up with a conceptual framework, through which to approach the case in such a ways, which could allow me to uncover the relationships between the actors and the land, and among the actors, I step upon three theoretical approaches. Firstly, through the analysis on the literatures on cultural landscapes (Abramson, 2000; Moore & Whelan, 206; Porath, 2000; Yeoh & Kong, 1994; Layton & Ucko, 2003; Strang, 2000) I set forth a perception of the land as a carrier of certain definitions, embedded in cultural meanings, traditions, and processes exceeding the purely environmental value of a sight or fresh air, as well as the purely economic value of the land as terrain for capitalization. Secondly, through a review of articles on the concept of socio-economic systems, I highlight not only the symbolic and cultural meaning of the land, but also its entanglement in economic, political and resource-based dimension. The intersection of these two interpretations of nature to become a social force I theorize by defining the land as a field for re-negotiation of social boundaries through symbolic boundaries.

Based upon literature from the tradition of cultural sociology социологическата (Bakkær-Simonsen, 2018; Lamont & Molnar, 2002; Raposova, 2019; Nancarrow and Borthwick, 2005; Lewis, 2003; Awad et. Al., 2022) I bring forth a definition of symbolic boundaries as significant differences and I adapt the definition of social boundaries as the aim and achievement for social tangibility. These two definitions serve as my instrument to investigate the relationship between symbolic (meaning-making) and social (tangible social matter-making) dimensions of the relations embedded in the *land as contradiction*. Thus I highlight the subject of my research as the

mechanisms which socially redefine the land, by employing new meanings and relations. The main conceptual assumption is that the mechanism, which resolves the contradiction for a priority use of the land, is the establishment of new social boundaries *around the land.* These boundaries result from the re-imagination and competition between already existing and newly-transformative symbolic boundaries, recognized by social actors and materialized in the new order of things.

Structure of the dissertation

In the first chapter of the dissertation I define the subject matter and the approach to its analysis. The chapter is divided into two distinct parts. In the first part I provide the empirically-grounded depiction of the case. This depiction results in the empirically substantiated definition of the *land as contradiction.* In the second part of the first chapter I turn my gaze at the sociological schools, which have analysed land in various paradigms. I propose the employment of the conceptual tools of symbolic and social boundaries as a gateway to the sociological potentials of interpreting the land as contradiction. I produce the concept of the land as terrain for (re)establishment of social boundaries as a theoretical mirror image of the empirical notion of the land as contradiction.

In the second chapter, I analyse the data, drawing upon 20 qualitative interviews with respondents, representing the relevant actors in the contradiction. As a result of the analysis, I describe the variety of symbolic boundaries, which establish meanings, tradition and practices upon the land (centered around the meanings of the land as a village, the land as progress, and the ecological land). I bring forth the para-formal social boundaries existing around the land. They support and are supported by the social inertia of things – routines and rituals, upon which rest tangible obstacles to perceived or real foreign access to the land.

In the third chapter, I focus on the administrative and bureaucratic process of decision-making in regards to the land. I find two key meanings of the land: the land as terrain for RES and the land as means for protection of the public interest. I investigate the way, in which these two meanings become equated by symbolic boundary drawing between the municipality and the investor: internal heterogenisation of the "for" and "against" groups among the municipal council representatives, and an external homogenization of the municipality and the investor through the decisions, made by the council. I identify two types of social boundaries, drawn by the formal process of normative decision-making: specific and general. I relate these to the mechanisms of the creation of the formal order of things – setting of political priorities in normative acts (The

Rules of establishing administrative taxes for tenure of the public land) and the making of specific binding decisions as one-off acts of bending the definition of the public interest beyond its monetary dimension.

In conclusion, I pay attention to the ways, in which social and symbolic boundaries can be specified and problematized in novel variations – my discoveries of formal and para-formal, specific and general social boundaries. I highlight the conditions for transformation of symbolic in social boundaries, depending on who and how draws them. I turn my gaze to the historical outcome of the contradiction and the light it sheds on the prevalence of the relationships (boundaries) among actors in their ability for mutual (or at least not contradicting) re-definition of public goods (the land).

Conceptual and methodological framework of the land as contradiction

What comprises the process of social reconstruction of the land? Who are the main actors partaking in this reconstruction? What are the main tools for reconstruction, or to put it differently, by what mechanisms do social actors defend their social position and interest? In order to answer these questions, I attempt to outline a scholarship-based notion of the land as. I define the land as a contradiction as an empirical effort to describe the emerging conflict around it. The resolution to this contradiction practically requires that one of the opposing actors obtains exclusive rights to use the land. This empirically observable process translates sociologically as an opposition between social and symbolic boundaries in an attempt to establish a new order of things. This establishment is a process of social boundary-making, based upon the re-drawing of symbolic boundaries, and it eventually leads to the transformation of the relationship among the actors, to the re-negotiation of each actor's relationship to the land, and subsequently to the re-definition of the land's social dimensions.

The case: An investment intent to build an RES park in the lands between the villages of Knijovnik and Dolno Voyvodino

The studied case unfolds on the parallel scenes – the Haskovo Municipal Council meeting room and on the territory of the village of Knijovnik. The two scenes are the fields of action, which dynamically intertwine and intersect in the two-dimensional manifestation of the contradiction in flux. In fact, the acts on each scene are inherently interlinked and shape a common solution, they flow into one another and transform the land and the actors.

The contradiction forms with the first entrance of the topic in the Municipal Council's Agenda in August of 2020 and boils into civil unrest by September of the same year. In August, after internal discussions, the municipal council representatives issue a Prior Approval for the erection of a photovoltaic plant in the pasture between the villages of Knijovnik and Dolno Voyvodino. By the mayor's invitation, the CEO of the corporation (*Enery 1 BG)*, which had entered the formal investment intent, gave a presentation of their economic plans for the region. As early as during the first discussion among municipal council representatives, the local disapproval of RES investments of such magnitude was expressed from the tribune. In September of 2020 the representatives of the potential investor refer to the Prior Approval as "a green light to attest to the sensibility of mobbing on with the project" which "by no means binds the municipality with concrete responsibilities"(CEO of *Enery* for Bulgaria). The Prior Approval is the starting point of a long administrative process which could be expected to culminate with the admission of the actual building of the park. During this long administrative process the land must undergo a process of administrative transformation. This transformation requires the completion of preocedures, related to the production of Detailed Development Plants (DDPs), to the change of the status and intended purposes for each of the parcels, initially intended by the investor for the RES park (19 parcels at the beginning). According to the initially expected scope of the investment intent, the RES park should be erected upon almost 4 000 decares of non-arable land (detailed in the investment intent as belonging to 19 parcels, 17 of which on the territory of Knijovnik and 2 of which on the territory of Dolno Voyvodino). These parcels comprise land of different agricultural categories (between 7 and 9) and are publicly owned by the municipality of Haskovo. The intended purpose of the lands, which spark the investor's interest, are originally set as either "for pasture", or "for forest roads". The latter holds almost no normative influence, as it should be easily re-instated or changed for a specific legal purpose and the procedures are the same regardless of what the intended purpose of the land had been, before the decision to ascribe it as "for an RES park". From the municipality's perspective, its lands are "free" and "unoccupied" – according to the Registry of Municipal Lands, as of 2021 (the period, during which the administration of the investment intent intensifies) all parcels, which have remained in the investor's interest, are not leased for agricultural or other economic purposes.

The maintenance of the land has not been outsourced to any firm or legal entity, which could by these means potentially receive municipal subsidies. This is because the characteristics of the land

legally require no specific maintenance. In the three years which followed the investment intent the administrative procedures for land transformation (which procedures I call "voting on DDPs" in reference to a quote from a municipal council representative in one of the qualitative interviews, conducted for the purpose of the dissertation) monotonously and (almost) undisturbedly run their course. During this time, the municipal council representatives categorically divide into two distinct groups – "for" and "against" the park. The majority (consisting of the representatives from GERB, DPS and Bulgare with a sporadic support from the coalitions of "Democratic Bulgaria" and "For Haskovo" cast their votes "for", as the BSP and the independent municipal council representatives for the opposition "against". In this three-year period a substantive portion of the intended parcels fall out of the investor's interest and the majority of the intended lands end up within the territory of the village of Knijovnik (the two remaining parcels in the territory of the village of Dolno Voyvodino are further away from the village's inhabited boundaries and therefore explain the focus on Knijovnik as the main "casualty" of the potential investment). Eventually, the municipal council votes on a new Prior Approval (as the statute of the first, set in Municipal Council Decision 155, expires after the first two years of the administrative process), which only refers to 1400 dacres of the desired land. In July of 2023, this Prior Approval becomes a Decision to allow the construction upon the land and the right to use the land for 50 years, for the benefit of *Enery*. In December of 2023, the procedure for change of status of the land from public to private municipal property fails to acquire the necessary number of "for" votes to support the decision and therefore the finalization of the administrative chronicle of the RES park is left in the hands of an expected newly elected group of municipal council representatives. With the second discussion of the same procedural vote in February of 2024, the new municipal council rejects it for the second time. At this point, the reasoning rests on the desire for re-negotiation with the investor and their re-engagement with formal obligations to the local community. *Enery's* CEO for Bulgaria enters the municipal council's meeting room for the second time and this time, from the provided tribune, he declares the set obligations not only as accepted, but as almost entirely completed. The investors have made donations to the villagers of Knijovnik, for the reconstruction of the village's church, for the renovation of the doctor's office, for night-vision cameras for the local hunter's group, for the construction of a natural sciences classroom in the village's primary school. These obligations however, as becomes evident from the discussion in the municipal council's meeting room, obtain a newly emergent complexity, as the opposition demand the direct participation of the local

villagers in the decision-making on the spending of the funds, potentially entering the municipality's budget. Left open-ended, the discussion with the investor's representatives leads to the reassertion of the previous rejection to approve the technical procedure for change of status of the land and further stalls the construction of the park.

In an unusual turn of events, the new Municipal Council was pronounced illegitimate by the Administrative Court of Bulgaria and therefore – dismantled. For the subsequent two sessions of the Municipal Council, before a new collective can be elected, the former municipal council representatives are reinstated in their positions. Following some heated discussions and documented disputes among the municipal council representatives, the required qualified majority to affirm the change of status of the land is secured and therefore the construction of the park – guaranteed.

In a response to the granted Prior Approval of the RES park back in 2020, the inhabitants of the two villagers, united against the core of the hunter's group (which comprises inhabitants of the two villages and form other three, unscathed by the investment intent), demonstrate their discontent with the investment intent. In September of 2020, less than a month after the Prior Approval had been granted, a meeting between the local villagers and representatives of the investor took place to seek ground for a mutually-agreeable solution to the problem.

At the meeting, a discussion of the potential consequences to the villages from the erection of the RES park was held. Potential ecological harm to the area was considered – the investor assured local villagers (mirroring some key points form their presentation in front of the Municipal Council) that the soil, the microclimate, the flora and fauna will be unaffected by the photovoltaic plant. As a result of the conducted meetings, the locals firmly state their position against the park. Their main concern is related to the perceived deprivation of their right, which was previously practically granted, to use the 4 000 decares however they saw fit. The use of the land for local needs had by this point been the unspoken social consensus – the order of things before the investment intent. The hunters had been using it to hunt and breed wildlife, the locals had been using it for hiking, everybody had been using it for access to a nature-friendly way of life.

The whole territory, included in the initial 4 000 decares, had been used as a hunting ground by the local hunters' group. There (as hunters narrated in qualitative interviews and ecologists later

confirmed) the hunters breed wild deer and pheasants, take care of these animals, recover populations, hunt, hold expeditions and hiking trips, entertain tourists. This same land had been used by locals for hiking with their children (suggestions confirmed by postings on Facebook throughout time).

Upon this land, following some friction with the municipality, the locals placed a big metal cross and positioned a photo frame with a sign *I love Knijovnik.* This land provided the immediate landscape (even in the literal sense of view, grass, and air) seen outside the windows of almost all houses in Knijovnik. This land permeated all aspects of their everyday lives and their romanticized idea of that rural life entails. The locals petition against the emergence of the park and gather (according to their own accounts) upwards of 500 signatures. The petition never reaches the Municipal Council (according to meeting protocols – there are no data of its formal registry). The petition was never presented to the Haskovo City Council (according to the minutes of the meetings - there is no record of its registration), and in the last meeting, where heated debates "for" and "against" the implementation of the investment plan in the proposed form took place, it became clear that the city councillors were aware of the existence of such a petition, but not of its location. However, the interests of the locals "against" the park were brought up quite often in the expression of the positions "against" the park (from the BSP group, which, throughout all four years of administrative processes, systematically voted "against" or abstained from approving the administrative procedures).

However, the petition is the last visible public act of disagreement with the implementation of the project. There are three possible explanations for the locals' silence. On the one hand, one explanation could be linked to many of my respondents' expectation, that the park was put on hold, as the practical implementation of the project was delayed (there was no sign of anything actually happening while the administrative procedures to settle the status of the land were still ongoing). Local people had forgotten about the park, immersed in their daily concerns, but at the first sign that the park is being built, discontent would be revived. On the other hand, locals may have been "passive" because of the hope that the project will simply "dissipate" in time, encounter political obstacles, and not materialize (such hopes were also frequently expressed by respondents, especially those who were very strongly opposed to the park). Thirdly, according to the village mayor and the investor, the locals had already been won over to the cause and they simply agreed

with the construction of the park (there is enough evidence in the interviews to refute this hypothesis), a hypothesis rooted in the perceived success of the meetings held with the investor.

During the four years when the administrative procedures for the park's approval had been ongoing, representatives of the investors met and communicated with locals in Knijovnik. According to the respondents, members of the hunter's group took representatives of the investors on a trip to view the land, which they had previously only seen on a cadastral map. And while the approval to erect the park on only 1400 decares (of the initially 4000, to which the investor declared interest) could be interpreted as some form of compromise, the conflict over the land and its use remains dormant and waiting to intensify when the project actually gets underway. The investors proposed a compromise between the use of the land for renewable energy generation and certain rural practices, but this compromise is conceptually built upon an understanding of "rural" (or agricultural) that does not match the reality of the Village of Knijovnik. The investors propose to reconcile livestock farming (grazing of goats, sheep, bees and rabbits) with their RES park. For this the investor had foreseen payment in favour of the locals, since it also serves to maintain the land. Unfortunately, apart from bees and cows, no other animals are kept by the locals, and cows are incompatible with PV, which is too fragile to be walked around by cattle. The land in the village of Knijovnik has been historically socialized to support agriculture as a way of life, not as a livelihood. The grumbling of the locals during the four years of the controversy is based on two main arguments. Firstly, neither the hypothetical benefits of the park (mainly economic in nature) can be proven or guaranteed, nor the hypothetical harms (concerns that clearing vegetation may cause temperatures in the area to rise, or that the concentration of so much heat and energy in one place may cause 'radiation' that could be hazardous for residents) can be conclusively refuted. And secondly, placing something foreign and out of character with nature and local lifestyle on the site would hinder their rural way of life and symbolically erase their cultural and political significance as citizens. These two arguments were supported initially by the threat of the scale of the planned park. 4,000 decares of land is, firstly, a huge area that would cause a significant intrusion into the local flora and fauna (regardless of whether the threat of 'radiation' or a perceptible rise in temperatures is realistic or not) - all the land between the villages would take on a completely new appearance and this fact cannot be avoided or ignored. Second, all other features of the land that the locals have managed to socialize into it would have to disappear. The idea of scale frames the

natives' battle as "all or nothing" and in the first two years of the controversy feeds their own sense of the righteousness of their position.

The land as contradiction is the impossibility to reconcile its two legitimately established states - for renewable energy or for rural living. The land has existed in this state of contradiction for four years. And this contradiction *demands* to be resolved. Land as contradiction is a transitional form that by definition must be transformed in one way or another. And this transformation must be mediated by means of renegotiating the resources that support each of the states of the earth that had previously been compatible and exercised as legitimate forms of use simultaneously. The transformation requires both normative (legal) and socio-historical legitimacy. My empirically derived definition of *land as contradiction* is the clear requirement of a categorical re-conceptualisation of the land and its uses.

Conceptual framework of the problem: land as landscape, land as resource and land as object of boundary redrawing

To reach the conceptual dimension of the empirical notion of land as contradiction, that is, to construct it as an object of social boundaries redrawing, I first turn to two paradigms established in the literature that explore socialized land. These are the 'cultural landscape' approach, which interprets land through its function to set meaningful context and to bind through identification and cultural meanings, and the socio-ecological systems approach, which frames land as a common good over which different actors compete and aim to assert political consensus in their favour.

In the context of the prioritization of renewable energy development, the search for large tracts of vacant land has become a popular practice and a necessity in the construction of energy parks. For this, the study of the processes of redistribution of common goods (such as land) is "receiving" its new paradigm in the context of the "green regime" - the concept of socio-ecological systems (McGinnis and Ostrom, 2014). It views societies as structures of interaction between natural and social processes, influenced by institutions and policies (McGinnis and Ostrom, 2014). The main interest of socio-ecological systems as a conceptual model in sociology is oriented on the study of "action situations" (McGinnis and Ostrom, 2014: 3). These are the moments in which different social actors compete over the allocation of limited public resources in a way that ultimately succeeds in materializing into a political or other type of lasting solution. To approach these social processes of redistribution not only of material goods, but also of the right to participation in the

processes of their distribution (political goods), McGinnis and Ostrom (2014) explore how resource units relate to resource systems, governance systems and actors (McGinnis and Ostrom, 2014, p. 4). The focus on political processes is not accidental in this popular conceptual model: as the value and meanings of nature change and as multiple new practices of its use emerge, new criteria for rightful access to natural resources need to be established, grounded in nature-centred values.

Socio-ecological systems place land (and/or other key natural units) in the political sphere of influence and make them a significant object of redistribution. This redistribution, especially when placed in the context of the commons, highlights not only the resource dimension of land but also key specifics of its socialization. Land is a highly exhaustible resource, and the new dimensions of its scarcity (especially in the context of the green transition) naturally make it an object of intergroup competition. A significant part of the socialization of land passes through its function as a resource that is intertwined in markets and policies and thus cannot be redistributed without reference to these macro influences. On the other hand, however, socio-ecological systems also accentuate another important dimension that should not be overlooked when studying the transformation processes of socialized land. And this is the importance of civic and political mechanisms for taking a stand and claiming land use rights. Not only is land causing more and more conflicts and controversies, but their resolution is a question of citizenship, a question of access to the political resources with which groups compete and goods redistribute. This dimension is of particular relevance to the study of the case of the RES in Knijovnik and Dolno Vojvodino because the land is a public municipal property. Not only does the natural in the land make it common, but the legal in its definition inextricably links it to mechanisms of ensuring unequal access to the decision-making processes about land use. The socialization of land *also* means the dependence of groups on political resources to secure access to it. Land is a resource, a matter, and as such has different dimensions and values. It is enmeshed in market and political relations in addition to social ones.

Another type of interpretation of land is through its definition as a cultural landscape (see, for example, Moore and Whelan, 2016). Central to this research tradition is the assumption that land can be seen as a landscape - as a 'scene' that acquires meaning through the symbols and relationships it engenders. The landscape, while materially existent in its monolithic nature, cannot

in fact be universalized in terms of the meanings and senses it comprises. The land is (a vehicle for) human experiences and practices on a cognitive, individual level. Interpretations of land as cultural landscape place it as "something which has meaning for to the identity of local populations. […]try to pull the notion of landscape away from its ideological European meanings of an aestheticized natural scene presented to the senses, to be looked at, its air imbided and image fantasised (Porath, 2000:176). Renewable energy installations, especially those that occupy large areas of land have ecological, aesthetic, resource, and cultural significance. For they 'interfere' with the land and all its manifestations. Including its dimension as a transmitter of locally significant personal and group histories, practices, meanings. This definition allows for an empirical exploration of the diverse meanings embedded in the land and to the social phenomena that have produced them and that sustain them.

Abramson, for example, proposes a method for exploring the cultural landscape function of land through his concept of 'mythically embedded lands' (Abramson, 2000:8). Through it, he offers access to the interconnectedness between humans, the land and their shared historical past as an object of analysis with which belonging and identity are intertwined in non-human social forms. This approach proposes the study of land through its cultural and social engagement with the human factor. Based on the cultural landscapes studies of land, I define four aspects that are analytically relevant to the case study in this dissertation. These are the symbolic binding and belonging of people to the land; the breaking down of homogeneities both in the land (which can now take on multiple even contradictory meanings) and in the actors in relation to it; ritualization, but not only of the relationships, but also of the practices of their everyday maintenance; and the construction of different boundaries, not only sacred, but also symbolic and social, not only between the particular actor and the land, but also in the boundaries (relations) constructed around the land among the actors of the contradiction.

In exploring the various interweavings of meanings of the land constructed by different actors, I draw attention to significant points of intersection and convergence - symbolic boundaries of relationships between different actors. Following this interpretive line, I consider land as an interweaving of meanings, emotions and attitudes, generated both by the local practices that are 'embedded' in it through the everyday actions and historical experiences of local communities, and by the 'normative' legal and formal actions that structure and govern it. Land as contradiction is not only socialised land, it is subject to re-socialisation, both of its meanings and functions and of

the rights and practices of particular groups to utilise it. Because the re-definition of land requires the (re)establishment of access and practices on it, it also challenges the (re)establishment of relations between the actors involved.

I use social and symbolic boundaries as an analytical tool to be able to identify and analyze both the transforming meanings of the land (each actor's relationship to it) and the transforming social relations (the relationships between actors) pertaining to the land.

Boundaries are a classic sociological concept whose genesis can be traced back to Barth (Barth, 1998; Barth, 1969), even Weber and Durkheim (Lamont et al., 2015). The classical interpretation of boundaries defines them as the demarcation lines between significantly different groups of people. Significantly different along ethnic, racial, class, gender, age and other lines. But crucially, significantly different by criteria that are structurally determinative of the societies that produce them. Boundaries can serve both to bring about cohesion (to build solidarity (Lamont et al., 2015)) and to solidify and normalize inequalities by establishing them as hierarchically conditioned differences (different are not equal to each other, but are located in graded social positions). Cultural sociology sets out two key dimensions of boundaries and proposes the study of the relationship between them as a cognitive apparatus to the processes of construction and establishment of new forms of inequality. These two dimensions are social and symbolic boundaries. They are defined by Lamont and Molnar as follows: social boundaries for "objectified forms" (Lamont & Molnar, 2002:168) of difference, and symbolic boundaries are "the lines that include and define some people, groups, and things while excluding others" (Lamont et al., 2015:850).

I accept these definitions of symbolic and social boundaries, but at the same time I am aware that their genesis is meaningfully tied to the thematic field in which they are constructed - the interest in gender, race and class inequalities in the American and French societies. In order to be able to use boundaries as a conceptual tool that is nevertheless empirically relevant to different contexts and especially different social structures, I propose its use as an analytical form. This means drawing out some basic postulates about symbolic and social boundaries that Lamont's cultural sociology has been able to produce in a voluminous body of empirical research (e.g., Cohen, 2013; Bhatt, 2022; Mijs et al., 2016; Valtonen, 2004). Thus, boundaries, and all that we know about them, can be used as a tool for analysing social dynamics, beyond assuming that they are tied to known or familiar (to the researcher) social hierarchies. Or to put it another way, the relationship

between symbolic and social boundaries can be explored even when it is not necessarily tied to and supportive of class and racial hierarchies. I outline eight features of symbolic boundaries that I use as a starting point for exploring land as contradiction, or more precisely, land as an object of redrawing of social boundaries through the opposition of symbolic boundaries:

1. Boundaries are one of the mechanisms by which the *order of things is* established without being constantly problematised. This symbolic world is most often understood as the logic that sustains the social order. "A key premise of the symbolic anthropological tradition is that cultures emerge from a quest for order. (...) The order is built up from a system of symbolic classifications that differentiates the world into distinct kinds and makes it meaningful. This differentiation is sustained and negotiated through boundaries that in turn get material existence through symbols" (Valtonen, 2004:33). Accordingly, symbolic boundaries both differentiate and bind because the demarcations they lay down as key to distinguishing one category from another can only exist if the two categories are situated within the same system for which these criteria (along which the demarcations are laid down) are significant.

2. Symbolic boundaries are, in effect, narratives of difference that draw content from different forms: the "conceptual distinctions, interpretive strategies, and cultural traditions that people use to differentiate themselves from others" (Bhatt et al., 2022:2). But not just to mark difference, but to construct it as significant - as contradictory to their notion of normality.

3. Thirdly, the normality that boundaries maintain is increasingly 'solidified' when it is questioned, when it is challenged, when it is met with its alternative - interaction with difference is necessary for the maintenance of symbolic boundaries (Cohen, 2013:13). Boundaries are most explicated when there is conflict, disagreement, contradiction.

4. Boundaries are necessarily bidirectional - in addition to defining who belongs (Simonsen, 2018), symbolic boundaries are also used to define who does *not* belong. Boundaries define in and out, respectively demanding internal and external recognition. Whether they refer to categorizing groups of people or *things.*

5. Boundaries require constant maintenance work - redefining and adapting who and what belongs inside and who and what belongs outside. This maintenance work consists of

transforming narratives, enriching meanings, and reinforcing (through moral valuations) acceptable and unacceptable practices and behaviours.

6. Symbolic boundaries are dynamics, not a static definition. As they are continually reworked, their enduring property of selective permeability is established. Relative to context, they dissolve and close, soften and harden, bend, are permanently crossed or temporarily transgressed. The key questions here are why, by whom and how.

7. Boundaries are not only in the definitions of people, but in the definitions of all *things*: symbolic boundaries are "the lines that include and define some people, groups, and things while excluding others" (Lamont et al., 2015:850). Boundaries structure all things, including even "time and space" (Lamont & Molnar, 2002:168).

8. Eighth, boundaries are always contextual phenomena. This means that when dealing with boundaries, sensitivity must be maintained to the manifestations of similar (or the same) phenomena among societies that have "divergent historical trajectories and cultural foundations of belonging, solidarity, and citizenship" (Mijs, 2016:1).

Based on these features, I define symbolic boundaries as locally available narratives of meaningful difference.

In order to concretize the concept and the approach to detecting social boundaries without necessarily taking them as the starting point (derived from a known and studied social hierarchy) of the analysis, I propose an approach to their empirical identification. This approach is based on the knowledge already accumulated in the literature that social boundaries are matter ("objectified forms of inequality" (Lamont & Molnar, 2002:168)), they are uncontested, visible and unavoidable (not a matter of different interpretations) (Cohen, 2013:13) and they are bound by a regulatory apparatus that supports them unconditionally (Lamont et al., 2014). However, to be able to account for what social boundaries are already present or produced that are involved in arriving at the resolution of the contradiction, I propose the application of the criterion *of social tangibility* to the phenomena as a condition for its categorization as a social boundary. By *social tangibility* I mean *an established order of things* that relies on a variety of stable mechanisms for its maintenance over time and space. These mechanisms can be the product of macro structures (regulations, laws, conditions, institutional rules) as well as practically available conditions prompting or requiring

behaviour of a given type. My adapted definitions of social and symbolic boundaries allow me to identify the ways in which land is transformed and through which social actors construct groups in relation to the land.

Methodological framework

In order to empirically and theoretically access the actors in the controversy, I define them against two criteria. First, in relation to their position in *relation to the land,* I divide them into user and owner. Second, in relation to their role in the controversy, I divide them into party and decision-maker. After the fieldwork, a third group of actors emerged: peripheral actors. These are the ecologists and owners of RES in Haskovo and the district. While key to understanding the dynamics around land in general and renewable energy in particular, these two actors are peripheral to the case under study because they have no bearing on the controversy. Here is what the actors categorized at the intersection between these two criteria look like:

Table1 . Initial categorization of actors

Actor	Position relative to the ground	Position towards the contradiction
The Municipality	Owner	Decision maker
Villagers	Current user	party "against" RES
The investor	Challenger-user	party "for" RES
Owners of RES in Haskovo and the district	Refusal to take up a position	Peripheral actor
Ecologists	Refusal to take up a position	Peripheral actor

The data sources I use are two: interviews and archival data from the publicly available activity register of Haskovo municipality. Between December 2022 and November 2024, I conducted interviews with a total of 20 respondents in two stages (December 2022 and July 2023 and one final interview in November 2024). The first stage was exploratory in nature and was used to calibrate the research instrument in addition to data collection. It included in-depth interviews and

go-along interviews. The second stage included semi-structured interviews and go-along method interviews.

The data archive under analysis includes all Meeting Protocols of the Haskovo City Council in which the topic of the RES park in Knijovnik and Dolno Voyvodino was discussed, the City Council Decisions that concern the case, and *Enery's* Investment Intent, which is not publicly available but was provided to me by a respondent.

The data analysis is divided into two thematic parts in Chapters Two and Three of the dissertation. In chapter two, I examine the process of framing and resolving the controversy as it unfolded on the ground in the village of Knijovnik. I do this on the basis of the fieldwork - on the interview data. In chapter three, I examine the process of framing and resolving the controversy as it unfolds in the meeting room of the Haskovo City Council. I do this on the basis of the collected archive of documents.

Creating the Contradiction: Defining the Land as a Village and the Land as Progress

On the terrain of the village of Knijovnik, the land of contradiction has been socialized and used for ritual and routine practices of the villagers as well as for maintaining the idea of the village and the life in it. I examine this two-dimensional existence of the land in the village through the symbolic and social boundaries that locals construct around the land. I group the symbolic boundaries that the locals construct around the land into two meaning-making categories. On the one side stand the locals who are 'against' the investment plan. They construct the meaning of the land as a village, which they support with narratives of clean and free natural land, of the land as a hunting ground and sustainer of the local animal population, and of the land as a bearer of the legacies of the past and the hopes for the future.

The land as a village

The idea of clean and free land is key in the way locals make sense not only of the village they inhabit, but of themselves. On it they build a host of practices for spending their leisure time - walking, hunting, small-scale animal breeding, religious practices. These practices define the land, the village, and the villagers. These definitions are binding - the land is land because it is rural, the village is a village because it has this land available and the villagers are villagers because they

have the rural land. The land symbolically belongs to them and they symbolically belong to it. For example, walks are narrated as a potential not only for spending time in the fresh air, but also as an opportunity to build group practices - a terrain for the community realisation of the village.

The land as a village is non-renewable land, according to local residents who oppose the renewable energy park. For this, in addition to being in harmony with the residents and nature, it is also narrated in opposition to the potential renewable energy park, even before it is built upon it.

The narrative that renewable energy would destroy the land in its pure, natural and scenic form was recognized even by pensioners who "worried the most" (Respondent 01, local resident, hunter, male) and were most likely to fall for (what sounded like) conspiracy theories about the harm and radiation caused by renewable energy.

Thus, the purity of the rural way of life is tied to the purity of the land - not only the purity it brings, but also the purity it evokes. The land as a rural landscape is two-dimensional - it sets a context but also sets a future in its ability to either reproduce the past or distort the present. Thus stands the symbolic boundary of the "pure land" that defines the land as rural.

The boundaries around the land do not only apply to it. They structure both people *in relation to the land and* the whole living and non-living world around it. Symbolic boundaries are adapted and reinforced through *diffusion.* Symbolic boundaries around the earth disperse into other *things* whose existence is inextricably bound up with it. This happens through the absorption of the specific meaning of the land into other objects beyond itself. In this way, these other objects and things are extensions of the earth, symbolic satellites of the earth that affirm and legitimize its use precisely in such a meaning. They also symbolically become the land, the village, the peasants. For example, the land as a village, which carries the component of landscape and of purity *runs through* all other objects that build or relate to its ability to maintain and build landscape and purity.

The same opposition of land scattered in objects tied to hunting (the local game population) versus PV again show the adaptation of symbolic boundaries around the definition of *land as a village* into objects to enter the contradiction against the objects of renewable energy installations.

In this way, *the land* transcends its purely material functions of soil, earth, foundation, etc., and through its symbolic significance overflows into other objects and subjects that are inextricably

tied to it and its realization as a village. This diffusion flows into all the uses that the locals have established for the land and finds new object-symbolic carriers in the cross, chapel and photo frame constructed by the locals. The land is not only a site for leisure that can be preserved by simply being transported elsewhere. The land is a way of life, preserved in the rural-agricultural traditions of the locals and in historically accumulated and practiced knowledge. Knowledge of the land - what grows, when and how, where to find grazing for your bees because the vegetation is most favourable, how to get to places where there are meadows for cows to graze - also represents a symbolic boundary. A symbolic boundary that defines the land as existing to benefit those who know how to use it. A symbolic boundary that permits locals to call themselves "rural-type people" because it requires an investment of time, resources, and commitment (to know and use the land). Knowledge of the land thus distinguishes - those who benefit from the land because they know it from those who benefit from the land without knowing it.

Knowledge of the land and how it can be used by rural people has been passed down through generations. This knowledge goes back to the parents of the current users, and its use (and definition) in this way and no other is a kind of testament of continuity. This symbolic boundary of knowledge continues to exist in practices, but it also spills over into emotions (the love of bees) and acquires *the selective permeability* so characteristic of symbolic boundaries. Not only do beekeepers use the land with knowledge and love, they do so not only because they know, but because it is ordained in their blood, as it were, to know. This symbolic boundary thus manages to distinguish social actors (those who use with love, knowledge and dedication from those who use only for economic gain), not only binding the land *to these very practices and people*, but seeming to bend time, as it were, into space. Previous generations of beekeepers continue to live through (and as if in) the land and the rural people who use it. The land, accordingly, binds not only to itself, but also to the past, through the people who seem to repeat themselves across generations - what has been is now and therefore must forever be - this is the narrative that bridges time through space.

Hunting is one of the strongest aspects of the pre-PV established *order of things* - an order that is being disrupted. Hunting breaks down into multiple symbolic boundaries that describe *care for the land* as a criterion of difference. A care that hunters claim to carry out on their own, without support from the state or any other formal structure.

Thus, through hunting, animal breeding, nature and leisure practices, the land is socialized. These become a sense that requires the maintenance of the established order of things in order to sustain not only itself as such, but everything else that is tied to its undisturbed manifestation *as a rural land.* The land not only supports, it legitimates, affirms, orders and regulates both people and actions, the present, the past and the future.

The Land as progress

The majority of the villagers are trying to save the land from foreign interference because through it they are trying to preserve the village, the rural way of life and the rural in people (in themselves) just as it is. At the same time, however, there is also a symbolic counterpoint among the locals who are trying precisely through the land to change the village - to make it stop being exactly what it is and become something else. This "something else" is based on a change in the built environment of the village. According to this meaning of land, it could become a barter coin, a resource to be replaced, for the sake of achieving improvements in the village infrastructure. By allocating it for renewable energy, and in return, the local residents would receive donations from the investor and favours from the municipality to solve long-standing problems in the village - building streets, bridges, cleaning and securing the river, installing footpaths, etc. The most ardent defender of this importance of the land is the mayor of the village of Knijovnik.

Important for this interpretation of the land as a barter coin is the historically established relationship between the village and representatives of Haskovo municipality. The hope that the investors in the RES park will take care of the infrastructure of the village appears as a last rescue thought - not only to "at least gain something", but also to exert on the villagers a care that should otherwise be the prerogative of the local government. But state and local governments are not looked to with the hope of caring; the narrative in this direction speaks of an abdication of the performance of these functions.

I call this meaning of the land as progress. The important nuance here is that this is the idea of the land as anti-village - *anti* the village that bears the marks of decline (lack of support for infrastructure and the built environment). The momentary image of the village is symbolically opposed both to the perception of the town of Haskovo (where almost all young and able-bodied villagers work, because the economic potentials of Knijovnik are almost non-existent) with its smooth streets and paved riverbed ("This is how the river is in Haskovo - concreted" (mayor of

Knijovnik)) and to the memories of the village's past. The locals' stories about the village are often in the past tense. And the reasons for this are not only biographical (respondents narrate the village through their own biography and, speaking of their childhood and youth, logically narrate the village in the past tense), but also because the public space of the village visibly shows a past bustling with life, momentarily frozen in collapsing buildings.

The land as progress then is a meaning constructed of symbolic boundaries, trying rather to disassociate with the village in the moment, the village as it is, not necessarily converging with the town. This symbolic boundary carrying the relationship between the locals and the village, in relation to the land, is supported by symbolic boundaries carrying the relationship of the locals to various others. This meaning of land is a narrative supported by symbolic boundaries of cohesion with the investor (as a bearer of hope for a future other than the present) and of distance with both the community and dissenting other locals. And if the dissociation and rapprochement with the investor is rationalised in pragmatic notions of the willingness and refusal to support improvements for the village, the dissociation from dissenting locals illuminates negative evaluations of their recognised meanings and fears.

The symbolic boundaries around the land, the narratives of difference directed both against foreign objects (RES), against the unwanted environment (the crumbling village), and against foreign opinions and positions (the foreign among other actors and the foreign among "us") construct the world as the locals understand and narrate it. At the same time, however, they are the meaning dimension of the world – but not the actual material world, rather an ideal world which takes the shape, which the narrators want construct. The locals who are positioned in favour of ('for') the park are trying to meaningfully construct the village in a more attractive way through the land, and the locals 'against' the village are trying to preserve it as it is. While the former undertake a symbolic mission of reconstruction and change (trying to materialize symbolic boundaries), the latter rather defend the already established material reflection of their meaning-making. Although in informal paths and ways, the natives have produced social boundaries around the land that they attempt to maintain and support with symbolic ones.

Para-formal social boundaries around the earth

In addition to narrating the land as their own, the natives have built material barriers - socially tangible obstacles to outsiders - around the land. These social boundaries are represented by three

material carriers of restrictive access to the land. These are the cross, flag, and chapel built on the land, the difficult-to-access road to most of the land

The road leading to the land starts from the outskirts of the village of Knizhovnik. The locals know where it is, though to the 'naked eye' the path is hardly distinguishable from all the other sections of the hill that must be climbed to reach the cross, the frame, the flag and the woodland (the land of the contradiction) beyond the wide clearing in which they are set. The area is also walkable as long as you know where and how to walk. For this you need a local who knows the area and can point out the path to start your ascent. This path represents and leads to the autonomy the locals exercised over the land before it became a contradiction. Not only has the place been socialized without the participation of the municipality, it has been socialized despite its dissent. The flag, cross and frame are newly constructed elements (2017-2019). They were built by the hunters' group. They are positioned on a high hill, which is visible from almost the entire territory of the village of Knijovnik. The peculiarity of their construction is that they are normatively "illegal" (quote from a local resident, a hunter, a man), because they were built without a building permit - one the municipality refused to issue on its lands.

It is the erected cross, flag, chapel and frame with the inscription "I love Knizhovnik" that also represent a social boundary. The cross, flag and frame are 'protected' by making it difficult for outsiders to enter the village. The chapel, which was built on a piece of land accessible via an intercity asphalt road connecting the village to Haskovo and Kardzhali, is locked. Local members of the hunters' group have the keys to it. Thus, although part of the general landscape for all passers-by, access to the chapel is restricted for outsiders. Locals rely on the municipality's refusal to practically manage the land it formally owns to maintain these social boundaries, which are not supported by a formal regulatory mechanism.

The third social boundary, which sustains the land in its para-formal existence and legitimates its use for a *rural way of life,* is objectified in a map - a map of the hunting ground and the territories of the hunting parties. And while it may seem less significant than other boundaries (probably because fewer people handle it), it is *socially tangible* enough because it is recognized not only by those it benefits, but by all who touch (or are touched by) it.

On the one hand, the abdication of the municipality from the practical management of its land (before the investment plan came into being) allows locals to make autonomous decisions about

the future and condition of the land. On the other hand, the availability of this land is a particular condition for the civic autonomy of the local group of people. The freedom to be who they want to be, and the freedom to govern *something – shaping it into whatever they want it to be through meaning and management*, they have obtained in para-institutional terms. The attainment of this freedom has been granted and supported *because of the land* – as it is and as they have kept it. For this, their narratives reveal a bidirectional dependence that is both symbolic and objectified - the land is autonomous because of them and they are autonomous because of the land. Without their autonomy, the land has nothing (or at least nothing of value). Without the land, their autonomy also means nothing. Indigenous autonomy to dispose of, define, and produce land stems from the refusal of the municipality to fully wield the tools with which it can enforce the administrative regulation (which I unfold in the next part of the chapter) of land. These inertly driven and guarded social boundaries that locals set have the power to determine the *order of things* while the power of the state stood by before the emergence of the contradiction. The mechanisms that maintain the land as a village cannot measure up to the power of the mechanisms that the municipality has at its disposal to enforce its right (its legal right) to dispose of the land. How does the municipality enforce its right to land ownership? By structuring its priority use for renewable energy in a legal norm. It achieves this by placing new undisputable social boundaries around the land - making a political decision to resolve the controversy. This process, while inherently producing legally tangible decisions, also has a symbolic dimension; it also redefines, narrates and makes sense of the land and the social actors (and interests) in relation to it.

Resolving the controversy: defining land as a public interest

The aspect of the controversy resolution process that unfolds in the meeting room of the Haskovo City Council takes place with varying intensity during the four years of the controversy. Because it is constant, it develops in parallel to other key dynamics for the municipality (in the sense here of territory). The COVID-19 pandemic goes through its peak (which, incidentally, is how the locals of Knijovnik explain the temporary stagnation in which they do not hear of any development in the construction of the park) and decline. Russia begins its war in Ukraine. The recession and inflation begin to affect the prices of all commodities, including the building materials that will be needed for the construction of the PV park when it eventually starts. During the four years of the controversy, the renewable energy sector has grown and other (relatively) similarly sized

investment proposals have come before the City Council, also seeking the right to use public uncultivated agricultural land in Haskovo. In 2023, regular elections for local government - mayor and municipal councillors - were held. All of these processes influence the development of the controversy. Between 2020 and 2023 in the municipal council the administrative work on the implementation of the controversy is monotonous - slow but steady. During this period, the two opposing groups in the city council - the councillors “for” and “against” the photovoltaic park - take shape. "For" the photovoltaic park usually vote the 16 representatives of PP GERB, the 8 representatives of PP DPS, the 4 representatives of NPP "Bulgare". Usually support for votes in favour of the park is also received by the 3 representatives of the PP "For Haskovo", the 4 representatives of the coalition "Democratic Bulgaria - United" and one independent municipal councillor. This support is sometimes expressed in votes in favour, sometimes in abstentions, and in other cases - in non-participation in the vote (sometimes even while the vote casters are present). The "against" group consists of the 6 representatives of the PP BSP.

Monotonously, slowly but consistently, the administrative procedures for the implementation of the RES park had been given the green light for three years. These administrative procedures are related to the so-called land allocation. The land use is changed (e.g. from "for forest road" to "for PV plant"; from "for pasture" to "for substation", etc.). The boundaries of the properties that constitute the land are changed - originally 19 in number, they are converted into a total of 7 (some are dropped). This is done through a formal change in the Detailed Development Plans (DDPs).

This procedure goes smoothly until August 2023, when a "formal" decision to change the status of the land from public municipal property to private municipal property is initiated. The reasons for this seem to lie in the rift between the representatives of the pro-park group and seem to be influenced by the election campaign that is underway at the time. The next entry of the topic of the renewable energy park in the lands of Knijovnik and Dolno Vojvodino is before the new composition of the municipal council, mandate 2023-2027. At its Second monthly meeting, it seems as if the procedure is starting all over again. The same representative of the investor stands once more in front of the City Council, whose representatives seem to be raising the same questions and negotiations - what will be the benefits for the municipality and for the locals. However, the life of this Municipal Council is short - after only three meetings, the elections were annulled, the composition declared illegitimate and new elections scheduled. With this seemingly karmic turn

of events, the 2018 - 2023 term composition was restored for three months. Thus, it is the composition of the City Council that gave the first consent to the right to build and use, who restores the procedural monotony of the "vote on the DDPs" (in April 2024) - the status of the land changes and the park can begin to be built.

While the administrative-legal aspect of the controversy lasts, a political decision is actually made about what the priority uses of the land are. Tangible social boundaries are being placed around the land. Boundaries placed in statutes, decisions and regulations. But this process also has its symbolic dimension - the political decision is made between two legitimate and legal alternatives (to continue to use the land as it was used before the proposal, or to allocate the land to renewable energy). And this decision follows a moral-political line. It is consistent with placing symbolic boundaries around the land and between the municipality and each side of the controversy. Here's how:

Constructing the meaning of the land as a terrain for RES

The first step of the land allocation for the RES was made at the very first meeting where the Investment intent was on the Agenda of the City Council. Then a presentation was made to the Municipal Council by the CEO of Enery, taking into account the expected economic benefits for the municipality and its residents, proposing a consensual use of the land (small animals can be led to graze around the PV, for which the investor proposes to pay local livestock farmers) and above all not claiming any ownership interest in the land.

Following discussion in the Chamber, a Resolution of the City Council was approved granting preliminary approval for a ceded development right (the most free form of use of municipal agricultural land, so to speak). And if the formally binding decision has been taken, the municipal councillors are facing an important first step in the symbolic legitimisation of the decision. The administrative decision has to be backed by an ideological consensus in order to become a lasting political decision, which should dictate the subsequent formal-administrative decisions necessary for the implementation of the park (the vote on the Master Plans). The symbolic process that the city council subsequently carries out is the construction of a new definition of *the land of the controversy*. It defines the land as a renewable energy site and this definition runs through the public interest narrative. The symbolic boundary that the Municipal Council builds by voting for the park actually takes the form of the following narrative "The land should be used in the public

interest, and the public interest is in the increase of the municipality's budget, and this is achieved by installing renewable energy on the land."

This narrative is constructed by the intersection of three important components. First, and already mentioned, is its attachment to photovoltaic installations. The land is valuable as part of a constellation in which it is not central because the RES is. And here, as in the meanings ascribed by the local villagers, the meaning of land goes *beyond* it and enters into other, significant objects of which it is an appendage and necessity. In this way, it is also symbolically equated with RES (that is, fostered by the political-ideological framework of prioritization of RES), but only in its belonging to the constellation.

The second component of the definition of the land as renewable energy is its "revitalization". This revitalization has two dimensions - political and economic. On the one hand, the specific land parcels do not provide any direct economic benefits to the municipality - they are not leased, not farmed, and there is no investment interest (beyond what is currently being discussed) in them[1] . For this, respondents and those involved in the process often give definitions to this land, ranging from 'vacant' and 'empty' to 'deserted' and 'unusable'.

Economic revitalization of the land through its ability to generate purely monetary benefits also sets a new field of influence for the City Council. Because these large revenues go directly into the municipal budget, the Council can dispose of them as it sees fit. Thus, the value of land as a resource becomes not only a profit from something that currently "brings nothing", but also potential goods for the municipality in other fields and spaces. Not only is capitalizing on land a gain. It is a profit bringing freedom - the freedom for the Municipal Council to decide for itself what that profit should materialise in. Profit without conditions. This economic revitalization is supported by the idea of its synchronicity with political revitalization. The political revitalisation of the land runs through the logic of its potential entanglement in the EU's 'big policy' priorities, which also run through national regulations, plans and strategies aimed at de-carbonisation and helping to realise the green transition.

[1] The land in the village that is leased and used by local farmers is not within the land area of interest for the investment.

The third component of the definition of land as a RES is encoded in the understanding of indirect benefits to the municipality and "local communities." Here, for the first time, the idea of the public interest as key in municipal policy decision-making emerges. The issue of 'public interest' and its centrality in determining legitimate land uses is given a monetary dimension.

The first two symbolic boundaries are encoded here, in terms of the relationship of the municipality to the other actors in the controversy. On the one hand, there is the rapprochement with the investor who brings the economic-political revitalization of the land. On the other hand, there is a convergence with "the people", who, however, are the abstract citizens - those for whom the budget money will be spent, without specifying how the money will be spent and for which citizens exactly. It is the way in which the municipality (through the councillors and the mayor) will manoeuvre in this position between its "citizens" and its economic-political amplitude that is the process of producing symbolic boundaries *around the land* and in relation to the participants in the controversy.

Boundaries of convergence and divergence

The role of "decision maker" requires not only administrative acts and the constant following of known and established procedures, but also the resolution of a social dilemma.

This dilemma is being resolved in favour of the construction of the RES park, while at the same time seeking (and in peace) a guarantee for investment of part of the revenues in the infrastructure of Knijovnik and Dolno Vojvodino. This equilibrium is achieved by two symbolic acts. The first of these is the convergence (seemingly even pairing) between the municipality and the investor. This pairing is practically expressed in the permanent (in the first three years and restored at the end of the fourth) positive vote of the administrative procedures. Symbolically, it is expressed in the adoption of the investor's rhetoric and logic that the construction of the RES park is an expression of common interests - not only monetary, but also politically forward-looking, strategic goals and interests.

Defining the land as a RES is a symbolic boundary that defines not only the land through the political and economic benefits of the RES, but also the community through its linkage to a desired role in the constructed narrative. The pairing with renewable energy, passing through the

approximation to the investor, allows the municipality to redefine not only its property (the land) as corresponding to the political and economic goals of green energy, but also itself.

This pairing of the municipality (through its unified actions of implementing the investment and through the symbolic boundaries drawn by the group "for" the RES park) is combined with symbolic boundaries towards the local inhabitants of the village of Knijovnik. The narrative "for" the park is differentiated from the locals (and their respective right to participate in the decision of what the land of the controversy should be used for) through a moralising de-hierarchisation of the local villagers. The definition of the land as RES thus brings it closer and closer to the abstract citizens who have a stake in the community's progress, vis-à-vis policies and economic movements, and less and less to the concrete locals who would use it if it were left in its pre-investment state.

Symbolically, by defining the land as a renewable energy site, the City Council (through the pro-park group) homogenizes itself with the developer and disassociates itself from local residents. It is along these two lines, however, that the City Council heterogenizes. But only symbolically because the practical action of the municipality as an actor is one - its decisions are ultimately for or against, regardless of the presence of internal opposition. The group "against" the park performs a symbolic internal heterogenization of the actor of the municipality, which goes along the lines of rapprochement with the local inhabitants and the recognition of their definition of the land as a village, but in its manifestation that the land as a village is the *land for the villagers*.

To put it differently, the meaningful internal heterogeneity of the actor "municipality" is defined by the question "Whose commons are they and how should we distribute them?". While the dominant position of the municipality (discussed above) maintains the understanding that the commons should be used for the benefit of the municipality's budget and for the sake of its prerogative to redistribute them as it sees fit, the oppositional viewpoint is more oriented around the opposition of the "common interest" of the municipality and the investor versus the "public interest" expressed as "the interest of the people of the villages upon whose land the PV park will be built".

What is interesting in this case is that the convergence of the opposition with the locals is again realised around the importance of the land as a resource for achieving the public interest, although

this is not the perdominantly recognised importance amongst the locals. However, the opposition, the BSP councillors, portrays communal land as a resource to be capitalised on primarily for the benefit of local villagers. A position expounded by the head of the BSP group at the very first meeting with the investor, when he raised the issues of the investor's commitment to employing local labour in the construction and maintenance of the park (an economic benefit that the investor's representatives always stress in the first place) and in the mentioned possibility of investing in the future by conducting a dual form of training between the specialised high schools in Haskovo and Enery on the ground. As the four-year chronicle of the case progresses, apparently as a result of informal interactions between the actors, this position "solidifies" into the aforementioned notion of tanto-for-tanto or land-for-lands, with the benefits being the needs of the locals in Knijovnik - clearing the river of vegetation and, most importantly, building road infrastructure. This firm position is stated openly in debates in the hall and it is already taking the form of specific demands to the investor for actions carried out for the benefit of the inhabitants of the two villages, even if the RES park is not yet there.

These two opposing narratives (symbolic boundaries around the land) of how the common interest should be understood *through land* as communal property can, at the symbolic level, exist in absolute opposition (either one or the other). Precisely because even the internal heterogenization of the municipality is ultimately irrelevant to its formal action in favour of the park. What is interesting in this case, however, is that the two opposing symbolic boundaries manage to produce social ones - in the form of formal normative acts.

Durable and non-durable social boundaries around land as RES

Three social boundaries have been set as a result of the normative process that began with the submission of the investment plan of Enery BG 1 and ended with the setting of the social boundary expected to resolve the controversy - the cession of the right to long-term use and construction of renewable energy in part of the land. They are different in character (different things withhold their material firmness) and in type (of permanence of influence).

The first social boundary, directly linked to the development of the RES case in Knijovnik and Dolno Voyvodino, is set by the amendment of the *Ordinance on the determination and administration of local fees and prices for services on the territory of Haskovo municipality*. It adds a paragraph in Article 15 which sets a ceiling on the revenue the municipality can generate

from the prices for the approval of investment projects of a particularly large size. For the re-use of land in order to place renewable energy projects on it, the municipality may not charge investors more than 70,000 leva. This is a deliberate policy of the municipality to provide favourable conditions for investment of RES, namely on land, namely of large size. This is a hard social boundary that aims to converge with future investments such as the one in the hydroelectric power plant on the land between Knijovnik and Dolno Vojvodino. And while it does not allocate any other specific land for renewable energy, the ordinance imposes precisely the importance of *any potentially suitable municipal land* as a priority site for renewable energy.

The second social boundary that emerges as a consequence of the case development is the establishment of an institutional pathway to move and implement large-scale renewable energy investments. What do I mean here? The procedure for administering the investment intent of Enery has been moving steadily, but clumsily, over a period of 4 years. The voting of the PDPs is drawn out and happens as if one by one.

Each vote is a step forward in the implementation of the park, but also a potential setback. As is the case in this example, even a slight shake-up of the solid majority means that a major investment that has been administered for years can be stopped to make political points. This is exactly what happened in August 2023, when the "yes" majority broke down due to electoral shuffles, and the process was halted. Although it is happening de facto for reasons unrelated to the park, sabotage is possible because of the nature of the procedure - it requires a persistent and repeated "yes" to implement the initial "yes" already established and allowed.

It is this danger that has been avoided by the establishment of an administrative pathway for the submission and administration of large renewable energy investment proposals on municipal land. It is evident in the submissions of renewable energy investment proposals on municipal land *following the* Ennery proposal. One distinct example of this is the difference in the submitted Report Notes and Draft Decisions in the submission of the 2020 investment intention of Enery BG 1 and the submission of a similarly sized investment intention of another company in the Haskovo village of Krivo Pole, submitted in December. Two main differences with the investment plan submitted by Enery BG 1 three years earlier and the new investment plan submitted by the Mayor and recently submitted by Creative Solar are striking and point to a hypothetical link, a 'lesson learned' and an 'established institutional path'. Among the points on the preliminary consent in

favour of Creative Solar, the following is also present: 'Grants preliminary consent, on the basis of Article 30(3) of the Regulations for the implementation of the Law on the Protection of Agricultural Land, for the designation of sites and/or routes for the design and change of use of the land described in point I.'. A procedural clarification that has been missing since the first preliminary consent issued in favour of Ennery and which subsequently adds another step in the three-year "vote on the DDPs," further delaying and burdening the technical administrative process.

Also, the preliminary consent in favour of Creative Solar was granted for a period of 5 years, as opposed to the one voted in favour of Enery, which was granted twice (because the period proved insufficient to administer the process) - once for two years and subsequently for an additional one year. Each of the Consents is preceded by discussions and renegotiations between the councillors because it requires a formal vote and decision.

That is, not only does the "municipality" as an actor already know what it is doing (working out in practice routines for proceeding in this type of situation), but the municipal administration is also taking advantage of this knowledge to positively influence other investment intentions. The tools for establishing the *order of things* are coming into circulation. It is a process of building and establishing a practical routine to avoid obstacles (from local civic discontent) and stumbling blocks (the exercise of city council control mechanisms arising from the potential time-consuming and multi-step nature) in the approval process. And this routine is used to achieve specific goals - goals that bring the municipality closer to investors and to the prioritization of renewable energy values. This practical routine, although not formally embedded (like the social boundary encoded in the Ordinance), normalizes the processes of processing Investment intents. It thus establishes a practical "order of things" through administratively enforceable practices. A practical routine that is implemented within a formal institution and imposes/establishes a normative 'order of things' is a de facto social boundary. An established and practiced 'institutional pathway' constitutes a social boundary because it has social tangibility (it can and does get implemented *by inertia*), though not to the same extent as social boundaries 'embedded' in normative acts.

The social boundaries described so far have different carriers (normative act and practical routine), but they have two common characteristics: 1) they impose the prioritization of the definition of land as a site for RES, and 2) they have a permanent character - they apply to *all investment*

proposals to all municipal land in Haskovo. For this, I call them durable social boundaries. They derive directly (this is evident in the evidence of the minutes in the speeches of the municipal councillors and the mayor) from the case of the RES investment plan in Knijovnik and Dolno Voivodino, but their application extends *beyond the specific case.* That is why I call them permanent - their effect is permanent and generally valid (within the territory regulated by these regulations and procedures, i.e. for the municipality of Haskovo). The third social boundary, which is constructed in this case, differs from the other two precisely by these two criteria. It follows the narrative that the land must protect the interest of the villagers and is also highly specific and relevant only to the particular case. It is the commitment made by the municipal council to spend at least BGN 1 000 000 of the proceeds of the cession of the Right to Build for the infrastructure of the villages of Knijovnik and Dolno Voyvodino, recorded in Resolution No 844 of the Haskovo Municipal Council of 17.03.2023. It is recorded as point 4 of the document, which establishes the Right to build on the municipal land for a period of 50 years in favour of Enery BG 1 (the Second consent).

All three social boundaries set as a consequence of the case study in fact regulate relations *toward the land* and between the social actors. They set a definition, a value and a valid public interest that firmly (if sometimes permanently) relate to communal agricultural land. In doing so, they put an end to this particular controversy. The decision is made, the land is allotted. This is not to say that the social boundaries set in this case resolve the symbolic opposition embedded as potentiality in the *land as contradiction,* pertaining to the possibility for dispute around any land potentially contradictory in terms of uses.

Conclusion

In my research, I have shown how resolving concrete contradictions between social actors of different calibres (rural residents and an international corporation as users of the one hand, and a municipal council and a municipal administration as owners and decision-makers for the management of their property) actually requires boundary-work symbolic and social distinctions. Not only in the definition of meanings, uses and priorities of the land, but also in the regulation of relations between the actors themselves. As interconnected phenomena, ultimately shaping the process of constructing a common *order of things*. Already as the case became problematized in relation to the empirical data that was beginning to accumulate, the construction of the sociological

subject slowly but surely moved beyond the particularities of the two competing *orders* (warrants) and shifted to a focus on the mechanisms and processes of establishing a common order of things, in relation to the land. The processes of land reordering were in fact foregrounded as processes of transforming the relations between the three social actors - the local inhabitants, the municipality (the municipal council, the mayor and the administration) and the investor - by redrawing the symbolic boundaries between them and in relation to the land.

The symbolic boundaries that are drawn by some actors are more potent in their ability to become social. Whether they are symbolic boundaries of convergence with people and things, or of distance. They keep the order of things in constant flux and renegotiation when confronted with difference. In this case, the different position from which symbolic boundaries are drawn plays a role. For the locals, narratives over the land are used to legitimise their rural way of life and these para-formally spill over into social boundaries - simply because there is no one to stop them. Here, the municipality's peculiar abdication of control over its own lands is a condition for hobbies (walking, hunting) and cultural practices (religion, chapel, national belonging, flag) to spill over into material objects that restrict or allow access to the land. On the other hand, not only does the municipality have a regulatory mechanism that is generally recognized, but it is also the legitimate owner of the land. The position from which it draws symbolic boundaries determines the inevitability of their transition into social ones.

What is interesting here is that the locals have managed to extract (through specific municipal councillors who they have been able to use as mediators of their interest in the spaces of power) an albeit limited recognition of the validity of their definition of land - land for the villagers. They managed to get a portion of the budget to be invested in the two villages. The key here is not only winning a mediator who positions the local interest as legitimate. It is important that the benefits they receive through the formal social boundary in their favour are laid in the significant fields in which the municipality defines the land, a source of monetary benefit with which to protect the public interest. This means that the potential of para-formal narratives to enforce formal social boundaries requires that they be translated into the language and value schema of formality, of norm, of legally intelligible value.

In terms of social boundaries, the case study illuminates several features concerning the multidimensionality of social tangibility (through which I view social boundaries as an outcome

rather than a starting point of analysis). First, in a society such as the Bulgarian one, in which a real enforceable order exists alongside the formal order, social boundaries are set to permanently structure the order of the world from which formal institutions have abdicated. Thus, in the cracks of the formal absence of legitimate state authority, a new order emerges - parallel (not necessarily contradictory) to the one described in the law. An order that exists *in spite of.* It exists in spite of land ownership, in spite of the impossibility of managing it, in spite of national or global priorities. And this order solidifies and produces its own social force that sustains it. Things are there because they are there and nothing stops them from being there. The chapel, the cross, the deer and the fauna set the social boundaries of rural life produced by and for its local inhabitants. This type of para-formal *social boundaries* is supported by a significantly weaker regulatory apparatus relative to formal social boundaries. For it, when confronted, they break down. As materially objective as the impassable road to the land on which hunters drive visitors to the village in their SUVs is, an alternative road can always be built, at the behest of the municipality. No matter how strongly the locals are convinced that "there is no one to tear down the chapel. Sanctified at that!" (Local villager, hunter, female), the municipality has a technique that can overcome it if it becomes an obstacle to its solution.

On the other hand, the social tangibility of boundaries is not a sufficient criterion for equating all structuring objects and substances. It is also important to pay attention to their durability because it reveals the difference between solving a particular problem and establishing an order of things. Enduring social boundaries (such as the obligation to invest directly in the two villages) are also firm and non-negotiable. However, they have no bearing on the definition of communal land *in general.* They only structure the specific communal land. Conversely, changing ordinances and establishing routine administrative procedure are social boundaries with lasting effects over time. And although they do not apply in this case (because they are established as a consequence of the Investment intent and therefore precede it), they apply to municipal land *in general.* They set out the order of things.

The purely historical conclusion of the controversy is also interesting - it seems that a compromise will have to be made and the land will *reconcile* its different meanings and distinctions. A path to the coexistence of what seem like incompatible concepts can be found. At this point, boundaries will be set and different definitions of the land will continue to exist until the boundaries manage

to hold each interpretation in place - beyond the fences of the RES park, hunting, walking and religious symbols will have the freedom of their own way. This begs the question of whether the two meanings exist *with* each other or simply *next to each other*. In the latter hypothesis, the doom of consensus is close on the horizon. Land is a particularly finite resource. And while it has *room* for different uses and interpretations, harmony is possible. Beyond this historical moment, controversy looms with new severity. Then, the symbolic boundaries between the actors (their relationships to each other) will have a new historicity - that of having existed next to each other (geographically) and together (if investors do build permanence in their endowments and coexistence with locals). The locals construct meanings of the land, housing their fears about the present, emotions of the past and expectations for the future. In this way, the meaning of the land and the *land itself* (the socialized land, of course) becomes an instrument of the symbolic regulation of the order of things. Land is a repertoire of boundaries that represents a coherent order, the world as the respondents want it to be, as they fear it might become, and ultimately as they believe they have made it.

Contributions of the dissertation research with scientific and scientifically applicable character:

As a result of this dissertation, I propose three conclusions with scientific contributions to the field of boundary studies in contexts other than Western European, and four scientifically applicable conclusions that can be built upon from research on land as public property in Bulgaria.

I define the emerging contradiction between social actors with different specificities (of different caliber) as a process of transforming and redefining its object (in this case, the land). This allows me to approach the analysis of the political decision-making process as a redrawing of symbolic and social boundaries.

I propose a definition of social boundaries as mechanisms for producing 'social tangibility'. In this way, they can be used in empirical and theoretical research without necessarily assuming their inextricable linkage to known and enduring hierarchies.

I rethink the notion of social boundaries from the perspective of their empirical study in a post-socialist society. Two features of social boundaries are thus highlighted that may allow future research to delve into their scientific-conceptual problematisation. These are: their relationship to

formal power mechanisms (social boundaries can be formal and para-formal) and the extent of their influence (social boundaries can be durable and non-durable).

I highlight the complexity of municipal property as a process of redefinition of what constitutes the public interest. And more specifically what constitutes land as public interest. This discovery could be useful for future work that is interested in the dynamics of common goods redistribution in Bulgaria.

In exploring political decision-making as a process of renegotiating social boundaries through symbolic boundaries, I draw attention to the importance of the right to participation, which is not guaranteed to all social actors. Thus, the question of access to land is in fact transformed into a question of citizenship rights for direct participation in formal political processes.

I formulate two significant conclusions about the way symbolic boundaries can materialize into social ones. The potential of symbolic boundaries to grow into social boundaries depends on who is drawing them. Formal institutions, by definition, set social boundaries whether or not they ground them in symbolic ones. In setting social boundaries around common goods, symbolic boundaries of power require a transformation of the narrative on ‘public interest’. Civic actors have limited capacity to set formal social boundaries. They can transform their meanings into material consequences when they place their narratives within the logical field (rhetoric) of formal power - then they can assert social claims.

Civic actors can construct para-formal social boundaries that coexist with the formal order when the latter has refused to construct countervailing ones of its own (and enforce them with a regulatory apparatus). One possible condition under which civic actors can set social boundaries is the abdication of power from exercising its property rights.

Publications on the topic

Two articles have been published on the topic of the dissertation, one in Bulgarian and one in English:

1. Todorova, R. (2024). 'Green acts: global politics vs local crises (a case study in two Bulgarian villages)', Filosofiya - Philosophy, 33(3s), pp.146-157.
2. Todorova R. (2023). "Values of land: building symbolic boundaries against the construction of a renewable energy park in the villages of Knijovnik and Dolno Voyvodino". In:Third National Doctoral Conference in Sociology. 22 May 2023, Small Conference Hall, UNWE, Sofia, pp. 167-188.

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