REVIEW
of the dissertation of Rosalia Yankova Todorova

LAND IN THE CONTEXT OF THE PRIORITIZATION OF RENEWABLE ENERGY SOURCES: MEANINGS, BOUNDARIES, AND ACTORS
(Based on the example of an energy park in two Bulgarian villages)

for the award of the doctoral degree
in 3.1. Sociology, Anthropology and Culture Studies (Sociology – General Sociology)

by Prof. Anna Krasteva

"The whole village was there – do you know what a commotion it was? Because they all came from Haskovo. There was someone from Sofia too, I think, and someone from the company. To explain, to say something – 'we'll fix the roads', what will you fix, really?"

This short quote from the fieldwork introduces us to a tangle of emotions, actors – local and external, rural and urban, domestic and international – dynamics, change, (un)certainty, (dis)trust. It is precisely this tangle that the doctoral candidate attempts to organize, conceptualize, and analyze. The degree to which she has succeeded is the subject of this review.

Among the many merits of the dissertation, I would highlight the most significant:

- **Topicality of the subject**: The study is positioned at the heart of current trends related to the green transition, energy justice, and the rapid deployment of renewable energy sources (RES), all of which exert considerable pressure on rural territories in Bulgaria and Europe. The dissertation captures this process *in vivo* by concretizing it through a specific case study.

- **Theoretical design**: Bold and interestingly structured around original poles of contradiction and boundaries. The subject of research is defined as the mechanisms for achieving social consensus in resolving contradictions and establishing them within socially accepted boundaries. The object comprises symbolic and social boundaries built around land in the narratives and practices of the involved social actors (local villagers, municipality, investors).

- **Land as contradiction**: This is the original core of the theoretical design, enabling the tracing of the dynamics among multiple actors, the tension between their positions, and the changes in both positions and interactions. Particularly interesting are the discrepancies and negotiations in the diverging definitions of

land: negatively defined as unusable/unproductive in official documents, yet vibrant, meaningful, and emotionally charged in the perceptions and practices of local actors—as a hunting ground, as part of their living space, as "view, meadow, air", as a landscape appreciated from almost every house, as an integral part of local identity.

- **Boundaries**: As the second core of the conceptual cluster, this is also an original and strong conceptual approach. The distinction between social and symbolic boundaries is convincingly made. While the rigidity of social boundaries can be debated, both concepts function persuasively in the dissertation. Particularly productive are three characteristics of symbolic boundaries: they establish order; they are narratives of difference (used to distinguish "us" from "them"); and they are dynamic – opening, closing, softening, hardening, bending, crossed temporarily or permanently. These resonate with major trends in the literature and enable the author to pose and answer key questions about how, why, and by whom boundaries are changed.
- **Methodology**: A suitable multimethod qualitative design is applied – 20 interviews (in-depth, semi-structured, and go-along), observations, and analysis of 40+ documents (minutes, reports, video recordings). The increasingly popular go-along interview method is well adapted to this energy research. The methodological approach provides the necessary triangulation for a case study.
- **Case selection**: The specific case of an energy park in the villages of Knizhovnik and Dolno Voyvodino is convincingly chosen and justified. It includes the typical actors and, most importantly, covers the full cycle from the emergence of the conflict through its stages to compromise and resolution.

No research is immune to questions, critiques, and recommendations. I will articulate two critical remarks and two questions.

1. **Conceptual apparatus**: A central paradox is the lack of engagement with border studies, despite "boundaries" being a core theoretical concept. The dissertation references classical sociological definitions but insufficiently engages with the established field of border studies, which has long-standing academic standing (journals, centers, programs). The doctoral candidate's own approach aligns with trends such as the shift from *borders* to *bordering*, and the heuristic triad *Bordering/Othering/Ordering*.

Another note: while 82 references is a respectable bibliography, an ambitious study could expand it to better reflect all relevant theoretical fields—particularly border studies and

environmental sociology. Likewise, the concept of the green transition is more referenced than thoroughly analyzed. Links to energy justice and just transition are present but would benefit from a more systematic review.

2. **Theoretical generalization**: The leap from a local case to a global conclusion is too large and insufficiently substantiated. For instance: “The global and national need for RES is growing, while land is decreasing... The resource exhaustion of land was overcome in the Knizhovnik-Dolno Voyvodino case, but cannot be overcome in principle...” This assertion lacks contextual grounding in RES scale, implementation trends, and power configurations, which would align the positive case conclusion with the general warning.

Questions for defense discussion:

1. How would you assess the achieved compromise (one-third of land for the RES park, two-thirds for locals) in the context of RES conflicts in Bulgaria and Central and Eastern Europe – as typical or exceptional?
2. What practical recommendations for local and national policies on energy justice do you draw from your study, and how might they be applied in other rural contexts?

Publications:
The findings have already entered academic circulation in two articles. More active dissemination through conference presentations and publications is encouraged, as academic feedback both refines and guides future research.

Contributions:
Well-formulated and detailed, though somewhat interwoven with conclusions. For example, identifying formal and para-formal social boundaries and their durability is more a conclusion than a direct contribution. The key point is that the findings and contributions are original and the result of independent, well-argued research.

Conclusion:
Rosalia Yankova Todorova’s dissertation is an original contribution to the sociology of the environment, energy justice, and rural studies.

I recommend the awarding of the doctoral degree in 3.1. Sociology, Anthropology and Culture Studies (Sociology – General Sociology).

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Prof. Anna Krasteva