

Abstract submitted by Tina Schivatcheva

*Title:*

**(Re)claiming the environmental conservation areas at the urban/environment interface of the city of Bourgas, Bulgaria as egalitarian socio-political spaces**

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The research inquiry comparatively explores the socio-political responses to the urban encroachment of two environmental conservation areas (brackish lakes), located at the urban/environment interface of the rapidly growing post-socialist coastal city of Bourgas, Bulgaria. Both lakes are located along one of the major European international migratory birds' route and provide important bird sanctuaries; they are also protected by the pan-European conservation network Natura 2000, thereby gaining recognition as habitats of not only local, but also pan-European significance. N2000 does not represent a strict 'fortress conservation' type of governance model, but promotes public participation in the governance process, while also being supportive of sustainable economic activity within the protected areas. Yet, in spite of the supra-national legal protection framework guarding the lakes, the city's constant expansion has brought in the dangers of gentrification, privatization and exclusion of access to these formerly public resources. The public has responded with great resistance to these process, leading to the emergence of a counter-movement, contesting the commodification attempts.

The analysis uses political ecology, sustainable urban governance and social ecology approaches to evaluate the degree to which the public has been successful in (re)claiming the lakes as inclusive public spaces, contributing to urban well-being and sustainability. The discussion elaborates on the different socially creative strategies used by the major actors, which participate in the broad advocacy coalition in favour of the protection of the lakes. At the same time the presentation explores to what extent these processes give a voice to groups that have been traditionally absent from the politics and institutions of post-socialist urban governance. Overall, the discussion aims to contribute towards a holistic understanding of the emergence and activity of the popular grassroots socio-political movements for inclusive and sustainable urban governance.