

Bulgaria: Greens against corporations in the fight to save Pirin National Park

Friday 25 May 2018, by [MEDAROV Georgi](#) (Date first published: 9 May 2018).

The campaign to save the Bulgarian national Park Pirin has over the past several months become the major source of protest in the country and even brought the attention of international media and NGOs. Instead of embarrassingly shelving their plans for building on the mountain, the Bulgarian business elite has launched a massive and virulent counter-campaign, mobilizing all of its subservient media and politicians. The forces are unequal and in the short term, defeat is likely, but at least the country has learnt the names of its “heroes.”

The Bulgarian Presidency of the Council of the European Union will be remembered, among other things, for the environmentalist protests that have been going on for over a month. Protesters contest a governmental decision allowing the radical expansion of the ski resort Bansko in the [UNESCO world heritage national park](#) Pirin, protected on paper by both national and European law. The environmentalist campaign managed to attract international attention, with reports in influential outlets like [Al Jazeera](#), [the Guardian](#), [the Independent](#). Most concerns are related to corruption. However, what the case reveals is a troubling deep seated alliance between the far-right, offshore capital, banks, and the tourism industry.

[On the 28th of December 2017](#), during the government’s last session for the year, an amendment to the plan for the Pirin National Park was approved. The change allows for the construction of skiing facilities in up to 48% per cent of the park, which would be devastating for biodiversity. The offshore company Yulen has the concession for the park and will have the right to start construction, even though the concession contract was not revised.

The growth of the resort has been advertised as opening employment opportunities, but the tourist sector offers notoriously bad working conditions. This year’s ski season started with workers protesting over low wages and [unpaid overtime](#). In the region, where the Bansko resort is located, the average salary is about [330 EUR](#) in the private sector, or 35% lower than the national average income of 500 EUR, even when the salaries of high income managers are included. The situation of the majority of low-income temporary workers is worse. Businesses often pay social security contributions on sums smaller than employees’ actual earnings, which are often below the minimum wage of 250 EUR. But even 330 EUR is barely enough for a family weekend in the ski resort, where a 2-day family pass for the lifts is over 150 EUR; not to mention accommodation and food - half a liter of bottled water in the resort costs 2 EUR. It is no wonder that in Bulgaria [only 28% of the population](#) travel for tourism, second worst after Romania, where it is 26%, with the EU average being 60%.

The government tried to defend the new Pirin plan by asserting that they are just trying to regulate the construction of a second cabin lift from the town of Bansko to the ski slopes on the mountain. It also stated that it is practically impossible to build over 48% of the park. Hence, they claim, the

argument that Yulen will be allowed to do build up all this space is invalid. The changes of the plan came after a campaign by Yulen. The company distributed pictures of huge lines of people waiting for the cabin lift in order to show that a second lift is needed, claiming customers had to wait for four hours to get in. Environmentalists speculated that Yulen had slowed down the lift in order to accumulate the line for their PR campaign.

[The ski zone concessionaire reports](#) up to 3600 daily skiers over the past three years, but the technical capacity of the lift is 2000 persons per hour, making it practically impossible for a four hours waiting line to accumulate. Or Yulen is lowering the reported number in order to reduce taxes and concession fees. Similarly, the investor keeps reporting lower revenues, but their prices had been going up. Such gaping holes in Yulen's statistics, needless to say, were never addressed by authorities. Moreover, the company never officially filed a proposal for the construction of a second lift with the Ministry of the Environment. When activists pointed that out, Yulen suddenly announced a project at their website, but they still have not followed the legal procedure. Additionally, with the new national park management plan, the government refused to specify that only one second lift is to be constructed, and, instead, the prime minister said he vouches that this will be the case.

Protesters raised the issue of the non-transparent ownership of Yulen, officially registered in an offshore centre with an unknown Cypriot citizen as the owner. Nevertheless, [a number of leaked documents demonstrate](#) that Yulen is associated with the Bulgarian entrepreneur and head of Bulgarian Ski Federation Tseko Minev. Minev is the major shareholder in the Bulgarian First Investment Bank (FIB), as well as investor in other ski resorts. Before the economic meltdown of 2008, the price of [apartments in Bansko](#) reached up to 1300 EUR per square meter, but after the bubble burst, they drastically fell to 350 EUR because foreign investments were withdrawn. FIB is a key investor in real estate in Bansko, and is now trying to reinflate the bubble in order to cope with the loss incurred by all the empty apartment blocks it now has at its hands.

The fact that there is such a strong concentration of economic power in one person, namely Minev, led some to reduce the problem to an issue of individual corruption in Bulgaria, and not see it as endemic privatization of the commons, prevalent in neoliberal capitalism everywhere. Furthermore, after protests took the case to court, all Bulgarian industrial associations [published a statement](#) against the environmentalists and in support of Yulen. The business representatives claimed there is a "green racketeering" and complained they were being blackmailed, since anyone could question the legality of their investments. The business organizations called for the government to create a list for "legitimate" green NGOs and to exclude the rest so that economic growth is not interrupted by pesky legal procedures.

This conflict is not new, it has been unfolding for over 15 years. Virtually all governments have been pushing for the accommodation of Yulen's business interests. This year ex-ministers of the environment, together with the current one, a vice prime minister of the far-right PF, an MEP and the ex-president Plevneliev all went to great lengths to defend the new plan and respectively the investor. Such a wide coalition in defense of Yulen is perplexing, as the company is at fault for the illegal construction around the Bansko ski area. In 2013 the Bulgarian National Audit Office announced the results of a revision and reproached the lack of actions and sanctions on part of environmental ministries of 10 years over the Yulen concession. The inspection also criticized [governments](#) for the lack of any provisions for sanctions of the concessionaire in case of systemic negligence, and for the lack of clarity on the territory of the concessioned area.

Both national and international institutions have been insisting on stricter regulations of the investor's activities in the area. In 2010 UNESCO excluded the ski areas near Bansko and Dobrinishte due to damages authorized by the concessionaire, such as the destruction of 160 hectares of protected century-old forests. The UNESCO sanction, however, did not dishearten

Bulgarian governments but instead [in 2015](#) the ministers of sports and tourism of the second GERB-led government implored the organisation to exclude more territories from the world heritage site in order to further “develop ski tourism” in the area.

Successive governments’ support for the investor has been accompanied by a huge media campaign against green NGOs, especially virulent in the end of 2017. In tabloid media, but even in respected media outlets, they were called a “green octopus”, and were accused of blocking economic development and of being paid from malevolent Swiss and Austrian agents. The far-right Patriotic Front (PF), who are currently in the ruling coalition with the center-right GERB, are especially aggressive in their stance against environmentalists, unlike GERB, who try to keep lower profile on the case. Neno Dimov, [the climate change denier, libertarian and current environmental minister from the PF quota](#), has been at the forefront of this governmental reaction. Valeri Simeonov, a vice prime minister from the PF, is constantly and aggressively insulting environmentalists. Simeonov is not simply a politician, but owns a cable TV company and hotels.

The #SavePirin campaign attracted support of international environmentalist organizations like World Wildlife Fund and Friends of the Earth. It was also backed by the German Greens’ MEP Ska Keller. She took part in the protests and gave multiple statements against the governmental decision to extend the ski resort into the national park. Valeri Simeonov, infuriated by Keller’s position, [threatened the MEP](#) with deportation to Turkey and called for her recognition as “persona non grata.” Simeonov’s statement was full of insults such as “green jihadi,” “delusional,” and other more cynical qualifications that are impossible to translate. The government officially distanced themselves from the statement of their vice prime minister and treated it as an individual statement of his party.

Interestingly, the opposition had been complicit in the anti-green PR in support of Yulen. The MP from the main opposition Bulgarian Socialist Party, Alexander Simov, who otherwise pretends to stand to the left of his party’s mainstream, wrote anti-green conspiracy “theories” in pro-governmental tabloids. Simov accused green NGOs of being paid foreign puppets, taking tens of millions of euro to block economic development and, additionally, called for deregulation of resorts and the exclusion of environmentalists from debates over the development of natural parks.

Evidently, all political elites have supported the overdevelopment of the tourist industry at the expense of natural parks and biodiversity to provide precarious and low-paid jobs for the majority and lucrative income for economic elites. What changed is that it is now the far right that became the most vocal member of the unholy alliance between the tourist industry, offshore capital and short-term financial investments in real estate bubbles.

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Original title: The Solidarity of the Business Class, or Building Anti-Environmentalist Alliances in Bulgaria

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