



# Environmental policy integration: Towards a communicative approach in integrating nature conservation and urban planning in Bulgaria



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## ABSTRACT

As urban areas continue to expand, the need to consider nature conservation objectives in planning is growing. Policy makers across Europe recognize that effective nature conservation requires an integrated approach to land use planning that includes relevant ecological and spatial knowledge. Although a number of such integrated approaches have been developed, many local authorities in Europe encounter important institutional barriers to this integration. This is particularly true for countries in Central and Eastern Europe (CEE) like Bulgaria. The post-socialist transformation in Bulgaria led to intensified urban growth and local authorities struggle to find a balance between environmental and socio-economic interests. Meanwhile, the Environmental Policy Integration 'principle' (EPI) has been gaining prominence in Europe, aiming to address the trade-offs between environmental and economic incentives. Research highlights that successful EPI depends on institutional processes within different economic sectors and across governmental scales. These processes have not yet been comprehensively studied in the CEE and in Bulgaria. This article assesses the EPI process in urban planning in Bulgaria and identifies the institutional approaches that may contribute best to EPI in urban planning. Using the example of the "Corner Land" project in the city of Burgas, we discuss the key challenges that the local authorities face in addressing nature conservation in land use plans. The findings indicate that EPI is to a high degree constrained by the lack of an efficient communicative process across fragmented organizational structures throughout the entire planning process. While a procedural approach to EPI appears to be prevalent it is concluded that a communicative approach is urgently needed if the sustainability of urban plans is to be safeguarded and negative impacts on nature prevented.

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## 1. Introduction

Urbanization is increasing steadily worldwide with no signs that this trend is likely to halt soon (CEC-Community of the European Commission, 2011; United Nations Population Fund, 2007; U.N-Habitat, 2012). More than half of the world's population now lives in urban areas (UNPF, 2007; Coutard et al., 2014). A number of studies provide evidence that, in the face of urban sprawl, spatial planning policies often let economic interests prevail over open space and nature conservation concerns (Dale et al., 2000; Miller and Hobbs, 2002; Daniels and Lapping, 2005; Sandstrom et al.,

2006; Termorshuizen et al., 2007; Zonneveld, 2007; CEC, 2011). Urbanization has proved to be one of the most severe threats to the preservation of natural areas and biodiversity (Beatley, 1994; Fahrig, 1997; Rottenborn, 1999; Palomino and Carrascal, 2006; Coutard et al., 2014). During the last two decades, the pressure from urbanization has been steadily increasing, particularly in the Central and Eastern European (CEE) countries, including Bulgaria. Since the end of socialism, Bulgarian cities have experienced notable sub-urban growth (MRDPW, 2006). This process has been regarded by the local governments and residents as an economic opportunity to develop affluent suburbs, following the model of Western capitalist cities (Hirt and Stanilov, 2009). The shift from the socialist, centralized political system to a market-oriented, decentralized one, with more governing power given to local government, has led to a rapid increase in land developments (Stanilov and Sykora, 2014). This has placed new demands upon local governments to act in a

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more pluralist society with the involvement of a greater variety of public and private actors and interests. While economic interests have started to dominate planning, developments undertaken in the real estate and tourism sectors have led to the accumulation of significant threats to preservation of nature resources in the coastal areas (MRDPW, 2006; Stanilov, 2007; Anderson et al., 2012; Stanilov and Sykora, 2014). With Bulgaria's accession to the EU, the responsibility for the implementation of the EU nature policy directives was delegated to the local authorities (MRDPW, 2005; Brinkerhoff and Goldsmith, 2006; MOEW, 2007). This, however, became a major challenge for the local governments in Bulgaria, which followed the neoliberal fashion of planning, seeking primarily economic opportunities while allowing powerful market players to push the expansion of developments (Carmin and Vanderveer, 2007; Stanilov and Sykora, 2014). This situation has been exacerbated in the absence of planning practices that integrate environmental and socio-economic concerns (Stanilov, 2007; Anderson et al., 2012; Stanilov and Sykora, 2014). In this article we discuss the need for such an integration process which is embedded in the Environmental Policy Integration principle (EPI). EPI was introduced by the EC policy with the aim of addressing the needed trade-offs between the environmental and socioeconomic sectors (EEA, 2005). EPI is considered to be the operational expression of the sustainable development concept, focussing on environmental concerns being an indispensable part of other policy objectives and sectors (horizontal integration) and of national, regional and local governance (vertical integration) (Laferty and Hovden, 2002; EEA, 2005; Herodes et al., 2007). Studies have shown the need for EPI in urban planning by revealing that to achieve desired environmental quality and conserve nature requires well-designed interdisciplinary approaches, incorporating both ecological and spatial planning knowledge (Theobald et al., 2000; Termorshuizen et al., 2007; Kihlslinger and McElfish, 2009). Across academic disciplines and policy sectors, recognition has been growing that planning decisions involving land use transformations of natural landscapes into urbanized areas must be based on knowledge about the impact of these transformations on natural habitats (Beatley, 2000; Lofvenhaft et al., 2002; Opdam et al., 2002; Theobald and Hobbs, 2002; Beunen, 2006; Geneletti et al., 2007). However, despite efforts to develop suitable approaches to facilitate integration of ecological knowledge into urban land use planning, some important barriers remain (Crist et al., 2000; Theobald and Hobbs, 2002; Termorshuizen et al., 2007). Planning research and practice has shown that, even if available, ecological knowledge is often not shared among planners or decision makers during the planning process (Miller and Hobbs, 2002; Beunen, 2006; Termorshuizen et al., 2007; Gibbs et al., 2007). Although more planners are starting to recognize the importance of using ecological principles while searching for mutual benefits between nature and economy, ambiguity remains about the weight that needs to be given to ecological concerns and how to address them systematically in different phases of a planning process (Campbell, 1996; Zipperer et al., 2000; Lofvenhaft et al., 2002; Sandstrom et al., 2006; Shandas et al., 2008). Contemplations on this issue are found in the planning and ecological literature, arguing that this ambiguity largely results from discrepancies between the implementation process of the environmental and spatial planning policies (Campbell, 1996; Healey, 2010; Termorshuizen et al., 2007; Sager, 2013). In particular, the poor levels of communication among planning and environmental professionals within fragmented governmental structures are considered an issue of great concern in the science-policy debate (Peyrache-Gadeau, 2007; EEA, 2005; Stead and Meijers, 2009; Peyrache-Gadeau, 2007; Peyrache-Gadeau, 2007). Moreover, as local governments may act differently upon national policies, questions have been raised about the institutional mechanisms at local level through which planners can success-

fully integrate and safeguard nature conservation objectives (Hajer and Wagenaar, 2002; Gibbs et al., 2007; Anderson et al., 2012). This issue has been addressed as essential for the achievement of EPI (EEA, 2005). While studies have conceptualized EPI as a new mode of 'good governance', making reference to a number of guiding recommendations and approaches (Laferty and Hovden, 2002; OECD, 2001; von Homeyer, 2006; Herodes et al., 2007), there is currently no unified strategy for achieving EPI. A number of commonly used approaches to EPI have been highlighted in the EPI literature, including strategic, procedural, structural and communicative approaches (OECD 2002; EEA, 2005; Simeonova and van der Valk, 2009). While the strategic, procedural and structural approaches focus on the substantive elements of the EPI process, such as elaborating an overarching EPI strategy, establishing coordinating structures and legal procedures, the communicative approach aims to address actors' communication processes at inter-organizational level (Hertin and Berkhout, 2001; von Homeyer, 2006; Mickwitz, 2006; Jordan and Schout, 2007). The communicative approach to EPI has been of particular of interest and it has strong links with the communicative planning discourse (Healey, 1997, 2010; Raemaekers, 2000; Wondollock and Yaffee, 2000; Margerum, 2002; Innes and Booher, 2003; Sager, 2013). In the context of urban sustainability the benefits and credibility of a communicative approach to EPI have been debated and explored by a variety of planning scholars studying the relation between environmental policy and spatial planning (Healey, 1997; Miller and De Roo, 2005; De Roo, 2007; Zonneveld and Spaans, 2012; Sager, 2013). Among its key proponents, Healey (1997) argues that the communicative approach is needed to reconcile the environmental goals of planning with market forces by means of dialogue. Other studies that have explored EPI-related practices in spatial planning have indicated the potential benefits of the communicative approach for achieving the goals of EPI and have referred to a number of experiences with EPI collaborative practices in planning generated by local governments in Europe (Miller and De Roo, 2005; De Roo, 2007; Stead and Meijers, 2009; Simeonova and van der Valk, 2010; Healey, 2010; Scholz et al., 2012; Stight et al., 2013). More empirical evidence is needed, however, regarding the potential benefits of the communicative approach to EPI within various local contexts and regarding different environmental issues. Particularly, we need to know more about its potential to provide local governments in CEE with the mechanisms to reshape the planning process in ways that would enable specific environmental concerns, such as degradation of nature areas, to be embedded in urban plans.

This article explores key challenges to EPI in the context of post-socialist urban planning in Bulgaria and assesses the potential benefits of the communicative approach to embed EPI in urban planning practice. Using an in-depth case study analysis of the planning process of the *Corner Land* urban development project, located on the Black Sea coast in the city of Burgas and bordering an important bird protected area *Atanasovsko Lake*, we discuss the role of the communicative approach in safeguarding nature objectives in urban planning. The *Corner Land* case provides a vigorous context to explore the legitimacy of the EPI concept as a communicative process as it represents a distinctive planning practice of a post-socialist city and illustrates typical urban sustainability dilemmas. The scope of this paper is on assessing the degree of EPI achieved during the routine process of plan preparation. The paper envisions whether the institutional settings within which planning is framed make a difference for the outcomes of EPI in a country like Bulgaria. It discusses the specific socio-political context, which may affect the EPI process. The analysis, however, does not extend to the realm of local politics.

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