

# „Many politicians in Bulgaria still act upon the maxim: The more concrete tourist blocks, the better!“

Interview with Dimitar Popov of Green Balkans about the difficult nature conservation work in Bulgaria.

Dimitar Popov has studied economics in Plovdiv. Since 7 years, he works for Green Balkans, one of the largest nature conservation organisations on the Balkans with over 4.000 members. Within the scope of the project "NatuRegio – trainees for nature", which is co-financed by EuroNatur, this year he has spent several weeks in two different German nature conservation institutions: in spring, in the stork village of Rühstädt in the biosphere reservation embedded in the fluvial landscape of the river Elbe in Brandenburg, and in summer, five weeks in the main office of EuroNatur in Radolfzell. There, they talked about his work, the situation of nature conservation in Bulgaria and his experience in Germany.



Photo: Günther Willinger

## EuroNatur: How does Green Balkans work?

Dimitar Popov: Green Balkans works for nature conservation in Bulgaria on many different levels. Supported by many volunteers, we organise direct protective measures of species such as the Eastern Imperial Eagle, vultures, storks or terns. Our full-time staff has been significantly involved in elaborating the Natura 2000 area list in the run-up to the EU-accession, as well as in elaborating and improving the nature conservancy legislation in Bulgaria. We are involved in the regeneration and protection of the floodplain forests along the Danube, in the establishment of a large natural park in the western Rhodope Mountains, or the conservation of the last wetlands on the coast of the Black Sea.

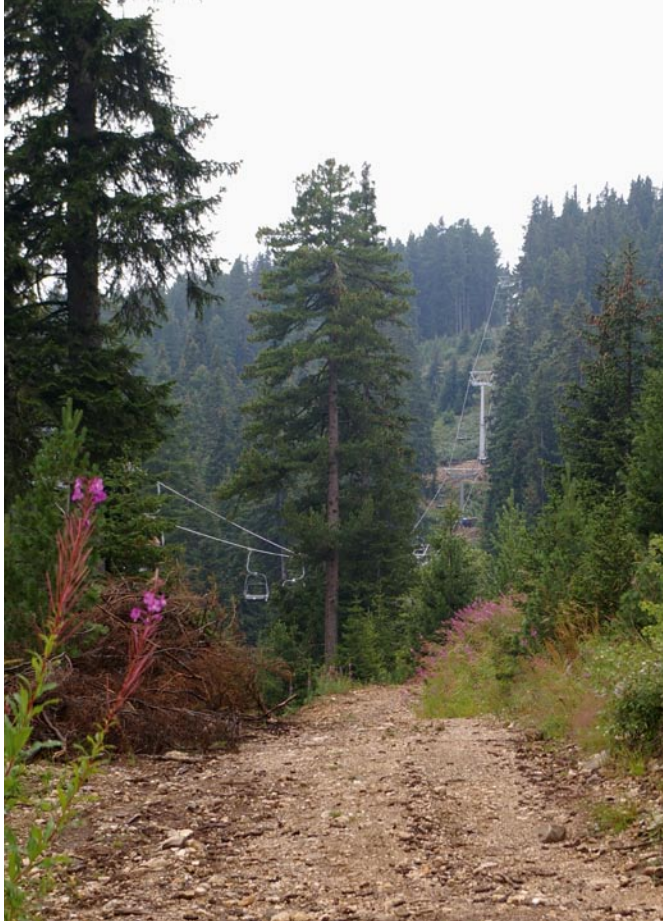
## What have you achieved so far?

By observing aeries and through many other protective actions, we have managed to preserve the Eastern Imperial Eagle in the downs of Sakar. In Stara Zagora, located in central Bulgaria, Green Balkans runs an animal clinic, with attached animal collection and breeding station exclusively for injured wild animals, where several hundred injured animals are cured every year to be returned to the wild. In addition, we have been successful in breeding endangered birds of prey, which then are introduced into the wild as well. At Lake Pomorie, a salt lake located near Burgas directly on the coast of the Black Sea, we achieved the re-establishment of nesting habitat for the Sandwich Tern. 15 years ago, in 1995, when we started working there, there were only four breeding pairs left. We then built a large, artificial island in the lake, where up to 1.300 pairs breed nowadays. It is a mixed colony, where apart from the Sandwich Tern you can also find the Pied Avocet, the Common Tern, the Little Tern and Black-winged Stilt. Thanks to

its success, we were then granted a GEF project for conservation of biodiversity, restoration of habitat and the development of sustainable tourism in this region, financed by the World Bank. Unfortunately, in our efforts to implement this project we are wasting much energy in struggling with local politicians who would rather build more giant tourist blocks. However, in the meantime the area has obtained Natura 2000 and Ramsar status, which makes it somewhat easier for us.

## To what extent is the EU-membership of significance to nature conservation in Bulgaria?

During the negotiations of becoming a member of the EU, the nature conservation scene in Bulgaria regarded the Natura-2000-network and the EU-legislation as the biggest opportunity to protect Bulgaria's biodiversity, which is one of the greatest among the EU-countries. Today, we have a very modern and up-to-date legislation. One third of the country is part of the Natura-2000 biological reserve network of the EU; still, it lacks in implementing these laws. After the "Wende", governments were weak, resulting in a completely uncontrolled exploitation of all natural resources in our country, meaning centuries-old forests, natural rivers and lakes, the coast of the Black Sea and the mountains. Hundreds of small hydroelectric power plants destroyed creeks and rivers; skiing areas were established or enlarged within national or natural parks; quarries and mines are built everywhere, and the coast of the Black Sea has been covered with concrete practically all over. Furthermore, several important Natura-2000 areas were rejected by the government; which urgently must be re-nominated, as for example the buffer zone around the Rila National Park, which comprises nearly the complete woodland of the Rila mountains; together with the Vitosha Natural Park they provide a vitally important corridor for species such as the brown bear and the wolf. The



Three years ago the Bulgarian Ministry of Environment "stopped" the plans for a new ski-resort "Panichishte-Ezerata-Kabul", because it was planned mainly inside the borders of Rila National Park. Despite of this intervention illegal construction works started in the summer 2007 after Vasil Petrov the park director at that time had been dismissed from his job. This year (2009) an illegally built ski-lift was opened (left side). Right side: The Vitosha mountain plateau at about 2.000 m above sea level. Here as well plans have been developed to enlarge the existing ski-tracks and to built new lifts.

mountains of Rila and Vitosha connect the populations of the Central Balkan Mountains with the Pirin Mountains in Southwest Bulgaria. Further examples for areas to be renominated are Cape Kaliakra in the Black Sea, harbouring one of the last authentic steppe habitat on the Balkans, which is meanwhile threatened and damaged by the construction of huge wind energy plants. Generally, we had to realize that in Bulgaria, the development of renewable energies is to the detriment of biodiversity and without considering environmental sustainability. Further wind energy plants are being planed, for example in the eastern Rhodopes and in the down of Sakar. Instead of taking into consideration the negative impact of the numerous small hydroelectric power plants on a national level, each community gives its approval on a local level. There is no national strategy, and the cumulative negative impact is enormous. Nowadays, the biggest challenge for Bulgaria is to put the existing laws into action..

**Frequently, Bulgaria assures a supply of negative headlines because of corruption, organized crime and cancelled financial aids from the EU. What effects does that have on nature and nature conservation in Bulgaria?**

The impact is enormous, because a substantial part of the problems that we have, both economically and regarding nature conservation, has its origin in organized crime and its effects. Many of the concrete giants ruining our coasts nowadays were only built for money laundering. There is no corresponding infrastructure or sewage purification, not to mention serious consideration of eco-friendliness. Protected areas or related management plans are no obstacle for these

people. This has once more been the case in the Vitosha Natural Park, established in 1935 and located on the outskirts of the capital Sofia, where the „Vitosha Ski“ - an offshore- owned company , tried their utmost to enlarge the existing skiing area, even against the law. Together with other NGOs, Green Balkans fights against this project, and as a result now has to defend itself against smear campaigns. There had already been similar cases in both the Rila and Pirin National Parks. In the Rila National Park, the new ski lifts were taken into operation this year, and the destruction of valuable alpine meadows, glacier lakes and habitat of the dwarf pine trees is clearly evident. All-terrain vehicles cross the area all over, and as there is no plan of waste disposal, garbage is being spread more or less uncontrolled. There is only one positive effect from the fight against this organized way of illegal destruction of nature: it welds the nature conservation scene in Bulgaria together. Two years ago, a coalition of many nature conservationists and other concerned groups as well as an environmentally aware young generation, succeeded to avoid the dissolution of the largest Bulgarian Protected area - „Strandia“ Nature Park, located in the southeast of the country. Yet this was only a partial victory, because once again a new development plan for the coastal community has been presented, which, to put it mildly, is a catastrophe. As I say, we have all these problems, and it is very sad that the many beautiful sides of Bulgaria, its unspoiled nature and manifold landscapes have to suffer in a double sense: first, because they are exploited and destructed, and secondly, because as a consequence, those areas that are still preserved have no chance to develop in an ecological way.



Photo left: Hristo Nikolov / Green Balkans; Photo right: Green Balkans Photos: Gunther Willinger

*Pictures clockwise starting from upper left: One of the last pristine parts of the Bulgarian Black Sea coast at the mouth of Veleka river close by Sinmorets, Strandzha Nature Park. – Hotel construction works continue close by to the north and to the south of Veleka river mouth. – The white storks nesting on the schools roof in the European Stork village of Belozem will be provided with stabilizing platforms for their nests during this winter. – Thanks to the conservation work of Green Balkans and many volunteers several hundred pairs of Sandwich terns breed regularly on an artificial island in the Pomorie Lake nearby Bourgas.*

### Is there any reason for new hope due to the new government?

The GERB party, representing the new government, can put its success down to the fact that the previous government was the worst we have had for the last twenty years; it was a coalition between communists, the former Kings Party and the Turkish party, popularly being known as „the dragon with three heads“. This „dragon“ raided all the riches of the country, especially the natural ones. The GERB-Party has made many promises, but it is still too early to say whether things will change for the better. At least, there have been some quite positive changes in personnel at the forestry commission, so that there is reason for hope.

### What kind of role plays hunting in Bulgaria?

In many protected areas, hunting activities are a major problem for many threatened species, especially for migratory birds and birds of prey. Every year after the start of the hunting season in mid august, we have rapidly increasing numbers of birds with bullet injuries in the wild animal clinic in Stara Zagora, such as Eastern Imperial Eagles, Red-breasted geese, storks and swans. Birds of prey still suffer from their bad reputation from the communist era, when they were declared enemies of the state, because they allegedly caused much damage by killing poultry. As a consequence, vast numbers of toxic baits were put down, and hunters got their licenses extended by proving a certain number of birds shot by simply presenting the cut-off claws, which was the only criterion. These facts are still embedded in many thoughts. Hunters in Bulgaria have a very strong lobby. The Bulgarian Hunting Association is the largest syndicate in the country, counting 120.000 members, and many politicians are passionate hunters too, like for example the President Georgi

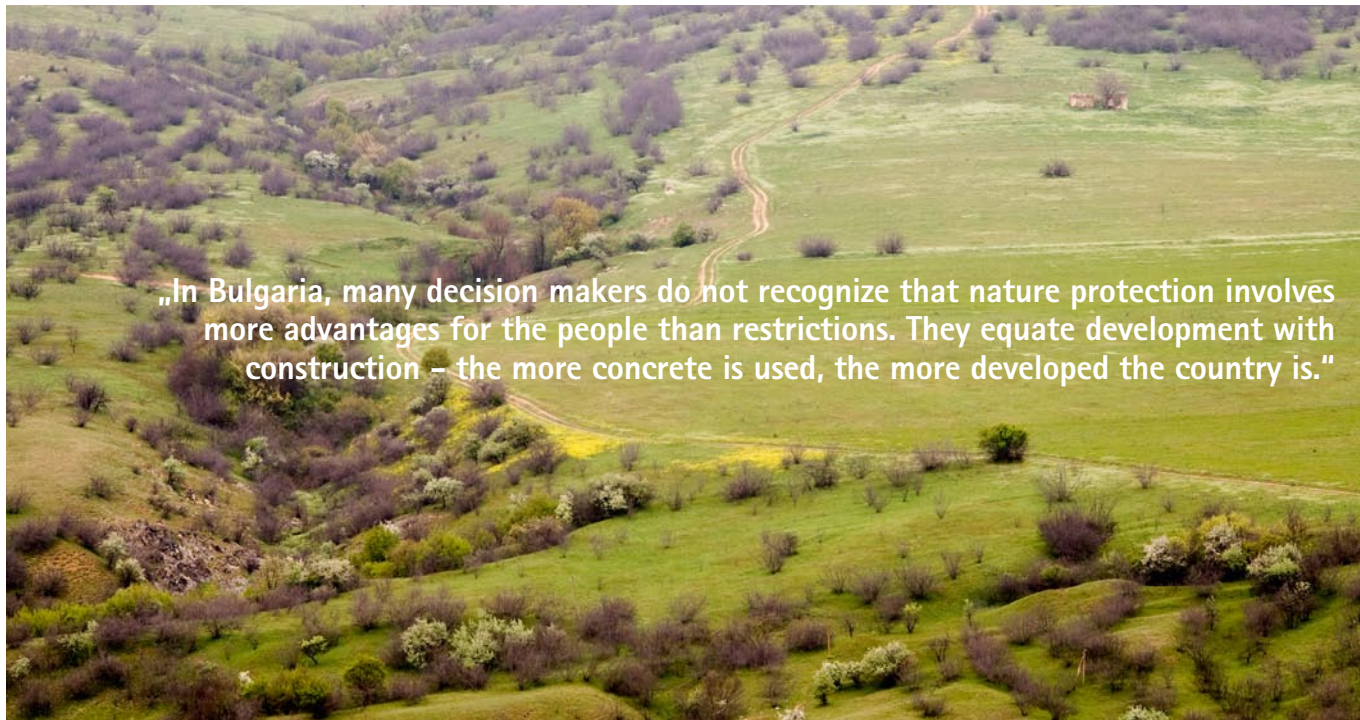
Parvanov himself. Unfortunately, nowadays it is stylish among the nouveaux riches to go hunting with costly weapons and cross-country vehicles. Generally, these people have no conception of ecosystems and do not care about rules or interdictions. Furthermore, having the necessary cash makes it easy to obtain a hunting license. In addition, a new amendment in law allows private persons to lease state-owned hunting grounds. Meaning that, if private businessmen lease such areas, they also intend to make some profits; this involves the risk that such hunting grounds that hitherto have been managed in a relatively satisfactory manner, will then be exploited either way, which implies a threat to roe deer, bears and wolves.

### Why is participation in the NatuRegio project important for you?

For me, the NatuRegio program is a perfect opportunity to learn from the experience of German nature conservationists. For example, I gained helpful knowledge of the EuroNatur management plan for the Salina Ulcinj in Montenegro, which I can hopefully use for our project at the salt lake in Pomorie. Regarding my project in the stork village Belozem, which is financed by NatuRegio, I have also made contact with the ornithological station in Radolfzell and with colleagues from the stork village in Rühstädt. Naturally, my contacts with other trainees from Bulgaria and Romania, and especially the NatuRegio network as a whole are very valuable for my future tasks. Besides, I will obtain a certificate that will certainly be useful for my future career.

### What shall be done in Belozem in the context of the NatuRegio project?

The aim of the project is to protect the stork population in



„In Bulgaria, many decision makers do not recognize that nature protection involves more advantages for the people than restrictions. They equate development with construction – the more concrete is used, the more developed the country is.“

Photo: Gunther Willinger

Grazing has created this landscape in the Sakar-hills in southern Bulgaria – one of the biodiversity hotspots in the country and home of the last Imperial eagles.

Belozem through well-directed measures, i.e. a ringing program and – above all – by involving the local population. People shall know that storks do not only bring luck and babies, but that by protecting the storks and their habitat around the village, they also look after their own environment by keeping it healthy and clean. With the help of the mayor and the whole community, we intend to convert an unused lawn situated close to the stork colony into a „stork park“. This includes an observation tower, bench and tables, a web cam to be installed on one of the nests and the organization of activities especially with children, because most of the storks nest on the roof of their school. In the long term, this may promote a kind of „stork tourism“, and maybe we will even be able to sell local products such as the excellent rice or the vegetables of Belozem under a stork label.

**Why is cooperation with EuroNatur important for Green Balkans?**

Green Balkans has always been interested in international cooperation in the field of nature conservation. The beneficial partnership with EuroNatur has existed for many years now, especially regarding the protection of the Red-breasted goose and the Eastern Imperial Eagle, a model species for Green Balkans. Both sides have benefited from cooperating in these projects by gaining new knowledge and experience, not only with reference to these species, but also about the work of the two organizations in general.

*Gunther Willinger conducted this interview*

Further information on: [www.greenbalkans.org](http://www.greenbalkans.org)

**NatuRegio – a nature conservation network for Bulgaria and Romania**

Every year, the NatuRegio project provides the possibility to for ten young nature conservationists an approximately three-months-long trainee-stay in different German nature conservation institutions. The training is enhanced by theory seminars, excursions and the possibility to carry out an own project in the home country after finalizing the trainee-programme. NatuRegio is financed by the Alfred-Toepfer Foundation and the Deutsche Bundesstiftung Umwelt DBU and carried out by the Academy for Nature Conservation (NNA), in cooperation with the University of Lüneburg, Europarc and EuroNatur.

