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Department of Philosophy,
Room 3D (third floor)
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A-1010 Wien

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Rethinking Wild Europe

European Perspectives on Wilderness, Rewilding and Biodiversity Conservation

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Panel 4 Policies of Rewilding

George Iordachescu

Europe's green frontiers: Rethinking wilderness protection from the margins of Europe

The expansion of wilderness protection is embedded into green growth agendas such as the European Green Deal and it constitutes a central feature of recent international agreements like the Kunming-Montreal Global Biodiversity Framework. Conservation advocates suggest that a growing interest in conserving untouched nature marks a new era in intergovernmental cooperation, and the integration of wilderness values in sectors such as agriculture, energy and infrastructural developments is imminent. Already permeating legal and policy developments, the EU's wilderness momentum appears to create a new resource in the European peripheries aimed at fixing the joint climate-biodiversity poly-crisis. This vision promotes a shift from extractive uses towards strict protection by creating people-free areas set aside for natural processes to develop independently of human management. But as these strictly protected spaces become frontiers of conservation intervention, historical underdevelopment and recent rural decline spur unprecedented unequal ecological exchange between marginal but biodiverse areas and regions that benefit from the green growth. There is an urgent need to understand the dynamics and genealogies of these conservation frontiers within their European socio-political and historical contexts. Following from this imperative, this paper critically examines the uneven geographies of this conservation agenda and shows how yet-to-be-issued prioritization mechanisms could end up targeting only certain areas which are considered biodiversity hotspots while ignoring the complex socio-environmental relations existing on the ground and thus raising issues of social and environmental injustice. Building on political ecology approaches, and grounded in over ten years of ethnographic engagements in various mountain areas of Southern and Eastern Europe, this intervention will examine the spatial contours of wilderness protection initiatives across the European peripheries to contextualize how green growth by conservation could deepen existing environmental and social injustices.

George Iordachescu, Senior Researcher in the Forest and Nature Conservation Policy department at Wageningen University in the Netherlands. I lead the recently awarded European Research Council project *GreenFrontier: Politics of Conservation and Unequal Ecological Exchange in the European Peripheries* that looks at how wilderness becomes a resource aimed at fixing the joint climate and biodiversity crisis in the European Union by bringing together case studies from Romania, Poland, Spain and Italy. Previously I researched rewilding conflicts in eight European countries as part of the *wildE: Climate Smart Rewilding* project at Wageningen University, wildlife trafficking in European species as part of the *Beastly Business* project (2021-2023) and forest crime as part of the *Biosec* project (2019-2020) – both positions hosted at the University of Sheffield. I obtained my PhD from the IMT School of Advanced Studies in Lucca (Italy) with a thesis titled *Wilderness production in the Southern Carpathian Mountains. Towards a political ecology of 'untouched nature'* (2019).