

THE WILD BORDER OF POLITICS: THE BIAŁOWIEŻA FOREST AND CHANGING ECOLOGIES OF PROTEST

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The challenge of the politics of the Anthropocene is how to respond to the protests of nature: how to elaborate modes of thought, collective action and social institutions through which non-human agents can be integrated into political communities, even as non-humans exceed our understanding and remain a subject of difference. This paper looks at how the contested borderland forest, Białowieża, at the Polish-Belarusian border helps us think across protest culture during post-socialism. We examine the Białowieża forest as a site of, participant in and provoker of a series of protests: those against national park expansion, against logging, in support of bark beetle rewilding, of far right radical movements and for or against Middle Eastern and African asylum seekers crossing through the forest since EU sanctions were imposed on Belarus in 2021. We do so in order to suggest that these protests should be read as a continuum that enables reflection into why this forest is a key site of protest; that exploring them as a continuum reveals something about an emergent ecology of protest; and that this exploration offers an insight into what is at stake if we see the forest itself as protesting.

KEYWORDS: protest, forest, gaiapolitics, bark beetle, Białowieża, Poland, Belarus, refugees

In the Western imagination, *silva* is a place, but not a being. Bruno Latour argues that this needs to change, because in light of climate change, geopolitics needs to be replaced by Gaia politics (Latour 2017a, 2017b). Through this neologism, Latour asserts that the earth should be considered not as the background in which politics takes place, but as an active participant in unstable “critical zones” (Latour and Weibel 2020) involving encounters between human and non-human actors. In this interpretation, the multiple environmental crises witnessed today should be read as evidence that, rather than being subdued by technological progress, nature is protesting. The political challenge of the Anthropocene is therefore how to respond to the protests of nature and how to elaborate modes of thought, collective action and social institutions through which non-human agents can be integrated into political communities, even as a forest exceeds our understanding and remains a subject of difference.

In this context, we suggest it is significant that during this era of post-socialism, the Białowieża Forest has become embroiled in a series of protests, which have led to it becoming, at the time of writing, a major hotspot of political controversy. The Białowieża Forest is a specific entity. Designated a UNESCO transnational site of special natural heritage, it spreads across a nation-state divide of shifting form and function. This ancient forest, or “puszcza” as it is referred to on both sides of the border, is composed of innumerable heterogeneous interrelations developed over tens of thousands of years prior to human political configurations. However, the forest’s unique biophysical form is a product of how it has been “co-created” by human politics, involving it being an imperial hunting preserve and the site where relations between commercial forest managers and those who call for its natural protection play out. It is also conceived of as Belarusian and Polish. Both the discursive significance of the forest and its material forms emerge as a result of the forest’s specific interaction with (and resistance to) wider social paradigms.

This article has been produced as part of a long-term conversation between Eunice and Ben, as Eunice lived in and researched Puszcza forest politics for roughly twenty years and over those years she shared theoretical ideas and ethnographic events with Ben, who has been based in Warsaw for two decades, during which he has been teaching and researching with Belarusians. His social network has provided the voices for the direct experiences of recent protests in Belarus, which are covered in the later part of this article. Combining our data and insights, we examine the Puszcza as a site of, participant in, and provoker of a series of protests, including those against national park expansion, against logging, in support of bark beetle rewilding, far right radical movements and of asylum seekers. We do so in order to suggest that these protests should be read as a continuum that enables reflection into why the Puszcza is a key site of protest, that exploring them as a continuum reveals something about an emergent ecology of protest, and that this exploration offers an insight into what is at stake if we see the Puszcza itself as protesting.

THEORISING *PUSZCZA* PROTESTS

For Timothy Mitchell, the *Carbon Democracy* (2011) is what characterised the nineteenth and twentieth-centuries. It was enabled by the ways in which changing material practices of the extraction and distribution of carbon generated political arrangements. Coal revolutionised the geography of Europe, concentrating power in large scale manufacturing and cities, but equally the autonomous collective work of coal extraction and its narrow channels of distribution made it vulnerable to labour protest. These protests led to compromises which in turn helped fashion the welfare state. Thus, Mitchell sees coal as crucial for the emergence of a limited form of representative democracy. Oil on

the other hand, created an illusion of limitless growth, wherein international cartels exercised control through dispersed regulations, calculative agreements, networked infrastructures and technical procedures backed up by U.S. military intervention to undermine nationalist claims for local control over its extraction. One of Mitchell's aims in situating political arrangements in relation to changing forms of carbon is to demonstrate the shock that will be caused in attempts to generate post-carbon forms of democracy (see also Servigne and Stevens 2015).

Transferring Mitchell's line of analysis to the Puszcza and protests there, it is tempting to argue that while the years of the People's Republic of Poland (1947–1989) were the age of protests in mines and shipyards, post-socialism is that of protests in the Puszcza.¹ While this categorisation might be viewed too glib by some, it conveys something of the surprise that this rather peripheral place that Eunice first encountered in 1995 should come to take centre stage in nationalist and international controversies. In my book *Forests, Borders and Bark Beetles*, I (Eunice) describe in detail how identities and practices in and around the Puszcza after the fall of socialism emerged through a reconfiguration of local and global opportunities and obsolescence, namely of the livelihoods of rural people. In these tumultuous times, certain narratives acquire a sense of historical continuity despite radical social transformations and evidence to the contrary. We rework some of this material here with a view to considering how these processes might be connected to a reconfiguration of protest.

Agata Konczal (2018) also posits a key role for Polish forests and explores them as complex socio-cultural-ecological phenomena. In particular, she analyses the complex relations, both social and natural, in which Polish foresters have been and are embroiled, and the ways in which State Forests have succeeded in negotiating post-socialist transformation as the rightful stewards of this key asset of the national landscape. The foresters' status as the natural guardians of forests is challenged in the book *O jeden las za daleko (One Forest too Far)* published in the wake of the protests against the tree felling carried out by State Forests (*Lasy Państwowe*) to stem the bark beetle attack in 2017 (Czapliński, Bednarek and Gostyński 2019). This collective work calls for a reinvention of politics to include nonhuman entities in order to oppose the devastation of nature carried out by Polish governments of various ideological hues in the post-socialist period (for more on state complicity in environmental destruction, see Dębińska 2021).

What is involved in opening the political field to non-human actors through anthropological theory and ethnographic practice? Mary Douglas drew attention to the way

1 Given the amount of civic activation in Poland around nature, our argument could possibly be extended to other locations in Poland, but for purpose of this article and in line with the knowledge of the authors, only some of these protests are referred to here; Inicjatywa Dzikie Karpaty (For Carpathian Primeval Forest), Młodzieżowy Strajk Klimatyczny (Youth Climate Strike), Obóz dla klimatu (Camp for the climate), and Siostry Rzeki (Sister Rivers). These protests indicate a wider generational shift in the nature of protest since the time of Solidarity.

cultures identify relationships between order/disorder and existence and non-existence advising anthropologists to attend to what occurs between categories. Human exceptionalism has long blinded many theorists to the processes of multi-species interactions as part of culture. Multi-species ethnography, drawing substantively from Latour, demonstrates the kind of slippage that Douglas might have us focus on.

When humans pay attention to the ability of other kinds of beings to use signs (certainly a point of contention for many linguists) they engage in a process of translation that involves recognizing details of difference that otherwise go unnoticed. For Eduardo Kohn (2013), multi-species ethnography is a process whereby anthropologists *re-present* not just how humans represent other beings, such as forests, but how those beings think, or as Amitav Ghosh adds, we *re-cognize* a renewed awareness of agency and consciousness (2017, 63). It matters that other beings are making meaning of humans, but also that other beings are not humans and that they are making signs that humans and other beings interpret. In Bruno Latour's formulation, "If we become capable of translating, then the laws of nature begin to have a spirit" (Latour 2017, 65). Kohn is not proposing that forests possess human rationality, nor is Latour arguing the same for the earth. Indeed, much of this theorisation has emerged through scholars who have studied animism (Vivieros de Castro 2014, Descola 2013, Bird Rose 2004). In encounters with other beings we are also changed to the point where we can no longer be the only ones signifying and thus, our own rationality and symbolic registers come into question.

Can this be a political project? Collaboration is always asymmetrical, but when anthropologists pay attention to the logic of non-human entities, a story unfolds of the "eventfulness of the ahistorical, which interrogates the power granted to modern history to certify the real" (De la Cadena 2015,13), or we might add to draw the boundaries of the political. Balaud and Chopot (2021) argue explicitly that attending to the "sense spaces of living things that are denied, forced, amputated, made artificial, mutilated, reduced and forced into transformation by the relations of capitalist power" (219) is a necessary element in understanding today's world order, and thus in re-imagining political thought and action. In this instance, they argue that evolutions of non-human actors (such as, pesticide resistant weeds) open up new possibilities for protest alliances.

In this text, we wonder what limits emerge when we seek to apply such an approach to a valued primeval forest at the edge of the European Union. Michał Rauszer (2021) provides a fruitful insight by highlighting the central role played by peasants in resistance (*opór*) as part of a wider argument that Polish history should be seen as an internal colonisation (of peasants by the aristocracy). Rauszer notes that in serfdom the domination of the aristocracy was not purely economic, but it was also of the person. Drawing on Scott (1985), Rauszer argues that in a context defined by a lack of means for open revolt, resistance occurs in a wide variety of contextually developed cultural or material practices that may not resemble protest, but involve everyday disruption

to noble domination and/or estate production. Transferring Rauszer's argument, we propose that the Puszcza emerges in a complex environment in which both humans and non-humans function in a context of a deprivation of symbolic agency. Particular mention here should be made about Belarusians, but rural Poles also come into the equation under the conditions imposed by accession to the European Union.

“Organisms don't have to show their human equivalence (as conscious agents, intentional communicators, or ethical subjects) to count. If we are interested in liveability, impermanence, and emergence, we should be watching the action of landscape assemblages. Assemblages coalesce, change, and dissolve: this *is* the story” (Tsing 2015, 158). Questions arise such as why the Puszcza, this ostensibly uniquely natural space, has become an increasingly central site of protest, to the extent that it is not clear what protest is and who is protesting. Is the forest protesting? This is the story we seek to sketch in this article.

INFOLDINGS: NESTED CULTURES OF PROTEST IN THE POST-SOCIALIST ERA

Objections to logging in Białowieża in 2017 under the pretext of a bark beetle outbreak emerged from many different corners. Ecological activists arrived, forming the ‘Camp for the Forest’, an occupation, which blocked harvesters and garnered significant media attention. Biologists researching on site wrote articles against controlling for bark beetle outbreaks, in other words, an objection to logging. UNESCO and the International Union for the Conservation of Nature (IUCN) urged Poland to stop logging or risk having the forest's World Heritage status revoked. The EU Court of Justice found that Poland had broken habitat laws, to which it was a signatory, fining the country more than 100,000 Euros per day as long as it continued logging.

In recent years the native spruce bark beetle population has defoliated spruce and spread throughout the Białowieża commercial forest and national park due in no small way to climate change. The right-leaning, Euro-sceptic PiS administration's solution to this was a plan which would have resulted in a three-fold increase in logging. It also used the State Forest organisation to insist on the primacy of Polish sovereignty over that of European, for that was the moral ground many on the political right wanted to stand on in their eschewal of EU power and global regimes. Following their frame, environmental protection equates to being implicated in an internationalist agenda that is anathema to the local or national context. Foresters charged that anyone who challenged their management of the forest was being unfair as well as factually incorrect about matters that should be left to the expertise of the Polish forester, as one of the four pillars of Catholic Poland (clergy, farmers, and hunters being the other three) (Blavascunas 2021, 171).

Poland should not have to sacrifice its prized managed forest (Białowieża), they argued, to a shallow and remote understanding of the forest's ecology as primeval or wild, and one that subordinated humans, never mind sovereign Poles, to nature. For

PiS, it should be self-evident for both State Forests, and foresters that western Europe's history of marginalizing Poland meant that it was incapable of seeing that western style management had destroyed its primeval forests – and therefore it had no basis for counselling or chastising Poland in relation to its sovereign interests.

Ecological activists congregated in the forest calling for terrestrial politics over and beyond the nationalist variety. For them, the attack on the Puszcza required a reframing of democracy to make it more in line to the creativity of the forest as witnessed in their celebration of the bark beetle on t-shirts, posters, chants, or even in exploring the bark beetle's sensitivity to sound as a possible means of guiding its population movements (Degórski 2019). These activists became the face of protest in this debate. They came mostly from outside the forest (though included a local contingent). Neither the bark beetle, nor the ecological activist would be tolerated by the state. Both were called *szkodniki* (pests) by foresters and PiS alike.

Dead Wood and Dormant Subjectivities

Foresters had been warning of bark beetle outbreaks since the mid-1990s, when they set up a trapping and monitoring program for this native beetle. This occurred at the same time that Białowieża municipality saw its first major protests *against* nature protection.

In the mid-1990s, biologists conducting research in Białowieża proposed a national park that would have transferred all State Forestry jobs to the national park. This would have entailed a radical change of management, one targeted at biodiversity protection rather than timber for markets. In the late 1990s the coalition government signed The Contract for the Białowieża Forest, which would have transferred jobs from State Forests to the National Park, while also providing development money for local municipalities. Seven and a half million Euros was divided between the national park and the municipal authorities in 1999. But when the Polish minister of the environment, Antoni Tokarczuk, arrived in February 2000, to announce the park's expansion, hundreds of protesters held signs accusing three specific scientists of causing poverty in the region and threw eggs at the minister. One sign read 'Out EU Judas traitor'. The protesters were local people, clearly expressing their will that the state should not create a national park over those favouring its usage as a commercially logged forest. From that moment, plans for the national park expansion began to unravel, and have lacked legislative support since. By the end of 2000, PSL legislators introduced a bill, The Environmental Protection Law, that required the consent of territorially appropriate bodies of local government to establish or enlarge a national park. It passed unanimously. Nevertheless, in negotiations during the years following, nature conservationists scored a series of protective preserves on commercial forest lands, which mandated that dead and dying wood needed to be left in the forest as biodiversity protection for birds such as the three-toed woodpecker. While dead and dying wood was a breeding ground for bark beetles, the three-toed woodpecker ate bark beetles.

The biologists' response to these local protests was to deny that local people had the consciousness to organize them on their own. This led to speculative pronouncements being made about local people who identified as Belarusian (Poles of Belarusian descent). They were cast as uneducated rural people of a "quiet nation" (*spokojny naród*). One biologist claimed directly that she knew of foresters who had bussed in people from local towns and villages. The basis of her claim lay in the fact that she did not recognize any locals protesting and she was adamant that foresters organized 'study tours' of state forest lands for both Orthodox and Catholic priests, who would then compel these locals into an anti-conservation stance.

How this event was narrated stresses a series of alliances, made from an oppositional difference forged over the 19th and 20th centuries. And these alliances get subsumed in the more recent protests against logging. But perhaps drawing attention to difference in the age of the Anthropocene, and then how difference becomes consolidated as sameness helps us understand how culture is co-produced at the level of environment, at the level of forest management, in an eerie era of climate change that few recognize as instrumental.

Under Tsarist control the forest and its people were transformed, converted to the Orthodox faith in many instances, which does not mean peasants necessarily identified as Polish or Catholic prior to Tsarist control. It should be noted that Poles fought Russians in insurrectionary battles in the Puszcza in the 19th century. In WWI, occupying Germans built an infrastructure for industrial logging, using war captives as labour. The Second Polish Republic inherited and used this infrastructure to continue logging, but would not employ Belarusians, who made up 90% of the population in the 1921 census. The Republic sent ethnically Polish foresters, while a small part of the forest became a national park in 1921. In this new territorial configuration, Polish state forestry diminished the rights of Belarusians promised by the treaty of Versailles and withheld employment of Belarusians, who had both sympathies and affiliations with Bolsheviks (Rudling 2015, Blavascunas 2021, 150). Polish foresters acted as militias, regularly running military drills for any flare-ups ensuing from the Polish-Soviet War. The communist period downplayed ethnic identity and Belarusian/Orthodox inhabitants were no longer prohibited and in fact worked freely in forestry operations. Many Polish/Catholic inhabitants, who moved to the forest as laborers in the interwar period, married Belarusian-speaking Orthodox locals. The communist era was one of full employment in state forests, while people of mixed ethnic identity farmed on a subsistence scale, selling surplus products to the state.

In 2000, at the time of the notorious "egg throwing" protest aimed at the minister of environment, new modes of capitalist production were well underway and a revived Belarusian identity movement had already inscribed itself onto forest politics. In that decade State Forests considerably downsized and moved to a corporate model, while still holding the title, "State Forests". As Poland was also poised to join the European Union

with strict and costly standards, farmers in Białowieża eventually gave up producing food for the market, and in many cases for themselves. The force of this standardization in a profit-driven agriculture in order to receive EU subsidies sidelined local people, who lived either from farming or forestry. Belarusian identity activists largely opposed a national park expansion on the ground that it would prevent Belarusians from economically developing and render them obsolete in a post-agricultural, post-forestry economy.

Three new corporate hotels arrived in this period and EU and international conservation development funds offered extensive training in how to start and succeed in opening home-based tourist businesses. Locals stressed that farming was never easy or practical in fields surrounded by a large forest. They also spoke frequently of how neighbours lent each other labour, rotating tasks such as the bringing of dairy cows to meadows and back home, and assisting in the harvest of each other's potato fields. They also spoke nostalgically of a liveliness to the village, that had disappeared in this new era. In a portrait that is perhaps overly tidy, locals recalled how the forester provided opportunities for wage labour, while the state guaranteed prices for milk, meat or crops. A national park premised on an economy of tourism needed the appearance of peasant hosts, hearty and generous, and knowledgeable about both forests and fields (which wildlife now occupied). State Foresters, who opposed national park expansion, paternalistically promised people that the present could be more like the past (only more bountiful), if foresters were in charge of managing the forest.

The energetic rejection of the national park proposal at the protest in 2000 was rooted in a legitimate grievance about transition at this time. In this first significant protest of the postsocialist era in Białowieża, locals objected to the cultural *habitus* of a national park economy (not as fully developed in the year 2000 as in 2017). Suddenly, local people were of marginal utility to agriculture and to State Forestry. The future being proposed (ecotourism) needed to be explored and mastered by calculation. This was very different than labour seen in the product of one's physical exertion, such as food or timber, or the value of hosting as an act of generosity rather than profit. While these were protests about local identity in relation to the forest, these protests also became lodged in the materiality of the forest and what it was doing in response to nature conservationists' protections: dead wood should not be left on the forest floor and bark beetle should be managed, and not left to "ruin their labour".

When this cultural frame is situated within the eco-social dimensions of the forest, the contingency and historicity of the eco-material within the cultural world of protest can be seen. Forests are rarely stable for long, but this era saw staggering changes, in the form of new subjectivities, bark beetle outbreaks and attendant spruce die-off. There have been five outbreaks of bark beetle over this period in question (1995, 2003, 2008, 2012, and 2017), evidenced by the volume of dead spruce. Commercial forests in Europe routinely conduct sanitary logging to control bark beetle numbers, but in a forest that is part national park, part protective reserve, and part commercial forest, the question

of control becomes of utmost importance. If you cannot log in the national park or in a forest reserve within state forest lands, and these areas make up a large portion of your forest, and provide habitat for the beetle, the bark beetle cycle will continue to plague the commercial forest.

Protests Intensify: The Puszcza and the Nation

In Mary Douglas' analysis of pollution and danger how people circumvent ambiguities and anomalies is part of the work of doing anthropology. She writes, "rituals of purity and impurity create unity in appearance" (2004, 3). For ecological activists who also lived in Białowieża, there were tensions and aspirations for wanting Belarus and Belarussianness to exist as separate categories. For if anything, tourism enabled urban Poles, visiting "Europe's last primeval forest" and "*Polska egzotyczna*" (Exotic Poland) to show their ascendancy in relation to neighbouring Belarusians, especially by playing with the Russian, Soviet, and communist past. Tourists could visit the Tsar's Boudoir nightclub, the Soplicowo Manor, where they could re-enact *Pan Tadeusz*, or a meticulously restored train station cum restaurant that had once belonged to Tsar Alexander II. This mirroring of hierarchy within a larger social order lends itself to a different variant of protest, one suited to reinscribing the stereotype of *spokojny naród* for Belarusians, which in effect equates to defending the border of the EU, based on ideas of democracy, where one can assert national sovereignty as democracy. Our argument unfolds here first by looking at the constitutive border of what is and is not Belarusian within Poland and then by recognising how protests against the Belarusian dictator, Lukashenko, spill back into the forest by way of Middle Eastern refugees protesting the border regime that pushed them back into Belarus, as they risked their lives in attempting to cross through the forest.

In my research (Eunice), I befriended a journalist/photographer, named Janusz Korbek, who spent much of the last decade of his life working to protect the Białowieża Forest from logging, and at the same time considered himself to be an activist for Belarusian heritage protection, even though he had not been raised speaking Belarusian or with parents who identified as such. In his case, the forest needed its autochthonous past and *sui generis* people. If he could convince Belarusians (on the Polish side of the border) of the value of national park expansion, his love of both wildlife and local heritage would bear fruit in a political accomplishment that was primarily cultural. Janusz wrote for one of the journals dedicated to Belarusian cultural life in north eastern Poland, *Czasopis*. In 2004, he managed to get Todar and the WZ orchestra to come from Belarus to play a concert for local people under the banner "wild is beautiful" on the day of international action for the Puszcza. While urban Poles visiting the region found it strange that this mostly Belarusian ethnic region of Poland turned a blind eye to its neighbouring dictator, Lukashenko, Janusz saw a strategic opportunity in bringing Todar.

Todar sang songs in Belarusian about the ‘independent bison,’ a symbol of both the Puszcza and a Belarus free of Lukashenko and other authoritarianisms. Janusz encouraged the locals to attend the concert by emphasizing that a Belarusian musician was coming to sing in Belarusian, leaving aside the fact that by doing so he thus hoped to gently persuade locals to the nature protection side of the debate. The concert pulled in a packed audience of a few hundred people, many of whom were local. What I am trying to illustrate by the recounting of this anecdote is how ethnic politics can be employed to the benefit of forest protection.

But Janusz and the Todar concert were not the only kind of churnings of Belarusian and Polish identity employed as persuasive tools. My neighbour, environmentalist and journalist Adam Wajrak, stressed the precariousness of identity in relation to neighbouring Belarus. ‘Białowieża is little Belarus in a pill’, he told me. He pointed to the undemocratic manoeuvres by foresters, the cronyism rife in local politics, and the ways bribes still functioned in some circles to back up his point.

In the early 2000s, urban Polish tourists obtained visas to Belarus for day trips. Polish tourists would return, laughingly referring to the draconian forms of tourism on the other side of the border, as they were constantly being watched by employees of the park, as well as commenting disparagingly on kitsch displays within Belarus, such as the Father Frost compound, where most tourists were taken as part of their visa package. Carved wooden dwarves guarded the compound where each visitor could have a personal meeting with the Belarusian Santa Claus. But what Adam meant when he said that the Polish side of the border was Belarus in a capsule, was, I believe, that Poland could easily find itself following in Belarus’ footsteps, if it did not consciously object to both the Belarusian dictatorship and to the growing power of foresters on the Polish side of the border. He suggested that Polish foresters acted in authoritarian ways. What happened through the right-leaning power of the PiS administration was that foresters could also surveil those coming as tourists, especially if they were also activists. In turn, far-right protesters in Poland targeted not Lukashenko’s Belarus as communist, but rather ecological activists and local Belarusians (Polish citizens) for being “communists”.

What provides ammunition for this way of thinking is how Polish foresters followed an authoritarian path when protest emerged. This form of politics does not so much resemble Belarus in any cultural way, but demonstrated the ballooning force of foresters’ rough-arm power, which seemed to go hand in hand with PiS’ ‘democratic backsliding.’ This power would come to be equated with the presence of foresters as a necessary, patriarchal bulwark against the spread of communism.

With PiS’ electoral victories in 2005 and then in 2015, new reasons to protest emerged, especially in retaliation to the type of political collective formed by ecological activists in 2017. In 2017, local activists of the National Radical Camp (*Obóz Narodowo-Radykalny*), a nationalist organisation inspired by the ideas of the interwar

fascist politician Roman Dmowski, entered the Białowieża Forest conflict as the *Narodowa Hajnówka* (National Hajnówka) unit. Their leaders had parents of Belarusian and Polish backgrounds, yet they identified with Polish nationalist views and applied them to what was seen as an unfinished national project in the region. The group's Facebook page contained the imagery of a slashed through hammer and sickle, until they changed it to a saw cutting a tree and the Polish flag. It called upon members to form militias in order to track down "eco-terrorist" activities. Members exchanged multiple messages about the *correct* methods foresters employed in tackling the bark beetle and also derided ecologists, suggesting that these 'eco-terrorists' should be killed and crushed by the very mechanical harvesters they chained themselves to.

In February 2017, *Narodowa Hajnówka* organised its first march (annually since) to commemorate the 'Cursed Soldiers' including, one of the most notorious, Romuald Rajs (code name *Bury*) who pacified whole villages in 1946, murdering more than seventy-nine Polish citizens of Belarusian descent in the process. The marchers, mostly young men and women carried Polish flags, portraits of the "Cursed Soldiers" and ONR memorabilia, chanting, "*A na drzewach zamiast liści, będą wisieć komuniści*" ("Communists will hang on trees instead of leaves").

In June 2017, *Narodowa Hajnówka* members joined several hundreds of people in the Puszcza to attend the unveiling of a statue of another of those Soldiers, Danuta Siedzikówna (code name *Inka*). Inka was celebrated as a morally pure figure, due in no small way to her age and gender. She was eighteen at the time of her execution at the hands of Polish communists in 1946 and had worked for the State Forests. Her father was captured and sent to Siberia by the Soviets in 1940 and her mother was executed in the forest by the Gestapo for collaborating with the Polish Home Army. Her story is undoubtedly one of heroism against incredible odds, as she smuggled all sorts of messages and goods through enemy lines. But the timing of the unveiling and its location in the Białowieża Forest outside the branch of the State Forest administration in Browsk (with its majority Belarusian population) symbolised a renewed fight with anything that looked outside the Polish narrative of victimhood. This fight includes the bark beetle – the pest inside the Polish forest and the enemy of Polish foresters – as well as the fight about whose ecology and science counts. In the case of ethnic identity, at this forest border we see competing authoritarianisms at play, as people delineate what is Belarusian and Polish in relation to the ontology of the forest and its management.

Bark Beetle Protests and Sylvan Sociality

Forms of subjectivity that are not language-based do not need to be read as literal equivalents of human protest. But if we follow Latour's lead with Mary Douglas' symbolic interpretation of categories, then we see that the consequences of leaving the forest out of any interpretation of protests, impoverishes our ability to elaborate modes

of thought. Thus, it is critical here to describe how the forest might be protesting in this time of the Anthropocene at the border of Poland and Belarus.

When conditions are hot and dry and there is a lot of forest detritus, spruce bark beetles emerge, flying for miles in some cases, until they find a host tree. They then bore their way into the phloem of both healthy, as well as diseased, Norway spruce (*Picea abies*) (Michalski et. al 2004). Norway spruce flourished in the twentieth century under State Forest management, valued because they grow long straight timber harvestable in eighty years. Most deer avoid browsing on it unless their populations are high. For these reasons, commercial forests in Europe rely upon Norway spruce as a dominant species.

Climate change, which for Poland means hotter, drier weather, will increase the frequency of bark beetle outbreaks, and a mosaic forest, such as Białowieża, provides the perfect breeding ground for the bark beetle to multiply. Infestations are more severe in forest stands of over eighty years old. State Forest lands include planted mixed stands of oak, maple and other hardwoods with alder dominating swampy bogs. Plantations with softwood spruce and pine, and many areas naturally reseeded with mixed tree species over one hundred years old are also a substantial part of the forest. It is forest policy that deadwood cannot be removed.

Deadwood alone does not necessarily mean more outbreaks. The beetle only nests in spruce, and there are many other tree species. The moisture content of the forest can actually increase with more deadwood, and deadwood stores carbon in the soil, which is why old forests are so important in the fight against climate change (Fleituch 2010). Important questions to consider include how much active management is preferable, how much commercial forestry should be adopted, if forests are to be kept as carbon sinks, and what are the best ways to prevent forests from burning or succumbing to more severe insect and fungal outbreaks.

The science of what the approach to the bark beetle should be in an era of climate change is not at all settled (Fahse and Heurich 2011). Another important question is whether active measures such as salvage logging should be used to protect forest stands and biodiversity. By doing sanitary logging in unprotected areas of the commercial forest, and not logging in the National Park itself, will this restrain or diminish any likelihood of outbreaks occurring? There is a complex interplay between beetles, host trees, biological antagonists, mutualists and forest management.

When and how the beetle flourishes is not entirely predictable, but the greater the food source and the less predation, the more it will reproduce. The beetle can only kill trees when their population is high. They form elaborate larval chambers, spreading throughout the tree, eventually killing off their spruce host. The endangered three-toed woodpecker (*Picoides tridactylus*) eats bark beetle larvae deposited under the bark, but what lies behind their endangered categorisation is the lack of dead and dying wood in most European forests. Populations of three-toed woodpeckers flourish when bark beetle populations are high and this may bring bark beetle under control (Bütler and

Schlaepfer 2002). The woodpecker, one of nine *Picus* species that live in the forest, nests in the cavities of dead trees. Białowieża is the only forest in Europe where all nine species of the European woodpecker can be found.

Why should old trees succumb to such a small insect, similar to the Lilliputians tying down the giant with ropes in “Gulliver’s travels”. The bark beetle does not act alone, it has allies. The blue stain fungus *Ceratocystis polonica*, vectored by the spruce bark beetle, helps the beetle overcome the conifer’s defences. While the spruce is busy excreting unpalatable chemicals and sealing up the ducts to its inner layers, so nutrients can still flow within the bark, the blue stain fungus leaves its sticky spores on the beetle’s body and these weaken the tree’s defences. Parental beetles construct an initial egg gallery. Then, the larvae they deposit form elaborate galleries. During the building of these generational constructions several different fungi can enter the nutrient rich tree. Fungi provide a vital source of nutrients for the beetle.

To comprehend present day forest ecology and politics, encounters between the bark beetle, Norway spruce, three-toed woodpecker, deadwood, blue stain fungi, industrial forestry and nature protection *are all in the mix*. The question of what to do about the bark beetle in an era of climate change is one that scientists are trying to address (Fahse and Heurich 2011), but never without sticky moral, legal, financial, cultural and sovereignty questions. In all of this, the beetle is being seen as having value in the sense that it can be used in rewilding. What remains striking in all of this, however, is that the beetle is only in such large numbers due to the combination of active management and nature protection, working together.

Protests Diffusing: The Puszcza and the Limits of Democracy

A humanitarian crisis unfolded in autumn 2021 in the forests of the Polish-Belarusian border, in a politically polarized landscape prepared by the bark beetle. At the State Forests’ October 2021 conference, titled “Green New Deal for Europe,” it was the likelihood or the threat of (much more the latter than the former) Green New Deal for Europe coming into being, that saw lines of uniformed foresters warned by ministers, priests and heads of state that it was once again time for them to close ranks and defend Polish forests from this potential contamination threatening Poland (Lasy Państwowe 2021a). It was not, however, Europe’s Green New Deal that led to an almost immediate enactment of the defence of sovereignty in the forests, but asylum seekers whose passage to the Polish-Belarusian border was facilitated by Lukashenko’s regime, in protest against Polish and European condemnation of Belarusian state repressions against the mass protests, which arose against the results of the 2020 presidential elections.

In autumn 2020, Todor, the Belarusian singer mentioned earlier, was one of many Belarusian musicians who performed in neighbourhood concerts – informal gatherings of residents between housing blocks – that were a distinctive feature of the protests in Minsk at that point. The nature, catalyst and consequences of the Belarusian protests

have been widely debated, especially in relation to previous protests, activism and self-organisation in Belarus (Ackermann, Berman and Sasunkevich 2017; Minchenia 2020; Wałyniec 2021). Further discussions have taken place about their relationship to changes in the economic structure (Gapova 2021), digital technologies (Gabowitsch 2021) and external political manipulations (Bekus and Gabowitsch 2021). Furthermore, the extent to which the terms of the protests respond to the Belarusian nation-building process that has occurred under Lukashenko, what they stand for (Gapova 2021), their gendered dimensions (Paulovich 2021), and what they have changed in the social and cultural fabric (Minchenia and Huasukouskaya 2020) or how at the moment of writing they seem to have become entrenched in a despotic status quo (Ilyash 2021), have all provoked much thought. This difficulty in asserting a singular interpretation of the protests is reinforced by their strikingly amorphous nature. After the arrest or exile of the three main oppositional candidates to Lukashenko before the presidential election, at which point three women assumed oppositional leadership (Veronika Tsepka, Maria Kalesnikava and Sviatlana Tsikhanouskaya), the dynamics shifted towards an emerging collective, one where the slightest signal was interpreted by the regime as protest. This characterisation of protest, frequently mentioned by commentators, made itself clear in a lack of speeches at marches, the collective production of flags and banners and the anonymity of posters. Planning, participation and returning home safely from demonstrations required temporary, improvised networks (on and offline) founded in one's experience of the social and physical environment. The subsequent neighbourhood concerts expressed a further diffusion of protest (Mironova 2020). The combination of mass participation in and massive repression of these protests meant that the material and symbolic significance of these gatherings intertwined.

In light of protests which occurred in Trumpian USA and indeed in Poland, what happened in Belarus could no longer be seen as a temporal or spatial outlier, but as something with relevance for future political paradigms. The response of the Polish government to the attempted crossing of its border by migrants, was to announce a several-kilometre terrain of "state of exception", whereby constitutional guarantees were suspended in the name of effectively guarding border security. Paradoxically, this seemed to have advanced the borders of Belarus into Poland, as those caught in the 'zone' were not registered in Poland, but pushed back to Belarus. NGOs and the media were also excluded and freedom of movement was limited. By profiting from the trafficking of refugees from Iraq, Afghanistan, Lebanon, Yemen, and other countries through Belarus to the borders of Europe, Lukashenko's regime succeeded in demonstrating the spatial limitations of Europe's 'democratic reserve'. The exemption zone along Poland's eastern border is a further step in 'slow violence' (Nixon 2013) enacted at Europe's borders and to which Europe turns a blind eye in the name of preserving precarious domestic social harmony (Schindel 2019).

The fault lines drawn in the migrant crisis mirror those that occurred with the bark beetle. In fact, the migrant crisis constituted a radical intensification and extension of the pressures at play in this habitat. Białowieża national park staff or regional branches of State Forestry are praised for being the true managers (*gospodarze*) of these terrains and thanked by Ministers and Border Guards for their effective cooperation (Białowieżski Park Narodowy 2021, Lasy Państwowe 2021b), a position backed up by the programme *Murem za polskim mundurem* (“We Stand United Behind the Polish Uniform”), including a televised Christmas concert and initiatives for children in schools to write cards to express their gratitude to border guards serving at the border. On the other side of the line there is the *Grupa Granica* (Border Group), a coalition of pro-migrant NGOs, the *Białowieża Akcja Humanitarna*, a coalition gathering local residents helping migrants, and the research network “Researchers on the Border”, which have all emerged as a response to the crisis. They developed a parallel infrastructure of networks in order to provide assistance to asylum seekers, despite official restrictions, and document the inhumane treatment and suffering experienced by refugees in the forests, offering educational advice to locals about the legality of providing aid to migrants and advocating for changes in policy (Grupa Granica 2021).

As a result of all this, a landscape has emerged that is both newly militarised and newly naturalised. The topography of the forest has taken on added significance as a place for concealment or one that has to be survived, as opposed to one that has to be patrolled and searched. This space has become a space of frictions in the sense described by Anna Tsing (2005): a space of stress and fatigue, confused temporalities, unexpected reversals and misidentifications, of a harshening of positions and mistrust, and of new coalitions and emergent infrastructures. In line with Agamben’s “state of exception” (Agamben 2005) and similar to the ‘prevention through deterrence’ policy described in Jason De León’s (2015) work, the forest can be seen as a death trap for migrants. Despite some interpretations of the exclusion zone being viewed as a tightening of top-down sovereignty, Urbańska and Sadura describe the disorientation of young soldiers brought into the border zone without sufficient infrastructural or psychological support or knowledge of the terrain, all on a war-footing where the enemy are unarmed migrants, and the conflicts that emerged between different sections of the state apparatus (Sadura and Urbańska 2021).

The Polish government started to build a wall along the Polish – Belarusian border in March 2022, only weeks after Russia commenced its invasion on Ukraine from Belarusian territory. The 5-metre-high wall topped with barbed wire was much criticised by the Belarusian Belavezha National Park in an article entitled “Puszcza Białowieża: the only transborder organism of living nature” for interrupting precious genetic exchange between threatened species in the forest, especially the lynx (Belovezhskaya Pushcha 2021). At the same time, the disbanding of ecological NGOs, such as *Ekodom* or *Bahna*, in Belarus and the arresting of ecological activists during the course of 2021

represents an obstruction to the participation of Belarus in international ecological projects (particularly those connected to its wetland territories, whose waters flow, amongst others, through the Puszcza, see: Owczinnikow 2021).

Białowieża residents, scientists in the Białowieża Mammal Research Institute and the Warsaw University Geobotanical Station (Jaroszewicz, Nowak and Żmihorski 2021), as well as ecological activists at the 'Camp for the Puszcza' condemn the wall for its obstruction to a unique habitat and threaten protest, while other Polish scientists argue that the wall will prevent the spread of disease posed by migrants (Krzysiak et al. 2022). Although the wall will not obstruct the bark-beetle, the symbolic changes it signifies will also impact on discourses available to those engaged in forest management and conservation.

CONCLUSION

The wall is a physical manifestation of the impact of human politics on the natural environment, just as earlier the bark beetle generated a reconfiguration of human political positions. The result is that this primeval forest on Europe's borders will continue to be a hotspot of political dramas, even as its migrant crisis has been overshadowed by the outbreak of war in Ukraine. The material forms and symbolic significance of the Puszcza and its inhabitants interweave with and challenge the practices and identities of humans close at hand, just across the border or more distant. In response to this opening of the political field, the state has set in motion new ordering processes, which have generated acts of brutality that have become part of the forest and resonate in its long and unfinished history. These, in turn, have provoked new practices of resistance and solidarity, which contain the germs of the potential for an emergent social infrastructure.

What we have attempted to do in this article is to acknowledge the agency of bark beetle outbreaks as a political response to twentieth and twenty-first century forest management and protection. The limits of protest and the limits of forest protesting require anthropologists to read motivations into context. We have endeavoured to provide both the recognizable details of significant protest movements and place these within both the smaller occurrences and utterances of different human actors. Opening up the idea that forests are protesting may require us to reconsider what we know as protest, and mediate the possibility of evidence in increasingly undemocratic times where protest, even suspected protest, becomes treasonous.

The very wildness of the transnational zone of environmental heritage (by the standard of processes influenced, yet exceeding human control) makes it subject to all sorts of bordering claims and practices, across which people, animals, and water flow. In the process, Białowieża has shifted from the periphery to the centre of conflicts of how to

redefine territory, in an era where the environment is a part of the political field. We have offered some examples of the difficult process of translation involved, translation where ahistorical beings and people find themselves in the throes of climate change regimes of late capitalism. While foresters, border guards, and politicians scramble to contain and sanitize meaning, so that borders are firmly demarcated, other actors and entities move and transform into a more liminal state of beings, where all we have are traces of evidence for what counts as contemporary protest and the potential for new alliances. In the intensifying spirals of current protest and counter-protest, the forensic of evidence emerges as newly contested and newly important. For now, the Puszcza's presumed wildness attests to a disturbing chaos, which has become the necessary backdrop for the restoration of order through a border wall.

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