

VWPE No. 15



Roman Szorad

**From Good Workers to
Enemies of Nature?**

Foresters' Revaluations of Work, State and Care in Slovakia

Vienna 2026
ISSN 2311-231X

**Department of SOCIAL AND CULTURAL
ANTHROPOLOGY** Institut für KULTUR- UND
SOZIALANTHROPOLOGIE

Faculty of Social Sciences, University of Vienna
Fakultät für Sozialwissenschaften, Universität Wien

FROM GOOD WORKERS TO ENEMIES OF NATURE? FORESTERS' REVALUATIONS OF WORK, STATE AND CARE IN SLOVAKIA

Roman Szorad¹ (*University of Vienna*)

Abstract

This Working Paper examines negotiations of state forestry and its value in rural Slovakia. Focusing on how state-employed foresters perceive and navigate tensions with non-state environmental actors, it argues that by refashioning their work as care they reproduce the boundary of the state's domain to exclude the non-state and state “outsiders”. Here, a critique of the state is interwoven with a hope for its alternative. To enact this state “otherwise”, the foresters build on newly established international partnerships, relations of care with humans and non-humans, and recollections of the socialist and imaginaries of the pre-socialist pasts. I conclude that the foresters have challenged their publicly devalued image by positioning themselves as “traditional” state actors, caring for nature, community and society in the region and beyond.

¹ FWF doc.funds PhD researcher, Department of Social and Cultural Anthropology (University of Vienna) and Research Center for the History of Transformations (RECET), Vienna, Austria.
Contact: roman.szorad@univie.ac.at

I would like to thank my interlocutors for sharing their lives with me. I would also like to express my gratitude to the editors, Tatjana Thelen and Ivan Rajković, for their support and valuable suggestions, as well as to the two anonymous reviewers for their helpful feedback.

Introduction

“If the forest is left alone without any kind of help, without cutting down certain trees that might be diseased, it can actually become a complete disaster, leading to its complete extinction.” Ivan, a longtime forester in his sixties, spoke pensively as we started a walk in the Topolčianky forest where he worked. The ground beneath our feet was cracked from a summer heatwave and month-long drought. He had not only turned to the subject of ecology in response to these conditions, but also to delineate the boundary between the foresters and “the others”. It seemed that the foresters in the village and beyond were all very aware of the current environmental crisis and bleak future outlook and he emphasised that stopping their work would result in the complete destruction of not only the forest but nature in general.

“Have you ever thought about all the insects that live in the forest?” he asked. I was uncertain what kind of answer he expected, but then he urged me to look at one of the trees nearby, a sturdy beech covered with green leaves. Gently touching its trunk, he showed me small orange and yellow marks all around the base, which he told me were caused by a specific “wood-rotting” insect, the infamous bark beetle (*Taphrorychus bicolor*), stressing that “if we stop caring for the forest, like they [the non-state actors]² want us to do, we’ll lose the whole forest, because the insects jump from one tree to the other very quickly”. Seemingly desperate to show me what he meant by “care work” (*starostlivost*), he pulled a small knife from his pocket and immediately and skillfully started to do the “caring work”. First, he scraped the trunk to see how deep the actual damage was, and when he found more marks left by the insects he declared that the tree would have to be removed soon to prevent them from spreading to other trees, as if it was left alone, large areas of the forest could be affected within a few months. If forests were “left on their own” with no physical intervention or help from foresters in accord with what he called “green” policies, he continued, it would certainly cause much greater ecological damage than removing the already-sick trees, especially since they could be sold as firewood. In other words, it was foresters’ care practices that preserved the much-needed environmental balance, not the allegedly uncaring practices of “green” actors.

This Working Paper shows how Slovak foresters like Ivan negotiate tensions with their non-state environmentalist counterparts. I primarily represent the latter group, a rather complex assemblage of actors who mostly come from academic and activist milieus and are not

² My interlocutors tended to refer to these actors as “ecologists”, “urban ecologists” or “environmentalists”. To account for the internal variability, I use the general term “non-state actors”. For additional insights, I also refer to my own interviews with members of a rather prominent Slovak environmental NGO.

employed in state forestry, from the foresters' viewpoint. Their main point of departure is the sustainable management of forests based on minimal human intervention (e.g. Iordăchescu 2021; Schwartz 2006) and consider the central aspects of (state) forestry work, such as timber production, logging, measuring, planting or fertilising, detrimental to the forest and its ecological processes. Forests should, therefore, be treated as "naturally" as possible (Kiik 2018; Hetherington 2020). Similar debates around "rewilding" and "ecologically green" approaches in forest management have been circulating throughout Eastern Europe since at least the 1990s (Novotný 2011; Petrova 2016; Schwartz 2006). According to Slovak foresters, however, the competition between these two modalities of forest management had only come to a head locally in recent years. In their view, this has not only resulted in public devaluation of state forestry work (and of foresters as its emblematic figures) but also increasingly asymmetrical power relations with the state. This article aims to trace some of these relational processes and asymmetries by paying attention to foresters as street-level bureaucrats (Lipsky 2010 [1980]; Bierschenk and Olivier de Sardan 2014). In doing so, it connects their efforts of re-valuation as ("good") care (Scaramelli 2018; Thelen 2015, 2021) within the wider context of postsocialism (Hann and Parry 2018; Makovicky, Wiegatz and Kofti 2023; Verdery 1996) and environmental concerns (Blavascunas 2020; Konczal and Asselin 2025; Uekötter 2023), which they themselves perceive both as undeniably present.

The Working Paper is divided into three interconnected sections. I begin by exploring non-state actors' ideas about "green" forestry and the foresters' views of and reactions to them. The second section focuses on narratives and imaginaries of the past, which function as historically embedded and reflexive building blocks for foresters' re-valuation efforts. Finally, I turn to care as both an emic and an analytical category to understand how the foresters (re)produced the state and its "others" while at the same time distancing themselves from it. Overall, the paper aims to contribute to ongoing debates in the anthropology of the state, care, and related subfields, with a particular focus on the postsocialist settings.

Research Context

I conducted a total of four weeks of fieldwork between May and September of 2023, mainly in Topolčianky, a village of about 2,650 located in the Zlaté Moravce District in western central

Slovakia,³ about a ninety-minute drive from the capital. Known for its scenery, wine production and horse breeding, and a manor house that served as the summer residence of Tomáš Garrigue Masaryk, the first president of Czechoslovakia, it has a long association with forestry, especially during the period immediately following Habsburg rule (1918-1938). After the collapse of monarchy, most of the local property was acquired and administered by the newly established Czechoslovak state and during the socialist period forestry-centred production continued in the region (Šabo 2021). Topolčianky's historical and cultural significance and its role as a centre for the surrounding countryside and villages makes it a prestigious post for foresters both in the region and beyond. In addition to their standard duties (see below), the local forestry administration is responsible for managing game and hunting and runs a local wisent (European bison) sanctuary and the village park.

Due to its richly forested landscape (about 41 per cent of the country's land area), forestry has played a significant socio-economic role throughout Slovakia's history. A major milestone was reached in the eighteenth century, when separate forestry programmes were established at new educational institutions that were strongly influenced by the principles of German and Austrian "scientific" forestry.⁴ (Stockmann 2016). The predecessor of the state agency now called Forests of the Slovak Republic (*Lesy SR*) was established in the nineteenth century and, after a series of changes in ownership structure, now owns around 51 per cent of Slovak forests. The Slovak Forestry Law assigns foresters the following duties: administrating and managing forests as recommended in the agency's strategic plan; planting, renewing and maintaining forests; logging in designated areas; and timber preparation, transport and storage. Furthermore, managing regional gamelands requires the construction and maintenance of feeding stations and water troughs for game and other animals, as well as trails, rest areas and other infrastructure for organised hunting expeditions, like. However, the social status of foresters in and around the village is at present rather marginal and it brings no particular authority, prestige, or admiration from villagers (cf. Blavascunas 2014).

Even though I met many other people, I worked with three main interlocutors whom I discuss in this article and will introduce below. Like most local state forestry employees I observed, they all come from the generation that experienced socialism. Beyond the situated fieldwork experiences in the village and beyond, I use the term "forestry" as a constructed

³ Slovakia joined the EU in its 2004 expansion, which also included the neighbouring Czech Republic and Hungary (among other countries).

⁴ For a historical overview of the "scientific forestry" phenomenon and its critical entanglements with the state, see Scott (1998).

collective actor for readability reasons and because it enables me to address the collective forestry identity and agency associated with it (Gehring and Marx 2023). However, I do not mean it to imply that I focused on forestry as a static institution or engaged in any kind of institutional analysis as such.

At 68, Ivan has passed retirement age but still works full-time for additional income. He was born and raised in Topoľčianky, where his father was also a forester, so he has been close to local forestry all his life. He was trained in Liptovský Hrádok in northern Slovakia and worked there as a rank-and-file forester, mainly in operating machines. After over a decade there, he accepted a job offer in his hometown and has worked and lived there ever since. He says that his main interest has always been working close to nature. A passionate hunter, he is now also among the most prominent figures in organising and managing hunting expeditions.

Peter is sixty-three and has worked locally in forestry since completing his apprenticeship in the late 1970s. He was born in the outlying village of Jedľové Kostofany, where he has worked ever since. His parents, grandparents and other relatives did not work in the field, but his son studied forestry engineering at the country's only university-level forestry programme in the city of Zvolen. He was particularly proud of this achievement and mentioned it often during the time we spent together. His work trajectory has been consistent: from the beginning he has worked as a rank-and-file forester and later as a head forester.

Jozef is seventy and retired from a lifelong career in state forestry. The only forester in his family, he graduated from a forestry school in the 1970s and was assigned to positions in various parts of western Slovakia so he could stay close to his relatives. A few years later, he returned to his hometown, Topoľčianky. Here, he worked in various positions including manual worker in the forest, lead forester, technical administrator, and office manager. He emphasised that staying close to the forest had always been important to him, even when he was working in the office. Over the years he became one of the most committed and consistent figures associated with forestry in the region. He was also actively involved in local hunting and has enjoyed helping organise occasional events related to that.

Nature or Technicality: Toward Ecological Futures Without State Forestry?

A table and two chairs in a dimly lit studio were the set for a late-night talk show on a private television channel. Two guests, a biologist and a member of a “green” association, answered the presenter's questions and tried to persuade the viewers that their “natural” vision for Slovak forests was the right one. They primarily discussed the current disputes over national parks and

strongly endorsed the government's plans to ban logging in certain areas of the country. However, the discussion was not only framed in professional and scientific terms. The show had a noticeable lifestyle aspect, and they also discussed topics like the current situation of party politics in the country. During the conversation, they showed pictures of devastated forests to draw the audience in and criticise practices implemented by foresters but did not explicitly use the term 'state forestry'. These images suggested that they wanted to remind the viewers that forests and national parks were the main issue here: without them, the discussion might have been mistaken for something entirely different.

Similar views and attitudes to those displayed in the talk show were articulated to me by the president of one of Slovakia's most prominent environmental NGOs. Our conversation was devoted to drawing a boundary between the superior 'us' and the inferior 'them'. While he acknowledged that a few state foresters held "other" views, most of those over fifty years of age tended to see the organisation and its activities as a form of urban activism that lacked relevant knowledge about forests and forestry. He considered foresters' knowledge "old-fashioned" and "extremely conservative", which made it irrelevant to what he called the "urgent climate crisis we are living in". While he seemed to be implying that this was largely a generational issue, he did not explicitly say so and disagreed when I asked about that. He conceptualised forestry as an overly technical discipline, stated that its "most fundamental understanding of forests is very different from that of ecologists", and went on to specify that "we need to leave out all the technical aspects [of forestry practices] and the whole understanding that the forest is a measurable area requiring cutting, cleaning, planting, etc.". Nature has its own holistic mechanisms; none of these things is needed. Forests can care for themselves – they can regenerate on their own if, for example, there are fallen trees or even sick trees. We don't need to go there to mark these points with colours and to measure the amount of fallen wood." The need to conserve financial resources during increasingly difficult conditions linked to climate change was also used as evidence that state forestry should change in favour of the "green" agenda: "All these unnecessary practices are also very expensive. The consequences of the climate crisis are becoming more and more tangible... I think we're reaching the limit – for instance, we just can't afford to measure all the trees that have fallen after an intense rainstorm, because these are becoming so frequent now. The same goes for sick trees: the sickness can spread so quickly now that we can't manage these trees. I think the old ways of doing forestry work are unsustainable, and we can see this increasingly in the present. Our forests will become more and more wild, that's for sure."

The elimination, or “formative absence” (Li 2014: 15), of human intervention is here understood as a way to “allow nature to take center stage” (Bocci 2017: 437) and ensure that valuable forest ontologies remain intact without rendering the forest technical (Li 2007). As far as the official vision of “green” forest management goes, the non-state actors in Slovakia, to various extents and with various intensities, advocate a so-called “zero-intervention” approach (Devine and Baca 2020; Konczal and Asselin 2025; Schwartz 2006). Under this internationally influenced regime, forests would remain completely free of logging and any other technical forestry activities, such as measuring and fertilising (especially in national parks), or at least forestry interventions would be minimal, with logging limited to certain forests considered less important to the ecological balance. This interplay between “here” and “elsewhere” represents a structural characteristic of a “green” ethos observed on a global scale with a particular focus on the Global South (Fairhead, Leach and Scoones 2012). While the (Western) “here” should remain untouched to preserve its reclaimed natural value, the (non-Western) “elsewhere” can serve economic needs through extraction. In other words, this green economy model is based on a logic of “unsustainable use ‘here’ [which] can be repaired by sustainable practices ‘there’, with one nature subordinated to the other” (Fairhead, Leach and Scoones 2012: 242). This kind of ecological vision aims at “ecological modernisation where economic growth and environmental conservation work in tandem”, together with the promotion of a global discourse on increasingly valuable nature and all things green (Fairhead, Leach and Scoones 2012: 240–241).

The foresters in Topolčianky denounced this “green” transformation of forest management and its principles as hypocritical. Once, when I brought up the topic, Jozef told me, “Of course, your main interest is where you work... but at the same time, as a forester you’re part of a whole. Every forest is important. We follow what is going on in the entire country, we care.... it’s all interconnected. And that is also something which distinguishes us from the environmentalists.” He continued that the strict division of forests into two groups – with and without human intervention – did not make sense, because even the most protected forests did need help at some point. For instance, if interventions were completely banned, sick trees could not be treated properly, allowing the disease to spread to other trees that could otherwise be saved. Unlike the destructive Western dynamics described in the Global South context by Fairhead, Leach and Scoones (2012), for the foresters in this postsocialist semi-periphery there was apparently no “here” without “there”.

Furthermore, the foresters insisted that the National Forestry Law had long ago incorporated all the relevant issues of sustainability and ecology and taken into consideration foresters' expertise in forestry work. In this context, they would usually also point to EU environmental policies⁵ that they understood as favouring precisely what non-state actors in Slovakia (and elsewhere) stood for and dictated what foresters should and should not do. The most pressing issue for the foresters was that they felt excluded from the discussion while they insisted non-state actors had not only been able to present their ideas on the environmental issues publicly, but also to participate directly in policy formulation and promotion with no 'real' opposition from foresters, who repeatedly questioned these actors' expertise and knowledge and suggested they were engaging in "political games" and "corruption".

In particular, the foresters I spoke with accused environmentalists of having unequal access to both state and EU funding that gave them a stronger position within and beyond state policy-making (particularly with the Ministry of the Environment). Peter commented on this locally widespread view during a discussion with his colleagues at the local forestry office: "Their [the non-state actors'] main idea is to use EU funds to gain access to forests in the name of ecology and the environment. Once society forgets everything, they'll start logging – otherwise, they wouldn't survive financially." The other foresters at the table nodded in agreement. This view indicates their belief that the zero-intervention approach as a cost-cutting measure primarily worked as a marketing tool. This perceived power imbalance was further illustrated by recent developments in a tract of forest in the High Tatras previously managed by Slovak Forests that the Ministry of the Environment⁶ had been managing for about six months as part of the 'green' agenda. Peter explained that logging had resumed two months before, despite initial claims that the new administration had been installed specifically to carry out an absolutist zero-intervention policy. I also heard similar stories about this area and others from Slovak Forestry Chamber members.

As non-state influence on state policies seemed to grow, foresters felt excluded from the ongoing formation of partnerships between the two entities. Mikuš (2018) explores a similar

⁵ Even though my interlocutors did not specify which EU policies, the European Green Deal has tended to be publicised as a particular milestone for "green" transformation across different sectors in Slovakia since its initiation in 2020. Driven by the Ministry of the Environment, forests, foresters and their role are not mentioned in the mission statement on its official web page. Meanwhile, Slovak Forests's 2023 annual report (entitled *Green Report*) mentions the Green Deal only in a brief summary of the goals of the EU Forest Strategy 2021-2030 and none of its other annual reports mention it at all.

⁶ The Ministry of Agriculture, the main administrator of forestry, appeared in this case to have somewhat limited power and resources compared to the Ministry of Environment. I do not analyse this institutional discrepancy in detail; however, it remains an important consideration in this context.

tendency of partnership-building among state and non-state actors in the context of Serbian associations for the disabled. His detailed ethnographic account argues that the hegemonic project of the EU used an agenda of “partnerships” in the name of state democratisation and transparency. These processes relied on, among other things, an image of Western-style non-state actors – nongovernmental organisations (NGOs) – as a cost-effective guarantee of these values that simultaneously represented citizens’ interests to the state (Mikuš 2018: 143–144). In practice, however, this agenda relied on relatively closed networks tied to political parties and other established structures (Mikuš 2018: 169). Although my interlocutors did not use this language, they seemed to hold similar views when talking about their “disembedded” position. The chairman of the Slovak Forestry Chamber, a sexagenarian forester and forestry scholar, told me that a Western-style (and often Western-funded) field of environmentalism had emerged in Slovakia, as in other parts of the former socialist region, following the regime change.⁷ Both state (the new Ministry of the Environment and its related actors) and non-state (NGOs and civic organisations) actors entered this domain. Initially, the situation was relatively harmonious. He explained that the large number of actors with their own ideas and views on the ecological aspects of forestry led to fruitful and unprecedented discussions and mutual exchange of knowledge, despite sometimes completely different points of view. Still, he attributed the current sharp divide between state forestry and ‘green’ environmentalism to what he referred to as a recent increasing politicisation of state forestry – that is, direct influence of and entanglements with party politics (Novotný 2011). He perceived this state/non-state partnership as a direct consequence of this politically-infused boundary: “They decided to work with the environmental activists rather than the foresters. This is clearly a political decision”. As previously mentioned, and as in the Serbian case analysed by Mikuš, the EU played an important role here. The Slovak government of the time celebrated itself as clearly “pro-European” and “democratic”, and the Ministry of the Environment was not the only one calling for a compliant attitude towards the EU and its “democratic” values (such as a pro-active attitude toward NGOs). In this context, the state’s turn towards non-state actors seems rather unsurprising.

The foresters claimed that the state, although the institutional “owner” and an inherent part of forestry, was consequently transformed into an unapproachable “other”, working for the

⁷ It is important to note that a limited number of entities devoted to ecology and nature protection also existed during the socialist period in Czechoslovakia. Examples include the Nature Conservation Section and Tis (Sarre and Jehlička 2007).

benefit of “others”. While seeing the existing state as contextually corrupt, politicised and not functioning properly, they simultaneously desired an orderly state that would understand their position and ensure “normal life”, resembling the postsocialist Serbian case described by Rajković (2017a: 35; see also Jansen 2013 for a different context). Such critiques of and alienation from the state carried the implication that foresters were “more state-making” (Blundo 2014; Rajković 2017a: 36) than the distant state institutions. My interlocutors thus insisted that the state should (again) include them in the partnership to “restore” forestry’s value on a national scale. Such collaboration would in turn enable the repair of the dysfunctional state (Rajković 2017a: 47), as Jozef put it to me.

As a concrete example of state transformation “otherwise” (Povinelli 2011; Thiemann 2024), my interlocutors cited their successful partnership with the European Association of Foresters devoted to close-to-nature forestry⁸. International knowledge exchange networks led by foresters themselves present the principles under which the partnership operates. Back in Topoľčianky, the foresters also often boosted of this achievement. This was not a political but a strictly professional collaboration, they said. Moreover, every regional forestry office in Slovakia describes “close-to-nature” forestry as its main working principle. The chairman of the Slovak Forestry Chamber commented on the partnership in the wider context of (lost and found) relations with the public: “We have truly underestimated the positive propagation of forestry work. What the environmentalists do is the same in practice: they also log, but they communicate it differently. We really need to change in this regard. In fact, we’re slowly advancing and the close-to-nature collaboration is proof of that.” From this perspective, the “other” partnership not only enabled foresters to work in tandem with other foresters internationally but also to articulate that they *did* care about environmental aspects in their work just as much as their non-state counterparts. While positive (if sporadic) signals from state institutions followed, like citing close-to-nature principles in the 2020 Government Programme, it was apparently the foresters who were in full charge here. The partnership was further transformed in 2022, when it became a civil society association⁹ run by the foresters themselves, resulting in an even stronger institutional position, even if only symbolically.

⁸ “Close-to-nature forestry” aims to “restore and maintain diverse, species-rich forest ecosystems that are more resilient and better adapted to climate change” (Pro Silva 2022).

⁹ According to its official website, “the objectives of the association focus on transfer of knowledge and practical experience in close-to-nature forest management, maintenance and protection of natural forest ecosystems and forest biodiversity, organisation of seminars and excursions, consultancy, education and training, establishment of demonstration sites as well as participation in forest policy making” (Pro Silva 2022).

Lipsky famously argues of so-called street-level bureaucrats that “the devices they invent to cope with uncertainties and work pressures effectively become the public policies they carry out” (Lipsky 2010 [1980]: xiii). This broader perspective enables us to grasp the way foresters as street-level bureaucrats reacted to state/non-state partnership. In establishing the “other” partnership, they actually produced a version of the state that they simultaneously hoped for. The main focus on environmental aspects as an inherent part of (both local and international) forestry work mimicked the hoped for re-embeddedness of foresters’ perspectives in state policies, while at the same time also enabling a “non-state-like” public presentation and communication mixed with a sympathy for the international domain – again, similarly to the non-state actors’ EU ties. Yet there was more to the project of state “otherwise”. The transformation “from below” by the foresters was tied to a particular temporal orientation: a turn to a combination of the (nostalgically remembered) socialist past and the (imagined) pre-socialist past within the (adaptively-reformed) postsocialist present (Kojanic 2015: 204). This historical reflexivity led the foresters to assert their unique professional status as a crucial distinguishing mark of their work as good practice and, ultimately, care. The following section focuses on these (historical) temporal dimensions, particularly recollections of the (socialist) past.

Knowledge, Skill and the Past: Forestry as Re-Valued “Good Practice”

Consider the following quote by Ivan from one of our conversations: “After the regime change, the forester could finally apply his knowledge and the self, his personality, in his work. If one was knowledgeable enough, the work results were very nice... you could tell if the forester was well trained and had enough professional experience or not. Under socialism, we just needed to complete the plan: planting, caring, cutting, hoeing. There was no room for personal intervention in work activities, so it wasn’t really obvious who understood the profession and who did not. There were particular norms in those plans and if you wanted to change it, you needed to ask the authorities... usually it didn’t work anyway, so we just followed the plan. Now, while we still have plans and certain actions are mandatory according to forestry law, the rest is merely a recommendation.”

One of the central aspects articulated here is central planning under socialism, which apparently hindered or completely blocked the professional execution of forestry work based on the knowledge acquired in forestry schools. Foresters usually expressed great admiration for the latter and lamented the significant decline in quality of forestry education in Slovakia since

the regime change. While my interlocutors described the socialist educational infrastructure – typically based on brigades and work in forests alongside professional foresters – as high quality, valuable and at least on par with that in Western countries, due to the focus on routine socialist working principles and the functioning of socialist forestry were seen as if conflicting with the mentioned qualities. The director of the National Forestry Association was as explicit about this as my interlocutors in Topolčianky: “Czechoslovakia had a fully functioning educational infrastructure: forestry schools, apprenticeships, universities. Even though some of these institutions still exist, their quality has declined since the 1990s. The entire education system worked very well until the revolution. The question is whether such good schools were actually needed at a time of socialist production principles.” In short, for my interlocutors good practice meant a set of relational work practices, within which they placed value on expertise acquired through institutionalised socialist forestry education combined with moral commitment and self-realisation (Robbins 2015; Kauppinen 2021: 125).

Consequently, this idea of good practice can be read as a continuation of rather than a radical break with the criticised socialist past. From this perspective, a “good” forester’s need for a “good” education is tied to the same socialist principles that were criticised as being problematic for their plan-based orientation. Anthropologists have generally criticised the distinction between socialism and postsocialism as two discrete periods, instead proposing that they “are discontinuous and interconnect by leaps and jolts, not part of a smooth transition along a single chronological timeline” (Kay, Shubin and Thelen 2012: 56). The re-articulation of forestry as “good practice” under the post-1989 capitalist regime has followed the same fluid lines between “pasts” and “presents”. Despite the perceived difference between the criticised socialist past and “good and competent” forestry, certain practices and values of the socialist period, particularly related to forestry schools, have, in fact, remained central to what it actually means to be a “good” forester. Thus, foresters in Topolčianky have attempted to re-define what it means and what it should mean to be a “good” forester in a postsocialist capitalist system (Makovicky, Wiegatz and Kofti 2023). These negotiations have incorporated certain aspects of the socialist period, even as they usually refer to a radical break with it.

Yet the socialist past was not the only important point of reference for my interlocutors. The presocialist context of the First Czechoslovak Republic simultaneously played an important role in formulating ideas of good practice. Forestry during this period was usually described to me as highly developed: progressive, oriented towards small-scale practices with a communal character of administration, environment-friendly, and – crucially – emphasising creative self-

expression (that is, individuality) in foresters' work. Comparisons with and claims of superiority over Western countries, especially neighbouring Austria, were also included. Unsurprisingly, perhaps, none of my interlocutors had a personal experience of these times. Sympathy towards the presocialist period was usually based on popular narratives and imaginaries of the First Republic mobilised through Topoľčianky as a forestry heritage site and the national media.¹⁰

Two sets of ideas infused with nostalgia were in consequence observed. Consider the following quote Ivan uttered when I asked him about how he remembered the socialist period after talking about the socialist forestry schools: "There were no problems and no stress. People had basically everything they needed. Today, after every election there is uncertainty and nobody knows what will happen. In the end, the result always seems to be the same, always negative, no matter how high our hopes are for a positive change in this country." National elections were to be held in Slovakia in a few days, as he mentioned repeatedly with a combination of humour, apathy and irony. This context gave his words a particularly urgent tone.

Similar recollections of the socialist past accompanied me throughout the fieldwork. During one day I spent with Peter, he told me a number of stories illustrating the good aspects of forestry work in the socialist village. He started with his house, where we spent most of our time together. This was idyllically located at the edge of the forest: seemingly in the middle of nowhere, yet only a few kilometres from the village's main street. He described the property had been owned by the forestry department before 1989, when the state provided these spacious houses so that foresters did not have to travel from the village or from more distant places to work every day. He boasted that around 1980 he had only paid what he called a "symbolic price" for the house, which remained officially owned by the state. Moving there with his wife and two children from another nearby village made his life as a forester more comfortable, since he was always "close to the forest". Smiling, he recalled how he and his two neighbours – also foresters – would come home from work together every day and gather with their families after work and on weekends and how their children had grown up together. After the regime change, the state decided to sell the houses, but this was not a straightforward process. At first, they were charged rent and officially registered as tenants. The neighbours left then because of the

¹⁰ The Slovak and Czech mainstream media have tended to circulate liberal imaginaries such as modernity, developed democracy, ideological pluralism, and Western standards of living as defining characteristics of the First Republic that distinguish it from the supposedly radical "backwardness" of socialism.

legal insecurity: there were no proper leases, and they were unsure whether they would be able to stay. However, about ten years later the central forestry office made Peter and his wife an offer, and they happily accepted it so they could continue to enjoy living so close to the forest.

Comparing socialist work conditions with postsocialist ones, Peter lamented that now foresters could only dream of the kind of “technical completeness” the state had once provided. For example, they did not have to worry about whether there would be enough fertiliser for each forester in the village, or whether they could come up with enough money to replace an old chainsaw that had stopped working. All they had needed to do in such situations was tell the local technical manager in the village office, who would make sure that a new machine would be delivered. The fuel tanks were always full and there was no need to worry about the current price or amount used. However, all these resources became strictly controlled after the regime change. Some foresters bought their own equipment because what the workplace provided was old, not functioning, or insufficient. So little fuel was provided that it seemed as if “they don’t want us to work at all,” as Peter said angrily.

Besides the material deterioration after the regime change, instances of nostalgia often centred around notions of community, familiarity and interpersonal closeness. In Topolčianky, the communal aspects of local socialist forestry were explicitly raised by Eva, Peter’s wife and a forestry administration employee since the 1980s.¹¹ She recalled how the practical preparations for various village festivities were the women’s responsibility – everything from setting the tables to making sure there was enough wine and beer to last all day. This division of labour worked very well, she said, as everyone knew their role within the collective effort. People in the village took these activities and forms of sociality for granted: it was “an integral part of village life”. She also recalled how she and her colleagues from the office used to eat lunch together every day: a seemingly “small and unimportant thing” that she explained had created a mutual sense of belonging and daily rhythm and regularity that had completely disappeared. Her husband added that the same was the case with foresters. They would have lunch together, which was a “standard” part of the working day. After finishing, it was also “normal” to stick around for a beer or two. Eva even used to visit her colleagues before going home. They would have coffee and cake together, chat about how the day had gone and their children and families, and gossip about life in the village. Eva admitted that she was still lucky

¹¹ As the villages in the region are small and the land here is not suitable for large-scale agriculture, most villagers – both women and men – worked in forestry. Women were usually responsible for planting and maintenance work in forests. After the regime change, forestry (except for desk jobs) became almost exclusively a male domain.

enough to have friends and family as well but said these “collegial relationships” had become almost non-existent over time, because, as she put it, “people in the village were much closer back then”.

Nostalgia for socialist forestry work combined with the relational aspects the workers remembered as kinship-like represents an example of socialist nostalgia¹² not unlike that seen in the classic work of Frances Pine in Poland: “When people evoked the “good” socialist past, they were not denying the corruption, the shortages, the queues and the endless intrusions and infringements of the state; rather, they were choosing to emphasise other aspects: economic security, full employment, universal healthcare and education” (Pine 2002: 111; for socialist nostalgia more generally see also Kojanic 2015; Nadkarni 2020; Todorova and Gille 2010; Velikonja 2009). Still, the “goodness” of socialism expressed here and above was apparently not endless. What struck me during conversations with my interlocutors was an ambivalence that underlay their accounts of socialist life. Ivan, for instance, concluded a discussion by remarking in a pensive tone that socialism “was such a period” (*bola to taká doba*). I did not initially pay much attention to this phrase, but it came back to me many times during my fieldwork. A more ironic question, “How do we live now, after more than thirty years?” (*Ako žijeme po 30 rokoch?*), was also frequently used to articulate dissatisfaction with the contemporary state of affairs. While praising all the “good” that socialism had brought into the lives of my interlocutors, this phrase also seemed to combine nostalgia for something valuable that *would* not return with a critical tone towards a regime that *should* not return. Velikonja argues that nostalgia can function as “a defiance, a resistance strategy of preserving one’s personal history and group’s identity against the new ideological narratives, historical revisionisms, and imposed amnesia. As such, it can have strong emancipatory potential and can become an agent of liberation from oppression of contemporary hegemonic discourses and practices” (Velikonja 2009: 547). Yet the implication that nostalgia always rests on a duality between what is perceived as the “good” past and the “bad” or “worse” present is partly contested here. We have seen that Jozef (and others) tended to articulate variously positioned both “positive” and “negative” sides of the socialist regime in their recollections of the past, reflecting a broader tendency of ambivalent attitudes towards socialism in postsocialist countries (Todorova 2012: 6).

¹² Rather than dismissing the material I present here as “mere” nostalgia, I deploy the term to address what my interlocutors felt has changed for better or worse after the socialist period. My aim here is not to question whether their recollections are “real” or not (see also Simić 2019).

By expressing their views on socialist forestry, even though they were ambivalent, my interlocutors were re-articulating the value of their work in the present through a particular “recreation” of the past. In other words, communicated nostalgia can be understood here as a “counter-narrative” (Pasička 2012) on the present, mixed with an underlying sympathy for certain socialist values. In it, affection mixed with a sense of loss and deterioration as defining characteristics of socialist nostalgia (Nadkarni 2020: 85) in the context of debates around good care for forests. As Jozef summarised it to me, “We used to be valued forestry workers in socialism; now we are enemies of forests and nature.”

However, we have also seen that the (imagined) history of the First Republic was simultaneously present in my interlocutors’ recollections and redefinitions of forestry as good practice. Through their revaluations of the pre-socialist past, foresters cultivated “the modern past as an era of national prestige, value, and [quality] relative to the demoralized present”, as Fehérváry (2022: 647) puts it in her analysis of the national retro phenomenon and the related reproduction of the past in contemporary Hungary. The socialist period effectively vanished here in the name of Western modernity and its value regimes in pre-socialist Czechoslovakia, as if they had never been separated by an East-West divide, internal inequalities, or an “Iron Curtain” later (Fehérváry 2022: 647). In so doing, good practice placed Slovak foresters “within a modern twentieth-century narrative of economic, technological, and cultural progress” (Fehérváry 2022: 653). This re-invented and re-valued historical continuity enabled the foresters to articulate that the care they provide has been an integral part of local and national landscapes in the long run (e.g. Tsing 2015), without touching upon the ubiquitous “zombie socialism” after 1989¹³ (Chelcea and Druță 2016). As already mentioned, ideas about foresters’ outdated conservatism were indeed mobilised by the non-state actors. Tying good practice to the pre-socialist past can then be understood as a way in which foresters tactically challenged these tendencies, even if the socialist period was, as we have seen above, equally (if not more) valued and (nostalgically) re-created in the name of forestry’s re-valuation as care. The next section synthesises the previous ones and turns to care as both an emic category used by the foresters and an analytical lens.

¹³ It was the non-state actors who were seen by the foresters as the primary advocates for “anti-socialist” values and attitudes, often implicitly expressed through the term “urban”.

State-Making, Forestry Work as Care and Care as Mutual Difference

Anthropologists and social scientists in general have tended to use care “as a concept of critique of neoliberalisation, migration policies, and gendered and global inequalities to argue for a seemingly more inclusive or impartial ethic of care” (Thelen 2021: 12; see also 2015). Thus, they have ascribed an exclusively positive value to care, distinguishing it dualistically and morally from supposedly impersonal domains like the market, for instance. However, care remains always embedded in wider socio-political contexts and such views thus “run the risk of underestimating its productive force for legitimising partialities, difference, and inequality” (Thelen 2021: 12). As these theoretical remarks on embeddedness, (transformative) social productivity, fluidity and open-endedness rather than a pre-given “goodness” of care (e.g. Aulino 2019; Bocci 2017; Perkins 2025; Williams 2018) suggest, foresters negotiated care constructed in opposition to the “others”, whose exclusive “otherness” was simultaneously being produced (Thelen and Coe 2019). Values entailed in the respective care practices and discourses were mobilised by the foresters to create the state boundary on which the present-day tension between the two sets of actors rested. Rather than situationally placing themselves inside or outside this boundary (Thelen, Thiemann and Roth 2014), they accepted or even insisted on its static reification and their position in it, despite their critical tone towards the (central) state. The following scene sets the tone for further analysis of this boundary work enacted through care.

On a late September morning, I met Jozef in Topolčianky’s picturesque central square. Although this was only a few minutes’ walk from our first appointment that day at the forestry office, he insisted on driving so that we could get to other places more easily later. The office was appropriately situated in the famous village park, just a few minutes’ walk from the renowned manor house and the national stud farm. The carved wood building lay slightly off the main park road but still offered an impressive view of the park across its spacious front lawn, decorated by a bronze bear statue and a small rustic fountain. Off to the side stood a historic villa that looked like a small castle, nowadays used as accommodation for hunting tourists. Jozef noted that it was proudly owned by the local forestry service and had been in active use since the First Czechoslovak Republic under President Masaryk.

We got out of the car and headed into the main office building. Although about sixty people worked there, it felt quite relaxed inside and the carved wood created a warm, old-fashioned, almost cottage-like atmosphere. I learned that it had been built during the socialist era for the newly restructured state forestry department of Topolčianky. The entrance hall was

decorated with a multitude of hunting trophies, underlining the general woodsy atmosphere. A variety of forestry-related items, including books, new and old photographs, wine bottles, and botanical exhibits about the region's trees that featured small samples of wood, were displayed in glass cases. On our way to the scheduled interview on the second floor, we met several people whom Jozef all seemed to know personally. Each encounter was followed by a short personal conversation. I observed with interest how close these relationships seemed to be, despite the obvious age differences between him and some of his former colleagues. Later that day he told me about how content he felt to know the people there. He had always maintained friendly relations with his colleagues and still enjoyed visiting them regularly although he was now retired. At the same time, he admitted that he no longer knew everyone and that the fluctuation of people seemed to make the whole office more "impersonal" compared with the past (socialist) times.

"The main question remains how to reach people – how to show that we need forestry and can also be proud of it. That we are not enemies of nature and that we understand our profession." This was Jozef's fitting conclusion to a conversation at an old wooden table covered with stacks of papers in Topolčianky's main forestry office. His friend and former colleague, Oto, apologised that he did not have more time for us due to the current climate at the institution, revealing that he felt work today was more stressful than ever but accompanied us to the car parked outside the building. As on our arrival, we encountered several people on our way down. Friendly – almost family-like – conversations took place, whose topics ranged from specific forestry issues to children and family life. The tense atmosphere of the institution he had mentioned just a couple of minutes earlier seemed completely absent. As we reached the ground floor almost fifteen minutes later, Oto pulled a pack of cigarettes out of his pocket and prepared one for the moment we exited into the scenic green park. Lighting it, he spoke with Jozef about the current situation around local forests. The relaxed feeling continued, enhanced by the still-warm, almost-summery air. Standing with these two men in foresters' customary green as they discussed forests passionately felt more like being present at an informal meetup between two friends than an interview at the region's central forestry institution, which was also one of the most important nationally. After finishing his cigarette, Oto warmly thanked me for the visit, joking that my research had finally given him an excuse to spend some time with Jozef. Interpersonal care among colleagues seemed to be as important here as care for forests.

The centrality of close relationships among foresters was, as we have already seen, repeatedly signalled and interactionally practiced and remembered by my interlocutors. Moving beyond this observation, the fact that, as illustrated in the scene above, foresters care for forests *and* forestry in the collective sense enabled them to draw a line against the “other” – supposedly uncaring (if not actually immoral) non-state actors. More generally, through their relational acts and practices of care, foresters negotiated their (shared) political belonging within the current situation. Forestry work renegotiated as care was thus mobilised by foresters as a re-valued characteristic with a distinct quality in opposition to the “green” milieu and its practices and relations. The value here lies precisely in the multitude of close human *and* more-than-human care entanglements (Kurtiç 2023: 163). These remain supposedly absent from the non-state actors and their entanglements with the state, indexing in foresters’ view “the erosion of the labor required to maintain a specific form of socioecological life and landscape”, as Kurtiç (2023: 154) puts it for a Turkish context. In other words, forestry work as care was co-constituted through personal ties among foresters, resulting in community-like local and more-than-local constellations implicitly reified as state (forestry) domains. These instances situationally coexisted with some of my interlocutors’ memories of local forestry as a (now perceived as lost or at least significantly weakened) family-like state unit during the socialist period. While the foresters did not use a kinship metaphor to describe postsocialist forestry in the present, the internal social bonds among them were, nonetheless, still characterised by familial intimacy (see Rajković 2017b). It was this “relational modality” (Thelen, Vettters and von Benda-Beckmann 2014: 7) which, together with forest care “properly” carried out, could distinguish them as morally and professionally superior to their non-state counterparts and the state domains in which “the others” operated. Once again, foresters’ association with the state was intertwined here with a simultaneous critical distance from it that would eventually produce the state “otherwise” – the entity that would take forestry work seriously (again). The fixed state boundary did not cease to exist to keep the (forestry) outsiders, at least metaphorically, out.

Ethnographic registers from postsocialist Eastern Europe (and elsewhere) have tended to argue that state foresters explicitly associated themselves, to various extents, with the nation after the regime change, be it in the Polish (Konczal 2020) or Latvian (Schwartz 2006) context, for instance. In Slovakia, however, the state boundary was not negotiated in this manner. My interlocutors in Topoľčianky showed no interest in explicitly articulating their “Slovakness” in relation to “the others”. A sense of “patriotic responsibility” (Schwartz 2006: 184) to the

country and its forests seemed of rather little significance. This is not to say that the history of the village in particular or of Slovak forestry in general was not important to them. As we have seen, these “affectively loaded” (Kurtiç 2023: 146) instances were central in negotiating their work as care vis-a-vis the non-state actors who did not dispose of such historical continuity. In this way, foresters positioned themselves as playing an essential role in social reproduction over the centuries. The long-term temporal orientation¹⁴ was then used as a justification for the necessity to continue with their work further, as its value was deemed irreplaceable for society’s existence (Narotzky and Besnier 2014: 13).

Conclusion

This Working Paper has focused on how rural state foresters in Slovakia perceived and negotiated a potential transformation of forest management sought by their non-state environmentalist counterparts. It examined how the foresters aimed to challenge what they perceived as public devaluation of their work against a backdrop of growing tensions with “green” actors and their increased presence in public discourse and state forestry policy. I argued that in the complex process of reframing forestry work as care, the foresters used and reproduced their reified position as state actors (i.e. street-level bureaucrats, Lipsky 1980) to envision a different version of the state they simultaneously desired (Rajković 2017a). This relational process consisted of three main elements. First, through an established international partnership based on close-to-nature forestry principles, foresters were able to model the state “otherwise”—one in which ecological and other elements of forestry work were dominated and led by foresters themselves, instead of the “other” state/non-state exchange (Mikuš 2018). Second, by recalling the socialist and pre-socialist past, foresters articulated the extended temporality of their work as a historically embedded characteristic of a distinct quality in which nostalgic and critical and imagined and real recollections coexisted (Kofti 2023; Simić 2019). Third, the relationships of care among foresters were crucial to carrying out professional forest care (Kurtiç 2023). These close social bonds were deemed (historically) specific to the forestry community, leading to moral superiority vis-a-vis the non-state actors. As a result of this triad, the state boundary was locally reproduced by the foresters, re-creating a more-than-local exclusive domain from which “the others” were excluded. In doing so, forest care implied work

¹⁴ For a more detailed discussion of different temporalities in forestry and environmental contexts from a different setting, see, e.g. Harms (2021).

“that creates not only material goods but also relationships and ultimately social life itself” (Lazar 2023: 21).

In a present-day context marked by environmental and material concerns on a global scale, the cultivation of care relations between humans and non-humans as shown in this Working Paper may present a potential for more ecologically *and* materially balanced futures. For now, such a potentiality remains in Slovakia, as elsewhere, hidden behind unequal power relations among all the actors involved. Yet “the apparent fixity of contemporary neoliberal arrangements and a desire for otherwise futures” (Valentine and Hassoun 2019: 246) remain encoded (not only) in the foresters’ hopes and wishes, within which domains for valuable change may open (Povinelli 2011; Zigon 2019). This non-linear junction of multiple temporalities within relational spaces may contain pasts, presents and futures – socialist, postsocialist, or otherwise. Further ethnographic exploration of state actors “at work” can help us to illuminate such transformative terrains across scales.

References

- Aulino, F. 2019. *Rituals of care: Karmic politics in an aging Thailand*. Ithaca: Cornell University Press.
- Bierschenk, T., and Olivier de Sardan, J. P. 2014. *States at work: dynamics of African bureaucracies*. Leiden: Brill.
- Blavascunas, E. 2014. "When foresters reterritorialize the periphery: post-socialist forest politics in Białowieża, Poland." *Journal of Political Ecology* 21 (1): 475–492.
- Blavascunas, E. 2020. *Foresters, Borders, and Bark Beetles: The Future of Europe's Last Primeval Forest*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press.
- Blundo, G. 2014. "Seeing like a state agent: The ethnography of reform in Senegal's forestry services." In *States at Work*, edited by T. Bierschenk and J.-P. Olivier de Sardan, 69–89. Leiden: Brill.
- Bocci, P. 2017. "Tangles of Care: Killing Goats to Save Tortoises on the Galápagos Islands." *Cultural Anthropology* 32 (3): 424–449.
- Chelcea, L., and O. Druță. 2016. "Zombie socialism and the rise of neoliberalism in post-socialist Central and Eastern Europe." *Eurasian Geography and Economics* 57 (4-5): 521–544.
- Devine, J.A., and J.A. Baca. 2020. "The political forest in the era of green neoliberalism." *Antipode* 52 (4): 911–927.
- Fairhead, J., M. Leach, and I. Scoones. 2012. "Green Grabbing: a new appropriation of nature?" *Journal of Peasant Studies* 39 (2): 237–261.
- Fehérvári, K. 2022. "National Retro and the Re-mattering of History in Twenty-First-Century Hungary." *Comparative Studies in Society and History* 64 (3): 646–689.
- Gehring, T., and J. Marx. 2023. "Group Actors. Why Social Science Should Care About Collective Agency." *Historical Social Research/Historische Sozialforschung*, 48 (3), 7–39.
- Hann, C., and J. Parry. 2018. *Industrial labor on the margins of capitalism: Precarity, class, and the neoliberal subject*. New York, Oxford: Berghahn Books.
- Harms, A. 2021. "Three Ways of Seeing a Forest: On the Social Life of Economization in Indian Carbon Forestry." *Journal of South Asian Development* 16 (3): 367–386.
- Hetherington, K. 2020. *The government of beans: Regulating life in the age of monocrops*. Durham, NC: Duke University Press.
- Iordăchescu, G. 2021. "Becoming a virgin forest: From remote sensing to erasing environmental history." *Arcadia*. Retrieved 10.1.2026, from <https://www.environmentandsociety.org/arcadia/becoming-virgin-forest-remote-sensing-erasing-environmental-history>
- Jansen, S. 2013. "Hope for/against the state: gridding in a besieged Sarajevo suburb." *Ethnos* 79 (2): 238–260.
- Kauppinen, A.-R. 2021. "More Than Money: Work as Self-Realization in Accra's Private Media." In *Work, Society, and the Ethical Self. Chimeras of Freedom in the Neoliberal Era*, edited by Ch. Hann, 108–132. New York, Oxford: Berghahn Books.
- Kay, R., S. Shubin, and T. Thelen. 2012. "Rural realities in the post-socialist space." *Journal of Rural Studies* 28 (2): 55–62.

- Kiik, L. 2018. "Wild-ing the ethnography of conservation: Writing nature's value and agency in." *Anthropological Forum* 28 (3): 217–235.
- Kofti, D. 2023. *Broken Glass, Broken Class: Transformations of Work in Bulgaria*. New York, Oxford: Berghahn Books.
- Kojanic, O. 2015. "Nostalgia as a practice of the self in post-socialist Serbia." *Canadian Slavonic Papers* 57 (3-4): 195–212.
- Konczal, A. 2020. "Why can a forest not be private? A post-socialist perspective on Polish forestry paradigms—an anthropological contribution." *Forest Policy and Economics* 117: 102206.
- Konczal, A., and J. Asselin. 2025. Exploring the Green Frontier within Europe's Recent Forest Initiatives. *Geoforum* 160: 104242.
- Kurtiç, E. 2023. Infrastructural Decay: Maintenance Ecologies and Labor in the Çoruh Basin. *Cultural Anthropology* 38 (1): 142–170.
- Lazar, S. 2023. *How We Struggle: A Political Anthropology of Labour*. London: Pluto Press.
- Li, T. 2007. "Practices of assemblage and community forest management." *Economy and society* 36 (2): 263–293.
- Li, T. 2014. *Land's End: Capitalist Relations on an Indigenous Frontier*. Durham, NC: Duke University Press.
- Lipsky, M. 2010 [1980]. *Street-level Bureaucracy. Dilemmas of the individual in public services*. New York, NY: Russell Sage Foundation.
- Makovicky, N., J. Wiegatz, and D. Kofti. 2023. "The Moral Matrix of Capitalism: Insights from Central and Eastern Europe." *East European Politics and Societies* 38 (1): 264–282.
- Mikuš, M. 2018. *Frontiers of civil society: government and hegemony in Serbia*. New York, Oxford: Berghahn Books.
- Nadkarni, M. 2020. *Remains of Socialism: Memory and the Futures of the Past in Postsocialist Hungary*. Ithaca: Cornell University Press.
- Narotzky, S., and N. Besnier. 2014. "Crisis, value, and hope: rethinking the economy." *Current Anthropology* 55 (S9): 4–16.
- Novotný, J. 2011. "Kam kráčaš slovenské lesníctvo?" *LESmedium*. Retrieved 10.1.2026, from <https://www.lesmedium.sk/casopis-letokruhy/2011/letokruhy-2011-09/kam-kracas-slovenske-lesnictvo>.
- Pasieka, A. 2012. "Resurrected pigs, dyed foxes and beloved cows: Religious diversity and nostalgia for socialism in rural Poland." *Journal of Rural Studies* 28 (2): 72–80.
- Perkins, J. 2025. "Delivering the state: State-Making through Maternal Health 'Care' in Bangladeshi Public Maternal Health Spaces." *Cultural Anthropology* 40 (2): 328–353.
- Petrova, S. 2016. *Communities in transition: protected nature and local people in Eastern and Central Europe*. London, New York: Routledge.
- Pine, F. 2002. "Retreat to the household? Gendered domains in post-socialist Poland." In *Postsocialism: Ideas, Ideologies and Practices in Eurasia*, edited by C. Hann, 95–113. London, New York: Routledge.
- Povinelli, E. A. 2011. *Economies of abandonment: Social belonging and endurance in late liberalism*. Durham, NC: Duke University Press.

- Pro Silva. 2022. "Pro Silva – iniciátor prírode blízkeho hospodárenia v lesoch." Retrieved 10.1.2026, from <https://prosilvaslovakia.sk/o-nas/>.
- Rajković, I. 2017a. "Concern for the state: 'normality', state effect and distributional claims in Serbia." *Гласник Етнографског института САНУ* 65 (1): 31–45.
- Rajković, I. 2017b. "From familial to familiar: corruption, political intimacy and the reshaping of relatedness in Serbia." In *Reconnecting State and Kinship*, edited by T. Thelen and E. Alber, 130–154. Philadelphia: Pennsylvania University Press.
- Robbins, J. 2015. "Ritual, value, and example: on the perfection of cultural representations." *Journal of the Royal Anthropological Institute* 21 (S1): 18–29.
- Sarre, P., and P. Jehlička. 2007. "Environmental movements in space-time: the Czech and Slovak republics from Stalinism to post-socialism." *Transactions of the Institute of British Geographers* 32 (3): 346–362.
- Scaramelli, C. 2018. "The wetland is disappearing: conservation and care on Turkey's Kizilirmak Delta." *International Journal of Middle East Studies* 50 (3): 405–425.
- Schwartz, K. Z. 2006. *Nature and national identity after communism: Globalizing the ethnoscape*. Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press.
- Scott, J. 1998. *Seeing like a State: How Certain Schemes to Improve the Human Condition Have Failed*. New Haven: Yale University Press.
- Simić, M. N. 2019. "Social construction of (post) postsocialist reality: Ethnographic research into the everyday." *Гласник Етнографског института САНУ* 67 (1): 121–134.
- Stockmann, V. 2016. *Dejiny lesníctva na Slovensku*. Banská Bystrica: Lesy Slovenskej republiky, štátny podnik.
- Šabo, J. 2021. *100 rokov Štátnych lesov v Topoľčiankach*. Topoľčianky: Lesy SR, š. p.
- Thelen, T. 2015. "Care as social organization: Creating, maintaining and dissolving significant relations." *Anthropological Theory* 15 (4): 497–515.
- Thelen, T. 2021. "Care As Belonging, Difference, and Inequality." *Oxford Research Encyclopedia of Anthropology*. Retrieved 10 January 2026, from <https://oxfordre.com/anthropology/view/10.1093/acrefore/9780190854584.001.0001/acrefore-9780190854584-e-353>.
- Thelen, T., A. Thiemann, and D. Roth. 2014. "State kinning and kinning the state in Serbian elder care programs." *Social Analysis* 58 (3): 107–123.
- Thelen, T., L. Veters, and K. von Benda-Beckmann. 2014. "Introduction to stategraphy: Toward a relational anthropology of the state." *Social Analysis* 58 (3): 1–19.
- Thelen, T., and C. Coe. 2019. "Political belonging through elderly care: Temporalities, representations and mutuality." *Anthropological Theory* 19 (2): 279–299.
- Thiemann, A. 2024. *The Politics of Relations: How Self-Government, Infrastructures, and Care Transform the State in Serbia*. New York, Oxford: Berghahn Books.
- Todorova, M., and Z. Gille. 2010. *Post-communist nostalgia*. New York, Oxford: Berghahn Books.
- Todorova, M. 2012. "Introduction: From Utopia to Propaganda and Back." In *Post-communist nostalgia*, edited by M. Todorova and Z. Gille, 1–13. New York, Oxford: Berghahn Books.
- Tsing, A. L. 2015. *The mushroom at the end of the world: On the possibility of life in capitalist ruins*. Princeton: Princeton University Press.

- Uekötter, F. 2023. *The Vortex: An Environmental History of the Modern World*. Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press.
- Valentine, D., and A. Hassoun. 2019. "Uncommon futures." *Annual Review of Anthropology* 48: 243–260.
- Velikonja, M. 2009. "Lost in transition. Nostalgia for socialism in post-socialist countries." *East European Politics and Societies* 23 (4): 535–551.
- Verdery, K. 1996. *What was socialism, and what comes next?* Princeton: Princeton University Press.
- Williams, F. 2018. "Care: Intersections of scales, inequalities and crises." *Current Sociology* 66 (4): 547–561.
- Zigon, J. 2019. *A war on people: Drug user politics and a new ethics of community*. Oakland: University of California Press.

Zusammenfassung

Dieses Arbeitspapier untersucht die Aushandlung staatlicher Forstwirtschaft und deren Wert in der ländlichen Slowakei. Der Fokus liegt darauf, wie staatlich angestellte Förster Spannungen mit nicht-staatlichen Umweltakteur*innen wahrnehmen und bewältigen. Es wird argumentiert, dass die Förster ihre Arbeit als Fürsorge neu definieren und so die Grenzen des Staates reproduzieren, um nicht-staatliche und staatliche „Außenseiter*innen“ auszuschließen. Dabei wird eine Kritik am Staat mit der Hoffnung auf eine Alternative zu diesem verflochten. Um den Staat „anders“ zu gestalten, stützen sich die Förster auf neu etablierte internationale Partnerschaften und Sorgebeziehungen zu menschlichen und nicht-menschlichen Akteur*innen sowie Erinnerungen der sozialistischen Vergangenheit und Vorstellungen der vorsozialistischen Zeit. Ich komme zu dem Schluss, dass die Förster ihrem in der Öffentlichkeit abgewerteten Image entgegengewirkt haben, indem sie sich als „traditionelle“ staatliche Akteure positionieren, die sich in der Region – und darüber hinaus – um die Natur, die Gemeinschaft und die Gesellschaft kümmern.

Biographical Note

Roman Szorad is a doctoral candidate in the FWF doc.funds Doctoral Program “The Dynamics of Change and the Logics of Transformation: State, Society, and Economy at Critical Junctures”. For his master’s thesis, he conducted fieldwork with foresters in Slovakia. He is currently working on a doctoral project that focuses on how social work with the elderly transforms the state and the meanings and experiences of ageing in southeastern Bulgaria. Accordingly, his main research interests include the anthropology of the state, care relations and practices, moralities, ageing, and postsocialism.

Biographische Notiz

Roman Szorad ist Doktorand im FWF doc.funds Programm „The Dynamics of Change and the Logics of Transformation: State, Society, and Economy at Critical Junctures”. Für seine Masterarbeit führte er Feldforschungen mit Förstern in der Slowakei durch. Derzeit arbeitet er an seinem Dissertationsprojekt, das den Fokus darauf legt, wie soziale Arbeit mit älteren Menschen den Staat sowie die Bedeutungen und Erfahrungen des Alterns im Südosten Bulgariens verändert. Zu seinen Forschungsschwerpunkten zählen dementsprechend die Anthropologie des Staates, Sorgebeziehungen und -praktiken, Moralvorstellungen, Altern und Postsozialismus.

Roman Szorad

From Good Workers to Enemies of Nature?

Foresters' Revaluations of Work, State and Care in Slovakia

Vienna Working Papers in Ethnography, No. 15, Vienna, 2026

Wiener Arbeitspapiere zur Ethnographie, Nr. 15, Wien, 2026

ksa.univie.ac.at/vwpe15

The VWPE is a peer reviewed series which aims at presenting and reflecting on innovative research. The series provides the staff of the Department of Social and Cultural Anthropology as well as guest authors with a forum for discussing their findings on a wide range of social phenomena. We welcome submissions that seek to advance conceptual-methodological and theoretical debates as well as manuscripts based on ongoing empirical research.

Die WAPE ist eine Schriftenreihe, die einem Peer-Review-Verfahren unterworfen ist, und die sich zum Ziel setzt, innovative Forschung vorzustellen und über diese zu reflektieren. Die Reihe bietet den Mitarbeiter*innen des Instituts für Kultur- und Sozialanthropologie wie auch Gastautor*innen ein Forum für die Diskussion ihrer Forschung zu einem breiten Spektrum an sozialen Phänomenen. Wir heißen sowohl konzeptuell-methodische und theoretische Aufsätze als auch empirische Beiträge auf Grundlage innovativer Forschung willkommen.

Vienna Working Papers in Ethnography

Tatjana Thelen, Ivan Rajković (eds.)

Department of Social and Cultural Anthropology

Faculty of Social Sciences, University of Vienna

Universitätsstraße 7, 1010 Vienna, Austria

Tel: +43-1-4277-49565

Paper submission

tatjana.thelen@univie.ac.at, ivan.rajkovic@univie.ac.at

Guidelines

<https://ksa.univie.ac.at/en/research/vienna-working-papers-in-ethnography/>

<https://ksa.univie.ac.at/forschung/wiener-arbeitspapiere-zur-ethnographie/>