Geopolitics in the Forest: A Border of Wilderness

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Abstract: Based on ethnographic sketches from the Białowieża National Park (Poland, Belarus) between 2005 – 2009, the paper explores the EU external border in this region focusing on the mutual interconnection between the process of the Europeanization of Poland and its eastern border and the simultaneous othering of Belarus and the exotization of its local population. Belarus and its present political regime stand in juxtaposition with the image of Białowieża as the last European natural forest. In the eyes and practices of visitors of the Białowieża National Park, the forest is not only an area of pristine nature, but it is also an important witness of the recent political history of Poland. The juxtaposition of the political regime in Belarus and the ancient character of the locality is dynamically used by local population for establishing alliance with, or subversion of, the state. The paper discusses different ways in which international borders are established through controversies and negotiations that concern the Białowieża National Park, including the politics of park entry, material barriers, EU standards, global and local arguments about how to protect nature, political tensions between Poland and Belarus, and divergent political interests. Thus, the paper explores the international border as a conservation border involving different schemes of protection within the Polish side of the forest.

Keywords: borders, Białowieża Forest, identity, Europeanization, environmental movement

“Save the Białowieża Forest,” people chanted in early March 2006 in front of the Polish Embassy in Prague, as well as other Polish embassies across the world.¹ It was not the first time that voices of environmental activists concerned about the Białowieża Forest had been heard. Previous occasions included the September and December 1994, and April 1995 protests and demonstrations of activists and supporters of Greenpeace in Warsaw, Vancouver, New York, Ottawa, London, Edinburgh and Copenhagen against plans to upgrade infrastructure and establish new logging sites in the heart of the Białowieża Forest. In the spring of 2006, top representatives of the Polish government received five-and-a-half thousand letters expressing opposition to the current method of national park management.

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The Białowieża National Park is considered unique. Allegedly, it is the oldest lowland forest in Europe and the only region in the world where you can meet wild herds of bison. Both claims are sometimes questioned and believed to be more myth than truth. The forest bears significant traces of human economic activity, so the idea of it being untouched by humans, an argument often used by environmentalists, does not necessarily correspond with reality (Franklin 2001). A similar situation concerns the herds of Zubr, the European bison, which are the symbol of the Białowieża Forest. Their population in Białowieża has not in fact been continuous, since there was a brief period between 1919 after the last bison was shot and 1921 when two new animals were imported into the forest in order to restore breeding. Moreover, the last ten years have witnessed increasingly frequent introductions of bison into the wild outside the area of the Białowieża Forest: in the Bryansk region of the Russian Federation (on the border with Belarus and Ukraine), in the Bieszczady Mountains (Poloniny National Park) in Slovakia or in the Rothaar Mountains in the German North Rhine-Westphalia. For the residents of Hajnówka, the administrative centre of the Polish part of the Białowieża Forest, the municipality of Białowieża and other local municipalities, as well as the national park’s scattered settlements, this inconsistency is not important, just as it is not important for hundreds of biologists and botanists, whose scientific institutes are located in the Białowieża area, or for hoteliers that every year accommodate thousands of tourists visiting the Białowieża National Park.

In addition to the originality, antiquity and complexity of the preserved flora and fauna of the forest, there is one other thing worthy of attention. The state border that divides the Białowieża Forest runs between Poland and Belarus. A smaller area, about 40% of the total area which equals 1500 km² of the forest, is situated in Poland, while the remaining territories are in Belarus. The state border that runs through the forest appeared as a result of geopolitical changes after World War II, and in 2004 it became the border of the European Union.

How are these things related? What could be the points of commonality between the preservation of nature and the Polish-Belarusian border demarcated by the victors of WWII? And what does this mean today when an external border of the EU has been established? The exploration of these somewhat unexpected connections is the subject of this paper.

A Short History of the Forest

The Białowieża Forest is a very important place for Poles, for Belarusians and for the bison whose symbol can be found on the park emblem, on the label of a local beer, in the name of Zubrówka, a well-known liquor and popular export item, or in the name of one of the most famous organisations of the Belarusian political opposition. The Białowieża Forest, the *pushcha*, a word used in both Polish and Belarusian, is part of the cultural heritage of both countries. Notes of the Białowieża Forest can be found in Lithuanian and Polish documents from the 15th century, where we can also find the first regulations regarding restrictions on entry into the territory of the forest. Even then, not just anyone could enter the forest, which served as a place which Lithuanian Earls and Princes and Polish Kings used for game hunting, before eventually being succeeded by Russian Tsars. These restrictions are the reason why a large part of the forest has been preserved to this day: as a property of Polish Kings or Russian Tsars, the forest was their sovereign terrain on which logging and development was for a long time significantly restricted (Faliński 1968; Franklin 2002; Korbel 2009).

Besides its supposed continuity and authenticity, the Białowieża Forest also has two other features that distinguish it from similar ecological niches. First, it is the symbolic role which the Białowieża Forest plays in the articulation of the uniqueness and specificity of the actors who invoke it. The second distinction-making feature is the discourse around the idea that right of entry into the Białowieża Forest was “always” rather limited. Therefore, a series of different boundaries are demarcated from the time when the first written references to this area are made. Both these characteristics are complementary. They are exclusive, as they rather serve as distinctions towards others. Each characteristic in its own way develops a policy that “strangers” must stay outside. And, as in other cases that advocate that “strangers” should stay outside, very often appear passionate disputes about who could be inside. In the Białowieża Forest, this takes many different forms.

Strangers and Locals

“We have to organize international action to pressure the Polish government. As we did in 2004, when we to significantly reduce logging. Why should it not be possible even now?” It is May 2005, and I am sitting in the kitchen of a plain wooden house in Białowieża. Mariusz, a sinewy fifty year old, is passionately depicting a plan of action which only four months later filled the news in the Polish national media. Mariusz is a city planner, architect, and a former university teacher. During the period of postsocialist restitutions, he acquired some assets, abandoned his academic career and decided to leave the industrial city of Katowice and move to Białowieża. From here, he started to organize resistance against the way the forest is managed.

“Foresters chop everything down. They see only wood in the forest. In 1996, the national park area has been extended to double in size, but the main goal, the extension of the strictly protected area where nobody with a chainsaw could ever enter, failed to be achieved.” Foresters today harvest timber in areas in which,

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2 The Contract for Białowieża was a contract signed by the local population and government with a promise to expand the national park over all the forest in 2000, but local peo-
according to the marked trails, entry is forbidden. Locals do not understand how important the preservation of the forest is; hence, we cannot expect any support from them. Anything other than mobilizing an international public is not possible. The Polish government will not heed anything else,” he explains. Mariusz is right: people living in Białowieża do not support plans to expand the zone of strict protection of the park, having voted against it in the 2000 referendum.

The locals are mostly Polish Belarusians (Białorusini in Polish), for whom, however, ethnic identification with the neighbouring nation state is largely problematic. They refuse to define themselves ethnically, preferring to be called locals, or tutejshi. More than anything, it is religion that defines them – Orthodox Christianity. In this area, if you do not attend a church (meaning a Catholic Church), but a tserkev (an Orthodox Church), you are identified as a Belarusian or Ukrainian, in one word a rusek (Engelking 1999; Sadowski 1995).³

Amongst tutejshi are Vasil and Jadwiga. In the summer of 2005, when I was with my students mapping the changes that occurred on the eastern Polish border after Poland joined the EU, one of the places we visited was Białowieża. We arrived in the village in the evening and, as it was evident that finding private accommodation would be quite difficult, we asked our bus driver for advice. From the conversation, I remember his astonished reaction at the fact that we were interested in something as strange as the national border, and as weird as the people and the country behind this border. I then encountered this reaction among people in Białowieża many times. But the driver introduced us to Vasil and Jadwiga, an older married couple who during the school year rented two rooms to apprentices from nearby forestry schools, and throughout the year provided lodging to bus drivers whose route and journey to the end of the day ended in Białowieża.

Vasil and Jadwiga were quite wary towards us at the beginning, but eventually I managed to introduce us as “students”, and justify our presence in Białowieża and our overnight stay. That first time we stayed in Białowieża for only three or four days – too short a time to be able to say anything about the life of locals, but long enough to deepen my interest in Białowieża. Over the next three years, I returned to Białowieża and stayed with Vasil and Jadwiga repeatedly. What I found striking was a certain selective amnesia that the couple applied to each of my visits – pretending that they did not remember me, saying each time, “No, we don’t rent rooms;” “We don’t know you;” “You were not here before, you must be mistaken.”

Unlike on the first day, when I was supported by the bus driver who brought me to their door, I realized that now I was a lone man in his thirties who stood at the gate with a backpack, asking in fluent Polish but with a foreign accent for accommodation for a few days or a week it was probably enough to scare anyone. The reasons were further clarified to me one night when Vasil hosted me with homemade spirit – horilka – mixing it with honey, and explained in his unmistakable phrasing and soft local dialect: “You know, it’s not so common here to find a lone guy in front of the house. Behind the fence, starts the forest and behind the forest, there is already Lukashenko. On the other hand, to the west, there are the Polish, and you never know what to expect from them.”

It took us a while before we established that although Vasil’s neighbours included many Polish people, these were mostly scientists who worked in nearby research institutes, people from the top management of the National Park, members of the Border Police, Catholic priests inhabiting the Białowieża rectory and people who, like Mariusz decided to exchange life in the big city for a life in nature. Behind the forest, in Belarus, there were Belarusians, who could also be people that are local, like Vasil and Jadwiga, but Vasil did not actually know them. The few memories that he still had about the family of his great-uncle who lived in Belarus, he stored in the form of fading photographs from family reunions in the early 1970s, when the family met at their great uncle’s funeral in Belarusian Pružany, a town situated only 40 km from Białowieża. The only thing that Vasil was able to say about Belarus was what he knew from Belarusian television broadcasts. Unlike in Poland, in Belarus people have jobs and are not hungry, there is order and, even if Lukashenko most likely is not an angel, he is capable to take care of his people and the whole country. Which is something that Vasil cannot say about Poland with such certainty.

It is not that Vasil feels distance towards Poland, although he would probably cheer for Belarusian footballers rather than for the Polish team. However, he does not have any particular reason to show loyalty to Poland and to the Polish people. Vasil still remembers stories of neighbours, whose families were considered ethnically unreliable and deemed Belarusians or Ukrainians – simply not Catholics and therefore non-Polish, and who were evicted from the eastern border region to the west and north of Poland. After all, his parents-in-law gave his wife a very “Polish name” precisely for the reason of “reliability” in the eyes of the Polish authorities. He also speaks of witnessing the oppression of local villagers by the Polish government. When he explains his reasons for voting against the expansion of the protection zone of the Białowieża Forest, Vasil uses an argument identified by Polish sociologists (Sadowski 1995): Vasil, like many Polish Belarusians, is concerned about the possibility of further Polonization. The elimination of the existing possibilities of free entry to the forest would ultimately mean the liquidation of scattered forest settlements and the eviction of locals beyond the extended territory of the national park. “What do we do there, diffused and cut off from our roots? There they would make Poles out of us.”

³ For a more comprehensive discussion of ethno-religious identification, see for instance Straczk (2013: 17-61).
Jadwiga, who was silent during the whole argument, eventually got involved in our conversation. The issues of our conversation cover a lot of ground, such as Vasil's story of his visit to Pruzhany, the evaluation of the quality of Polish democracy and economy, and also two recurring themes: the quality of life in Białowieża in the context of the possible expansion of the area of strict protection within the national park and the question of the national border, which runs less than a kilometre behind their house. Jadwiga and Vasil knew about the large demonstrations that took place in world cities. They showed it even on Belarusian television channels, explained Jadwiga. My landlords could talk about this topic for a long time. However, somehow they could not cope with the fact that their pride and enthusiasm resulting from the fact that “their Białowieża” interested people so far away as “in America”, goes hand in hand with a disillusionment that their own voice, the voice of the tutejshi people who oppose the ecological demonstrators, is heard no farther than regional administrative centres, such as Hajnówka or Białystok.4

It was only after some time that I registered that Vasil with Jadwiga began to identify my presence in Białowieża and my interest in their lives in the heart of the forest with the dispute over the extension of the national park that we discussed. I realized that I was positioned as a Polish man and a scientist, one of those people against whom the tutejshi define themselves in the dispute over the pushcha and its borders. A Polish man, because what other Polish-speaking foreigner would have appeared in Białowieża (of course, sometimes Germans, Dutch, and even Americans arrived, but everybody knows that they are not Polish because they do not speak Polish). A scientist, after all, because I told them that I work at a university in Prague and in the Warsaw Academy of Sciences, because I also know some people who work in research facilities located in Białowieża and because, like activists and certainly many scientists from Białowieża, I have also been in some of the world capitals where demonstrations against the interests of the tutejshi took place.

The Border

Vasil and Jadwiga understood the Polish-Belarusian border, which runs across their backyard, in ways comparable to how they understand the relationship between the tutejshi and the scientists residing in Białowieża. Of course, they understand that the Białowieża Forest is a “unique in the world”, “reservoir of natural resources”, “cultural heritage of humanity” and that, as such, it must not only be protected but also studied, for instance, in the way done by the scientists who work here in several research institutions. Vasil and Jadwiga do not know much about the scientists’ work. Or more precisely, when it came to talk about the scientists’ work, it turned out that Vasil and Jadwiga did not know anything about it. I am not even sure if they had ever met any scholar or scientist living in Białowieża. They do not fall within their circle of acquaintances, their relatives, neighbours and friends, in other words those who are simply tutejshi. Unlike tutejshi, the interests of scientists are, according to Vasil and Jadwiga, only instrumental: to get the most out of the local conditions and then leave Białowieża. So, it turns out that Vasil and Jadwiga did have some kind of knowledge about the scientists: they knew that – unlike them – scientists are mobile. This unfortunately does not mean that scientists are in Białowieża only temporarily, but rather their mobility implies in that if one group of scientists leave, others came right away in their place.

One of those mobile scientists is Magda who, in the Mammal Research Institute of the Polish Academy of Sciences, is working on her dissertation on the migration routes of bison. Following the signals of small lightweight radio transmitters that are attached to the bodies of these animals, Magda is able to monitor the mobility of the bison almost in real time. For now, she is working only on a pilot project which monitors the movement of animals in the game preserve, but soon she should be monitoring the movement of the wild animals as well. This is why Magda’s interest is to expand the “natural ecosystem” in which the bison range as widely as possible. Although Magda does not agree with all the arguments formulated by environmental activists, such as Mariusz, she is in agreement with them on the following: the requirement for expanding the national park should not apply only to the area that is utilised by loggers, such as Vasil, to which locals provide vigorous resistance, but should be formulated in such a way that all kinds of roadblocks that impede the natural movement of animals would disappear. There are many such roadblocks in the forest, such as the border fence built in the 1980s by the border troops of the Soviet Army in order to defend the territory of the Soviet Union against dangerously active Solidarity movement. Magda believes that for now it would be enough, if there were selected places where the fence could be demolished. This wired fence and through the ploughed land around it, did not managed to stop the flow of anti-communist ideas under the previous regime, but bison do have a problem with the fence. At least, according to what scientists say about bison’s natural migratory gradients.

While for scientists and environmental activists, such as Magda and Mariusz, physical barriers at the border are something improper, undesirable and perhaps even harmful, Vasil and Jadwiga see borders and their material visibility differently. “Borders and wolves are best avoided,” Vasil once commented regarding his relationship to the border. This was during our first meeting, when together with my students I wanted to learn how to find the easiest route to get to the border line. Our interest was understood as the interest of tourists interested in any local or specific scenery which it is required to photograph before departure so
that the captured image at home could serve as proof of the fact that we were really there. This was not far from the truth. The only thing that was missing was the reason why we so strongly link Białowieża with the border. Sure, Białowieża lies in its close vicinity, but Vasil himself, as has been said previously, attributed the real social relevance of the border with the social boundaries that divide the local villagers, such as himself and Jadwiga, from townspeople, scientists and other Poles, like myself for example.

“The border is dangerous,” the explained to us Vasil. Dangerous and tricky. As proof of his allegations, he began invoking true stories of Russian (Soviet, Belarusian) border guards who attract tourists and mushroom or blueberry pickers to cross at the border posts, saying they will be happy to take photographs with them and show them truly abundant sites of berries or mushrooms. The unfortunate who fell for this were immediately detained after crossing the border, while the cunning border guards were rewarded for their vigilance with special holidays. These stories of real events which Vasil invoked are probably part of the collective memory of the whole Polish eastern borderlands. These memories I’ve registered in almost identical forms on the border with Ukraine and Lithuania as well, but I have also heard them at the Czech-Polish border, as a proof of the credibility of Czech pioneers or camp cooks and the treachery of the Polish soldiers who guarded the border between socialist Czechoslovakia and the Polish People’s Republic.

Regardless of whether Vasil depicted real events (being fact does not preclude settled narrative forms) or whether we are dealing here with one of the modern myths that has the special function of pointing out the relationship between the civilian population (ordinary citizens) and soldiers (the state), Vasil’s story shows one very important thing. While for me the state border was a subject of professional interest, the reason why I came to Białowieża, for Vasil and Jadwiga it remained something elusive, that in our conversations could only be covered via vague stories and common precepts. No information about how to get to the border then, or under socialism when borders still held their seriousness. None of the things described within the context of life at the Czech-German border by Hajnówka as disparaging important symbols. When I then had a conversation with Mr. Wojciech talking about people’s relationship to the former regime, of-
ly attracted the attention of other guests in the bar. Instead of confirming this information or refuting it, the message articulated by the new participants in our conversation was very clear: anyone who did not live here, should not start such topics as these and, moreover, should not even talk about such matters. Then perhaps the first time that I could not challenge these views by pointing out that I also had spent a considerable part of my life in socialism and that many of the things my bar acquaintances talked about, I had also either experienced myself or had been otherwise interpreted to me in Bohemia, Poland, Ukraine and Belarus many times before. My ignorance during this noisy debate still more and more inflamed the local context, and eventually it become for my debaters the main argument: why I, from the position of a foreigner, cannot understand the situation of locals and their relationship concerning the period of the Polish socialism, post-socialist transformation, their assessment of the political situation in Belarus and Western democracy.

After returning from Hajnówka, I found Vasil and Jadwiga sitting in a room watching television. When I mentioned that I had been at the bar U Wołodzi, I noticed a flash of displeasure cross Vasil's face. “I do not like it there, they make fun of everything there,” he commented in response to my question as to whether he ever went there. He had never been there, but of course he does know about it the place. The U Wołodzi bar often appears in national newspapers and magazines, and even film-makers from Japan or the United States had filmed documentaries about the bar. “They think that they are making a document about how life is here, but they don't know anything,” said Vasil explaining his reservations, having no idea how much his words resonated with what had been said a few hours earlier by the regulars in the bar U Wołodzi. He feels that this interest of journalists and tourists is just another effort to get interesting experience out of a picturesque wilderness. The U Wołodzi bar is thus just another open-air museum in which the people of Poland and the West would like to close all tutajski.

I stood there in the doorway, a little uncomfortable with the rejection which I felt in Vasil's tone of voice and, feeling that this was a little bit pointed at myself too, I began to wonder how best to end the entire conversation. Jadwiga who, while seeming to listen to us all the time, was at the same time flipping from one television channel to another, until she stopped at one of the Belarusian television programs where an old Soviet crime thriller had just started. “You're right, the museum is on that side,” I said to Vasil and nodded to the TV. What should have been a sentence that I hoped would strike a peace between us, turned out quite the opposite. Jadwiga turned in her chair and slowly, to make sure that I understand all that she was about to say, started to explain that democracy and freedom is one thing, but on the other side of the scale it does not lie dictatorship, as they write in the newspapers, but justice, order and the ability to work, to earn a living the way it has been done here for generations. And that the people in the forest understand the meaning of this much better than in Warsaw. In fact, nothing much would happen if the border crossed not behind, but in front of their house concluded Jadwiga, bringing our conversation for the evening to a close.

Tourism

Lukashenko's regime, often referred to as the last dictatorship in Europe, creates an interesting juxtaposition with the Białowieża Forest, the last European natural forest. Blavascunas (2008) describes how, in the eyes of Polish tourists and the practices of Białowieża's hoteliers and tourism promoters, the Białowieża Forest stands not only as a witness to an original state of nature, but also emerges as a relic of the distant and recent political history of Poland.

One of the artefacts that, according to Blavascunas, immerses Białowieża and its surroundings in the centre of a mythical Polish national history was the Soplicowo Hotel which opened in 2003 (burned down in 2010). The hotel name referred to one of the imaginary places from the epic story Pan Tadeusz by Adam Mickiewicz (1834). Mickiewicz, a native of the eastern Polish borderlands (now part of Belarus), in this national epic places in Soplicowo events that portray an idealized life of villagers, and the eponymous hotel through its architectural design confirms this idyllic vision of rural life. Casual visitors and hotel guests find themselves in...
a country house where every detail demonstrates unity with nature (the materials used, the representations of different domestic animals), staff are dressed in plain clothes (referring to folk clothing worn perhaps in the 19th century), and the furniture evokes the squire aristocracy which in Mickiewicz’s work bears thoughts of the reunification of the Polish state (room design).

Indeed, visitors to Białowieża can find themselves in different moments in Polish history: in a luxury imperial restaurant housed in the former Białowieża railway station, at the Tsar’s Boudoir Nightclub located in one of the big Białowieża hotels or in a railway train on a trip into the heart of the forest, where passengers are exposed to a staged attack of Soviet / Russian partisans and subsequently admitted to the Communist Party.

The antiquity of the forest and its uniqueness is thus connected with all this bizarre “Polish” history with which the visitor comes into contact only through its exotisation. Blavascunas conceptualises the past which the tourist encounters in Białowieża, as being composed of the following (2007, 2008): the ancient landscape and architectural details; the old (original) forest; the Polish view of Belarusians / local residents in the nineteenth century; and the period of communism, which is largely presented through the regime in neighbouring Belarus. The wired fence, the impenetrable border, which is so abhorrent to scientists and ecologists, and perhaps even to all the mammals on whose behalf scientists and environmentalists speak, then plays an important role in this image of Białowieża as a village frozen in time. It presentation as an attractive tourist relic of the past makes Białowieża, its inhabitants and neighbouring Belarus into genuine antiquities.

Every year, more and more tourists arrive in Białowieża. When the season is in full swing, the population of the village, originally less than a thousand, almost doubles. The luxury hotels that have been raised here in recent years are for Mariusz an eyesore. “To bring thousands of tourists to the National Park is nonsense,” he says. “Moreover, what exactly can they do here? People who came in recent years are increasingly those who not satisfied by organized walks in reserved zones and in the dedicated visitor park. One day in the forest, a second day in a museum, but what about the third day and other days?” Mariusz knows what program hoteliers would like to offer their guests, but further development of the infrastructure for the tourism industry, similar to the one provided by the Hotel Soplicowo and tourist trips into the forest, would go ever further into the history of nature and society. Environmentalists and scientists have, for now, successfully defended against this new development. As an attraction, therefore, hoteliers offer a trip to Belarus. The forest and mosquitoes are identical there, but the opportunity to visit another environmentally conserved area, along with politically conserved Belarus, makes this alternative very attractive in the context of the Białowieża boredom.

**Border Crossing**

The centre of Białowieża is only three or four miles away from the border with Belarus. Anatoly, a native local man and commander of the local border police station, did not seem to be too busy when meeting with me and my students in 2005. In the summer of 2005, he with his entire unit moved to a new gatehouse, one of those that were recently built, every twenty or thirty kilometres along the external border of the European Union. We do not encounter illegal border crossing here: the density of the forest and the abundance of mosquitoes in the summer months are the best barrier. And if anyone ever tried to transgress the border, in new cars with the slogan, “Leading through technology”, the border police will catch anyone.

A modernisation similar to that through which the guardhouse passed in 2005-2006, also happened on the nearby border crossing into Belarus. Two modular buildings on the Polish side, the other two on the Belarusian side, a border gate, a white line bisecting the narrow asphalt road exactly in the places where the state borders run and finally a large iron gate. This was how the border crossing in Białowieża used to look before modernizing it (or more precisely, EU-nizing it). The three members of the border police and one employee of the customs administration stationed here did not have much work. Since 2006, however, things are different. European standards have no understanding for modular buildings. Border crossings on the external border of the EU must comply with strictly prescribed requirements, including a bunker where the border police unit could hide in case of an air attack from enemy parties.
However, the EU does not harmonize only the border crossing itself, but the entire border regime. The institution of small local border traffic, which can be used only by locals and which was mainly used for visits of divided families across the border, was indeed cancelled and the possibility of lawfully crossing the border from April 2005 opened to all. If you have a valid passport, and if you have a Belarusian visa, you should have no obstructions to cross the border. Whether you are a local or a tourist. And this is exactly what Mariusz is afraid of. It starts with the construction of a new border crossing, then the expansion of the road that leads to it that will bring tourists here and thus the devastation of the "original" and "untouched wilderness" picks up speed. In the Białowieża Forest, free movement and the removal of all artificial barriers are deserved only by bison. In contrast, the movement of people should be restricted with new barriers.

The border crossing is only for pedestrians or cyclists. However, because the crossing is in the heart of the forest, it is not desirable that visitors should move around without proper supervision. At least, this is how the Belarusian authorities explain it when they do not allow tourists to wander around the park without a guide – an employee of the National Park. Tourists who pass through customs and passport clearance must wait until one of the employees of the park comes and takes over from the border guard. “The iron gate on the Belarusian side, is that the fence built in the eighties?”, I ask Jana, a young guard that here, in the middle of the forest, dressed in tight skirt and stilettos, seems somewhat out of place. “No, no, this is the gate where the Belarusian area of the strictly preserved zone of the national park begins,” she explains. Like on the Polish side, in this zone only tourists accompanied by an employee of the National Park can enter. It has already happened on several occasions that tourists properly checked and dispatched to the Belarusian side had, after several hours of waiting for staff from the National Park, simply returned back. “After all, for just one or two tourists it is not worth it for the Belarusians to send someone to come out of the park,” says Jana’s colleague with a rueful smile.

There were others, perhaps Dutch tourists, whose visas, passports, everything was fine, and who crossed the border on bicycles. And two hours later, a military off-road car arrived from the Belarusian KGB and escorted the Dutch tourists with their bicycles back to the border crossing. Grażyna, an ethnologist and national park employee from Białowieża, a Polish Belarusian, also talks about the KGB and experiences with its ever-present Belarusian secret police informers. Beyond the border, Grażyna visits distant relatives and, even in the 90s, conducted ethnological research there. “They guard only villages and roads. In the forest, you don’t come across control,” says Grażyna. Belarusians are not interested in the for-
est and its protection. The only thing guarded is Lukashenko’s summer house, or dacha. “The Białowieża Forest, the Belarusian half, is de facto Lukashenko’s personal property.” Grażyna thus creates a parallel between the untouchable (sacred) area in order to protect public interest, as in the Polish part of the National Park, and state protection, or rather the untouchability of personal property, as it is in the case of Belarus. The form in which interstate borders exist and how the border control regime and cross-border migration is practiced, thus directly affect the potential “vulnerabilities” of nature, the state and its representatives.

It is no wonder that tourists, as they move around in the context of the reality of a country with a political regime envisaged as an odd remnant from the period of the Soviet Union, and encounter unusual supervision and restriction of movement, explain their as a “return” to a bygone era. Tourists’ allegations of about the poverty in which Belarusian villagers live and the restrictions of movements to which they were exposed, which Blavascunas also experienced (2008), reinforce tourists’ understanding of their own civilizational maturity. The important thing is that tourists’ trips “to Belarus” and their understanding of what they saw on the Belarusian side, are not depicted in strict opposition to what they found in Białowieża. Belarus is not the antithesis of Białowieża. The only difference is in the range of services and the facilities for tourism: the obsolescence of the local population in Białowieża, on the other hand, is only slightly smaller than the one they witnessed in Belarus. National borders act as a border of the quality and “antiquity” of the life of locals, as well as of an exotic and wilderness environment. The viewpoint of Polish / western tourists is similar to the conclusion that Jadwiga formulated after my return from the bar U Wołodzi: that is that the national border could be allocated not beyond Białowieża, but several miles in front of it.

**Forms of Border**

The zone of strict protection of the National Park, for which Polish activists call, is also to be found on the Belarusian side of the border. The restricted zone that is to ensure the undisturbed lives of world unique game, here (coincidentally?) accurately replicates the belt where the national border runs. The barrier is not only created by the white line on the road, the gate, the Iron Gate, the fence, the border police, the KGB and the mosquitoes, but also by a zone of “untouched wilderness”. The forest, and its strict protection zone, serve as a natural barrier. Or perhaps as a roadblock created by nature? For each of the actors who appear in this paper, the border between Poland and Belarus represents something different that separates (or includes) different important facts and has other sources of legitimacy.

Scientists and environmental activists, such as Mariusz or Magda, whose academic careers reflect usual “Western” values and trajectories would like to remove physical barriers at the borders, so as to allow the movement of game to be as natural as possible, hence in the territory of both the Polish and Belarusian parks. This does not mean, however, that they would like to simultaneously open the Białowieża Forest, Białowieża and the small settlements scattered around it for the entire world. On the contrary, while the border should be more accessible for animals, the movement of people across the National Park should be more limited. According to Magda and Mariusz, until that happens, the existence of the Polish-Belarusian border dividing the national park entails at least one good thing: the closed border prevents the contamination of the “natural” Belarusian part of the forest by tourists.

The relationship to the border which Vasil and Jadwiga (and by extension, many other tutejshi) share is not straightforward and clear. Of course, they realize that its existence created a barrier and significantly reduced, or even ended living contact with many relatives who now live in Belarus. However, at the same time they are very well aware that the interplay of their life in the forest and on the border contributes to their marginalization and exoticization by the inhabitants of the central state, by “Poles”. Paradoxically, they do not attribute the border only with negative connotations. Its existence also demonstrates that many stereotypical views that they are exposed to do not reflect their own values. When Jadwiga said that the border could easily run in front of their house, she also said that the people and the values to which she is introduced by the Belarusian media feel (perhaps due to the historical experience of locals / tutejshi with the Poles) to her closer than the discourse of political legitimacy and justice currently dominant in Polish public space. The Polish-Belarusian border thus acts as a border between different local experiences imprinted with great history and varying value standards, and less like a border of different geopolitical regimes.

The importation difference of being tutejshi, that Vasil and Jadwiga perceive, is also emphasized by many Polish tourists and Białowieża’s hoteliers. The difference is that locals, who are enacted by the tourist industry as exotic and archaic, want to break away from this picture. They do so symbolically to seriously express a belonging to this past. Not as a curiosity, but as a practical policy option. For many visitors, Białowieża is only further evidence of the antiquated natural and social environment in which they found themselves for a few days. By tying interpretations of the region and its inhabitants, which are both anchored in the Polish national consciousness with the time of national revival, with the exotified image of post-Soviet Belarus, which the tourist industry actually offers, these tourists reiterate that the Belarusian border through the centre of the forest could equally be delineated in front of their own national park.

In this paper, I did not discuss the possibilities for nature conservation. Nor was my aim to argue about the motives and strategies of mobilization that Mariusz and his colleagues choose. I did not want to say that protests by environmentalists acted in favour of Lukashenko. And the last thing I wanted was to question the legiti-
macy of these protests. Through describing the situation of the environmentalists' protests, I just wanted to point out the various ways in which international borders are enacted. The practices that build them and the practices that dilute them. And the often unintended connections that these actions create. The mere presence or absence of a fence does not mean anything. It is not enough to ask what kind of material (physical) barriers, we find at a border, or what barriers are missing and who is missing them. Actually these barriers are not that important. More important is how these borders / barriers are used.

The Bialowieża Forest, its different zones with different regimes of entry (Strict Reserve National park, open national park, state forestry lands, and state forestry nature preserves), material barriers, EU standards, global and local arguments about how to protect nature, political tensions between Poland and Belarus, quests for mutual relationships between Poles and Belarusians (both those that are Polish and those that are citizens of Belarus), political interests and vocabulary based on the opposition of democracy and totalitarianism: all these in different situations refer to and are linked to each other. These references and links are directly involved in border creation or reduction. Through these connections, we can see how these different borders are permeable or impermeable for humans as well as for bison (and all those in Poland and Belarus that the Żubr represents).

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