Politics and the Environment in Eastern Europe is a wonderful volume that makes an excellent set of unique contributions to the political ecology and political anthropology of Eastern European environmentalism, environmental policy and the post-socialist transition. In fact, there is no other project like it as far as I am aware of, and the collection of engaging and critical chapters will surely be a sought-after resource for the present and future scholarship of the region. The project is timely and significant and will help to push theory and ethnography forward into new and fresh areas of inquiry.

-Edward Snajdr, John Jay College of Criminal Justice

Europe remains divided between east and west, with differences caused and worsened by uneven economic and political development. Amid these divisions, the environment has become a key battleground. The condition and sustainability of environmental resources are interlinked with systems of governance and power, from local to EU levels. Key challenges in the eastern European region today include increasingly authoritarian forms of government that threaten the operations and very existence of civil society groups; the importation of locally-contested conservation and environmental programmes that were designed elsewhere; and a resurgence in cultural nationalism that prescribes and normalises exclusionary nation-building myths.

This volume draws together essays by early-career academic researchers from across eastern Europe. Engaging with the critical tools of political ecology, its contributors provide a hitherto overlooked perspective on the current fate and reception of 'environmentalism' in the region. It asks how emergent forms of environmentalism have been received, how these movements and perspectives have redefined landscapes, and what the subtler effects of new regulatory regimes on communities and environment-dependent livelihoods have been.

Arranged in three sections, with case studies from Czechia, Hungary, Lithuania, Poland, Romania and Serbia, this collection develops anthropological views on the processes and consequences of the politicisation of the environment. It is valuable reading for human geographers, social and cultural historians, political ecologists, social movement and government scholars, political scientists, and specialists on Europe and European Union politics.

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Introduction

Political Ecology in Eastern Europe

Eszter Krasznai Kovács

Eastern Europe is often seen as a ‘lab’ or model for economic and socio-political experiments of “late industrial modernity”, with the region’s political agency muted by capitalist and socialist planners alike (Bockman and Eyal, 2002; Glassheim, 2006: 89). This volume takes as its starting position that there are valuable things to learn from the eastern European (EE) region despite (or because of) these silences and repressions (Rogers, 2010). Our edited collection explores the contemporary dynamics of environmentalism across EE between people, the environment and the state, identifying associated movements, practices and relations, and sketching out contemporary systems of politics and affect. We take as fundamental a ‘political ecology’ approach, where nature and ecology are understood to be produced through politics, culture and history, and the political is understood as both made through the material environment and as having environmental consequences (Gille, 2009). In doing so, we contribute to emergent understandings around the pivotal role of environmental resources in the development and maintenance of new political configurations, while also providing insight into how society-nature relations are a part of the region’s conceptions of place, landscape, livelihoods, and present and potential political futures.

Typical depictions of socialist legacies consist of largely grey urbanscapes, dirty streets and buildings, people queuing for basic goods, enormous coal smokestacks polluting the sky, vast expanses of decimated brown-mining sites, intensively managed agricultural areas, and, of course, the spectre of Chernobyl (Pavlínek and Pickles, 2000).
The ‘real’ environmental record of the state-socialist system is far more nuanced: alongside its share of environmental disasters and inefficiencies, the mosaic nature of intensive resource extraction also led to the persistence of a number of unique habitats; the highest forest coverage and levels of biodiversity found on the European continent; and a number of domestic (such as vegetable gardening, livestock-rearing) and societal norms that privileged self-sufficiency and local economies in ways enviable to contemporary environmental ‘small-is-beautiful’ movements (Smith and Jehlička, 2013). For example, the socialist system maintained and encouraged a distinct frugality borne not only out of a fundamental scarcity of goods, but also a waste processing system that mandated repair, re-use and waste recycling (Gille, 2007). These practices serve as a strong contrast to Western capitalist norms and question the ‘wasteful’ and ‘inefficient’ depictions of socialist eastern Europe (Gille, 2010; 2007).

These examples speak to the intertwined nature of the environment and society, as well as the existence of an orientalised ‘ecological East’ that was “invented” during the Enlightenment and further concretised by the region’s post-WWII Soviet occupation and socialist decades (Wolff, 1994; Snajdr, 2008). The chapters that follow interrogate these themes through close ethnographies and engagements with local, extant forms of environmentalisms in the EE region today. The chapters’ value lies in their sensitivity to the contradictions of environmentalism and the ‘messy’ means by which these can be realised, the increasing ways environmental issues overlap and intersect with other ‘tricky’ issues such as social justice, and the ‘wicked’ dilemmas conservation and environmental management pose on the ground.

The contradictions of environmental movements are many and shared globally, as modern-day political economies give rise not only to profligacy and waste but extensive socio-economic inequalities. The highly political questions raised by environmentalism are in the spotlight here, from how environmentalism is realised, to what it represents, who articulates it, and how the state reacts. This politics of engagement is relatively new in the EE context, as environmental groups became formally institutionalised only from the early 1990s (Herrschel, 2007; Smith and Timár, 2010; Smith and Jehlička, 2007). From this time, environmental groups were rapidly politicised as they engaged
with wider political questions, particularly concerning public decision-making (or its outright lack), or became used for the expression of a nativist nationalism (Auer, 1998; Dawson, 1996; Gille, 2009; Hicks, 2004).

The political engagement of the environmental movement is often a point of critique, given its self-depiction as founded on science and objective environmental ‘problems’. Although environmental protests are frequently grounded in discrete and identifiable scientific issues or localised causes, the remedies or trajectories for improving environmental conditions are ultimately reliant on political decision-making pathways that, through their variety, are by definition subjective. This subjectivity means that environmentalism often splinters as those affected or participating coalesce around different solutions. This means that environmentalism may lose its representativeness over time, or potentially even its closeness to its original ‘cause’ (e.g. Snajdr, 2008 describes these processes in Slovakia; Smolar, 1996). It is also arguably inevitable that a movement that often (especially in its ‘deep green’ incarnations) agitates for systemic change—to curb consumption and economic growth, or limit climate change—should become embedded amongst a host of issues rather than remaining as a separate entity. Environmental issues underpin the workings of and blur the boundaries between different sectors (Dalton, 2009). By its nature, therefore, environmentalism is realised through a fluctuating set of stakeholders, whose perceived acceptability, legitimacy, and thus power are constructed by wider political machinations. Today, we are at a juncture where ‘ecology’ as a field of knowledge—and the wider scientific and research process—is facing serious communication and credibility challenges in the midst of increasingly politically polarised, populist systems (Neimark et al., 2019). In this context, the eastern European region can perhaps lay claim to the dubious merit of setting precedents.

This volume thus grapples with the broad political ‘place’ of environmental issues, their reception and its spokespeople at a number of scales. The ‘fall’ of socialism post-1991 and eastern European accession to the EU post-2004 meant not only the passive downloading of environmental legislation and the new headquartering of Western conservation agencies in the region, but also the import of a number of development expectations, legal norms and processes. One example has been the expectation—held by Western financing and political
institutions—of development of a so-called ‘civil society’ or ‘third sector’, which were formally absent within the state-socialist system (Torsello, 2012). A vibrant, active civil society is viewed as essential to democracy in the West, as part of a desirable social order that often pits civil society against the state (Urry, 1981). Assumptions around the possibilities of ‘mediating’ institutions are problematic, as such ideal or universalist categories fail to capture societal relations and power realities in non-Western societies (Gledhill, 2000; Hann, 1996). For example, the acceptability of CSOs operating in opposition to the state is today of enormous contention in the region, particularly in Poland and Hungary, while there is low societal trust towards these institutions and high foreign aid dependency in Bulgaria and Romania (Vandor et al., 2017). The ‘foreign’ nature of civil society institutions, as well as the environmental ideas and ideals that they purport to represent, can form the prongs of populist attack against them.

Providing insight into how these somewhat grandiose ideological battles play out on the ground is the undertaking of anthropologists and social scientists, who explicitly work to decentre Western constructs and assumptions around norms (Verdery, 2003). Indeed, as Doug Rogers outlines, the “very act of trying to create them [these norms and institutions] permits a critique of their assumed universality, transportability, coherence, or desirability” (Rogers, 2010: 7). For these reasons close attention is paid to the informal and interpersonal practices, the cross-institutional linkages between ‘sectors’ in this volume (Hann, 1996). Scholarship from the region has only recently come to focus on the role of ‘nature’—how it is enacted, treated or protections and interventions configured and realised—in emergent, and now increasingly consolidating, political architectures in EE.

In the following section, an elaboration of regional political ecology is explored, including a critical look at the regional grouping and meaning of ‘Eastern Europe’. While markers of comparison “along externally derived and allegedly universal metrics of, for instance, freedom, corruption, marketisation, or the development of civil society” (Rogers, 2010: 12) are imbued with Western norms, expectations and external dependencies, there is enormous merit to exploring the present political realities of the region through reference to EE’s unique histories, local environment-society and power relations, and their global connections
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through inquiry that is sensitive and privy to local ‘ways of doing things’ (Burawoy et al., 2000).

A Regional Political Ecology

Political ecology focuses on the relations between ‘nature’ and people through attention to how natural resource access is governed from local to global scales, where environmental ‘problems’ are recognised as “social in origin and definition” (Watts and Peet, 2004: 7). The discipline has a strong focus on analysing the workings of power (in terms of the forms it takes, who articulates and wields it), and the differential consequences of intervention and management regimes on stakeholders and the environment (Robbins, 2008).

Bringing together the political and the ecological means recognising the agency of both people and the environment. Environments influence social realities: of local identities, livelihood possibilities and resources’ own management. For example, Staddon (2009) explores how particular trees and forest stands are “complicit” in some forms of tree theft in Bulgaria, whereby trees’ environments lead them to not ‘behave’ and grow as would be convenient to their “masters” — and scientific forestry. Recognising non-human agency also means re-focusing scholarly attention to perspectives and things normally unseen and without representation. These recognitions are important as the ways in which the environment is discussed matters: interventions are justified and legitimised through narratives and discourses that usually emanate from those who are in power, who decide management pathways (Forsyth, 2004).

These roles and agencies between people and the environment also transform citizen-state relationships. Centralised control, ownership and planning architectures were rapidly eroded in EE in the post-1991 period, leading to new rules and networks of resource extractors, owners, users, and so on. Newly-established EE democratic states privatised previously nationalised companies and industries in the aftermath of the collapse of intensive extraction of resources (coal, bauxite) and farming systems (arable and fruit, through cooperatives) (Oldfield, 2017). Conservation and environmental interests emerged and spread during this same period. These interests “re-territorialised” (Adams et al., 2014) claims to land, its uses and value, and have proven
conflict-ridden (Petrova, 2016). Land users’ ways of working and motivations have also been transformed: from 2004, the EU’s CAP has incentivised farmers into a new ‘service’ class (Heatherington, 2011; Kovács, 2015), as governments have also broadly aimed to create new middle classes (Buchowski, 2008; Hann, 2019). Such transformations have been encouraged through economic policy and sustainable development discourses that are ‘neoliberal’, which expressly prioritise the development of entrepreneurial individuals and entrench market-based solutions to public policy issues. These approaches do not contest problematic power hierarchies, nor high extraction and environmental degradation rates (Staddon and Cellarius, 2002).

Political ecology seeks to understand the differential effects of environmental, social and political-economic change on different societal groups through attention to their particular life experiences and perspectives. The typical lens through which political ecology inquiries present their analyses is ‘neoliberal’, in that it considers how ‘successfully’ or ‘unsuccessfully’ particular groups have navigated new systems. It subsequently brands these individuals or groups to be either ‘winners’ or ‘losers’. This prism is “in virtually all elite discourses about the masses”, and is both “simplistic and ethnocentric” (Sampson, 2009: 220–21). It is important to keep in mind that “ostensible ‘winners’ are constantly afraid of ‘losing’ and that those seemingly excluded from the economic development of EU integration still pursue strategies whereby they, too, can ‘win’” (ibid.), meaning that the contradictions and nuances of everyday lives need to be foregrounded.

For these reasons, many of the chapters in this book approach this challenge through locally engaged ethnographic research, to understand how people make meaning from and through changing politico-environmental contexts, circumstances and opportunities. They focus on a wide range of participants in this panoply: from particular environment action groups and political institutions to state responses, individuals’ and sectors’ identity shifts and transformations.

Over the past three decades, environmental resources have become a key battleground and point of contestation between local and international stakeholders, from communities, to corporations, to states, as each seeks to secure and formulate their needs, access and dominium. Recent electoral results within several EE states have had
enormous consequences for the forms of control and legal regulations over these resources, particularly as we experience an apparent decline in European ‘soft power’, and increasingly authoritarian domestic practices. The emergence of a new authoritarianism has given rise to a re-centralisation of decision-making pathways, and erosions in the operating space of civil society groups. More broadly, several governments have instituted high levels of corporate capture and corporatised government institutions through the reassertion of politically centralised monopolies, as in Hungary and Poland. Other states have established economic competition and brokerage systems for public policy issues, as for example in Czechia, Slovakia and Romania (Innes, 2014; see also; Stahl, 2012). At the same time, these political developments often encourage and normalise a resource nationalism that justifies regulatory interventions for the control, nepotistic privatisation or re-nationalisation of natural resources, and the protection and promotion of particular landscapes (Koch and Perreault, 2018). These developments have stark, long-term consequences for society and the environment and force a strong reckoning with where eastern European societies—and thus the European Union as a whole—are headed in terms of their political democracies, economic systems and environmental futures.

Environmental struggles are in and of themselves not unique to the post-socialist region (Petrova, 2016). It is thus important to contextualise the continued relevance of the post-socialist category: after all, the collapse of socialism was over thirty years ago, meaning that many adults in the region today do not have lived memories of state-socialist regimes. The region is also well past the moment of new beginnings; indeed, barely twenty years had passed when surveyed eastern Europeans expressed widespread discontent with the ‘new’ world order and their place in it, and 1991 has come to be viewed by many as a “failed point of origin” and lost opportunity (Nadkarni, 2020: 3).

Political ecology in its post-structural turn questions the seemingly ‘natural’ delineations or representations of territory and space (Escobar, 1996). Intra-regional (internal) insistence on an eastern European ‘difference’ is perhaps most often grounded within claims to a (still desired) cultural difference that originates from alternative experiences and interpretations of historical events and their consequences. The
historical case for the delineation of ‘Eastern Europe’ as separate is made with reference to the longevity of orthodox Christianity and the form of feudal relations in the region that saw power dispersed between ‘noble’ land-holders, in contrast to the more centralised power relations that existed between nobles and the monarch in the West (Rady, 2000). This difference, it is argued, led to the West’s earlier development and institutionalisation of an ‘absolutist’ state, which consisted of the normalisation of legal norms and population-state relations. The lack of these relations in EE justified the label of “backwardness” to the region (see for instance Chirot, 1991). This ‘backwardness’ set the stage for eastern Europe to adopt an “imitative strategy of catch-up” relative to the West (Berend, 1986: 329), in an effort to emulate, join and be recognised as equal European partners on political, economic and social terms set by the West.

This suggests that “orientalising” discourses and actions arise from within eastern Europe as well as from without (Zarycki, 2014). Orientalising discourses and ideologies result in east/west binary thinking that has economic and power consequences, most notably that the East is on a path-dependent course to become like the West. This view holds Western capitalist systems as exemplars, and problematically relegates everyone and everything else to irrelevance, eliminating non-Western agency. EE states and actors have a significant hand in how these power relations are made manifest—from acting as imitative “servile boot-lickers” to the ‘First World’ and “paternalistic companions” to the ‘Third’ (Nowak, 2016, in Grzechnik, 2019).

Bringing EE countries “in from the cold” through formal memberships of international alliances such as NATO and the EU has not necessarily thawed differences or closed gaps. Some scholars suggest that the “EU expanded its empire” rather than undergoing proper ‘integration’, where integration “implies mutuality, exchange, equality,” (Böröcz, 2001; Grzechnik, 2019: 1002; see also Zielonka, 2006). Instead, EE states remain crucially outside key decision-making circles. Merje Kuus’ work within the European Commission found an “orientalist discourse that assumes essential difference” between eastern and western Europe, where the east is “at a distance from” the West and lacks “Europeanness”, as manifest in their different styles and modes of diplomacy (Kuus, 2004: 472). In practice, this has meant that regional leaders have had little power to
influence the terms of their participation in policies that they have had to implement (Caddy, 1997; Kuus, 2007; Bőrőcz interview to Heimer in Népszava, 2019). Domestic ‘downloads’ of EU policies have been cached in technical language, with the political (and economic) consequences under-examined or entirely smoothed over (see Dimitrova, 2020 for an exploration of these issues in Bulgaria), which allowed integration to proceed despite the threat of deadlock. The process of negotiations and preparation, however, could be seen as a constant switching between the technical parts of the acquis and their potential. When considered together, the persistent side-lining of the EE region from political processes, regional EE sovereignty concerns regarding EU-power creep, and the decontextualised branding of EE economies and democracies as perpetually behind may in part explain the current reactionary populist, nationalist turn taking place within the EE region, which risks undermining the EU project itself (Mälksoo, 2019).

These processes—the expected passive acceptance of European laws and regulatory systems with no eastern input; the righteous need to ‘transform’, ‘develop’, ‘democratised’, or ‘lift up’ the East—demonstrate how the EE region continues to be viewed as an ‘underdog’, forever lagging behind politically and culturally, in need of socio-economic acceleration, on terms and conditions set by the European Commission and the EU’s triad of financial institutions.

There is thus a case to be made for the relevance of the EE or indeed the post-socialist category because it is lived and enacted as difference, from within and without, while at the same time being alive to the geographies and power relations of externally determined (yet internalised) markers of progress (Tlostanova, 2015). The themes of emulation, or outright dependency, run through this volume within the environmental sphere. However, the chapters do not dwell on dependency frameworks: they consider instead local assertions of ideology, activism and policy, to reinscribe agency to local actors, civil society and political groups and their struggles. Attention to local experiences contests the dominant normative expectations concerning the region’s economic and civic development: paying heed to socialist continuities and post-socialist relations provides alternative interpretations and insights into why things are the way they are, and how they may proceed from here (Stenning and Hörschelmann, 2008; Verdery, 2003).
This book offers a different vantage of EE through the use of political ecology, to show how on-the-ground experiences and histories of place contest dominant narratives and experiences of unequal politics, and how, in moments of encounter and contention, alternative ‘natural’ environments may be brought into being. High legislative activity around natural resources directly affects a large proportion of EE populations, as post-socialist societies’ demographics are still majority based in small towns or rural areas, such that many livelihoods are still (or once more) linked to resource extraction, industry and manufacturing sectors. In these contexts, environmentalism poses both a threat to traditional livelihoods and political allegiances, and opportunities for meaningful community engagement, local expressions of value, and the development and maintenance of already sustainable practices.

This Book’s Sections

This collection was born from an informal early-career research network whose members met through the years at a number of political ecology conferences, where we held panels on the regional emergence of populism and populist governments. We have each, in our various ways, been engaged in an effort to better understand and document the ecological and political consequences of these turns. Research that investigates the populist tropes, minutiae of democratic decline and normalisation of authoritarian practices is crucial, but threatens to obscure the impact of ‘everyday politics’ (Kerkvliet, 2009) on the lives of individual citizens, the real audiences for whom national governments ‘perform’ their rhetoric and diplomacy. The chapters in this volume try to strike a balance between broad environmental movements, civil society structures and state responses (the first half of the book), and local-level transformations, where ‘high’ politics are referenced only fleetingly, or glancingly, yet influence circumstances and contexts as they develop. This twofold approach aims to provide a better understanding of the ways in which new systems of governance and power are normalised and navigated.

Questions of environmental resource access and control are fundamentally intermingled with the politics of the day in EE at a number of levels: state centralisation of power increasingly determines the ways
in which any civil society may exist and operate; the oligarchisation of society and the emergence of new middle classes brings resources into new ownership patterns with untold consequences for local users or the state of the resources themselves; environmental actions risk sidelining other ways of valuing, using and seeing the environments requiring protection.

This volume is divided into three parts. **Part I** engages with the development of formal environmental movements in EE through civic actions or civil society organisations and their tactics, together with more recent government attitudes to these developments in Czechia, Hungary and Poland. **Part II** shifts focus to start to examine how experiences of landscape and daily life give rise to an environmental politics (formal and informal) that is increasingly nationalistic in Poland and Romania. **Part III** delineates more concrete interventions or changing legal frameworks to achieve conservation, or rural development, in order to question and investigate the impact of these interventions on communities, identities, and environment-dependent livelihoods.

In **Part I**, Eszter Kovács and György Pataki document the deliberate dismantling and subsequent decline of the environmental sector in Hungary, which was once composed of research institutions, designated government departments, and civil society groups and actions. While the disarray and absence of these institutions today is largely a result of the Orbán regime, it is worth noting that previous governments and accession prescriptions from the European Union have also played a part in this dismantling of the sector. Kovács and Pataki’s chapter pinpoints the ways in which the state positions ‘green’ interests as illegitimate and oppositional to national interests in public discourse, providing a contemporary insight into the working of the Orbán regime and how it wields its power. This contribution therefore underscores the difficulties of ‘developing’ or seeding environmental causes or a third sector through external financing or requirements, and highlights the need for local agency, buy-in and involvement in environmental (and other social) issues for the long term.

In contrast, in Chapter 2 Arnošt Novák unpacks the long-arc dynamics of protest and environmentalism in the Czech Republic. He documents new politicisations, radicalisations and allegiances through increased international cooperation between environmental
and climate change activists that contests the historical fragmentation within the domestic post-socialist environmental movement. In contrast to the Hungarian case, Novák’s embeddedness in the Czech movement allows him to pinpoint how recent largescale public campaigning has re-energised the environmental sector across Czech society, leading the formal state to reconsider its coal and climate policies. Here, civic action and the civil society sector, through their strong engagement and representation amongst the people, have power. Mikuláš Černík in Chapter 3 considers the evolution of environmental resistance developed by Novák through a very contemporary form of activism, the organisation and tactics of ‘climate camps’ between Poland and Czechia. Mass mobilisation that redirects states’ energy policies, and deliberative state responses to these demands, provide nascent insight into how environmentalism may gain broad societal legitimacy and its own political power.

In Chapter 4 Jana Hrckova also documents a contemporary example of activism or, using her term, ‘activation’ by local Warsovian residents to ‘save’ green spaces in Warsaw. Residents’ actions have challenged the neoliberal urban planning rhetoric of town planners and city administrators intent on turning Warsaw into a ‘world-class’ city worthy of Western investment. Helped along by a number of political scandals and crises at the city level, the result of local agitation may not only be the preservation of green sites across the city, but the creation of new imaginaries and “manoeuvring space” for what a city should look and feel like, and how it can be lived in and used. Hrckova develops the notion of how technical language is often hollow, allowing it to be inverted and deployed by environmentalists to suit preservation agendas that are diametrically opposed to the construction-heavy development prerogatives of the typical post-socialist city trying to compete on a global urban stage.

These chapters together offer compelling, multi-scalar reflections on the space an environmental ‘civil society’ has been able to carve out and operate within, in political contexts that often view this sector (both civil society and environmentalism) as antagonistic to state interests. This is most dramatic (although at the same time subtle and accumulative in its methods) in the Hungarian case, but the uses of violent state institutions against environmental activists is an increasingly global
phenomenon (Feng et al., 2020). The research from Czechia and Poland demonstrates the importance of international connections for local civil movements, as sources of regionally novel forms of activism (climate camps, coal protest), solidarity, and also as reminders of the borderless nature of many environmental issues. At the same time, these studies document a spectrum of state tactics to police, surveil or outright suppress environmentalism, where the branding of environmentalists as ‘extremists’ gives state institutions enormous (legal, as well as physical, intimidatory) power to curb and cow these movements—but where such labels might also legitimise and bring together formerly fragmented groups. All of these chapters demonstrate in different ways the merit of looking at the connections and networks behind and within environmental movements, as the various actions taken by groups in this sector may find potentially unexpected but valuable alliances in one another. The chapters also point to a fragility in the contemporary moment, a sentiment of by-the-grace-of-the-state tolerance of the existence and campaigns of environmental groups.

**Part II** examines the claims to alliances between ‘nature, blood and soil’, wherein people make meaning and politics from the contemporary landscape around them. In Chapter 5, Balsa Lubarda examines how, in Poland, ideological content is embedded and amended through activism and engagement with the fate of ‘far-right’ political organisations and individuals and their versions of environmentalism. Lubarda’s concept of ‘far-right ecologism’ makes explicit the constellation of actors and environments that meld worldviews and materialities into a political position, where right-wing and left-wing environmentalists increasingly align with a return to or privileging of local protest and local issues. Nationalist claims about ‘blood and soil’ are explored in Chapter 6 by Alexandra Coțofană, who engages directly with the forms of nationalism expressed online and in print media by people and groups threatened by the entry of foreign interests into Romania. In her account, the Carpathian Mountains are symbolically imbued with a xenophobic agency to ‘protect’ those deemed to be ethnic inhabitants of the region. This agency is political and reaffirms nationalist tropes around rights to land and belonging. Also focusing on Romania and the Carpathians, in Chapter 7 Imola Püsök recounts the ways in which inhabitants of villages ‘left behind’ by all forms of change experienced in the region...
over more than three decades—including economic collapse and shifts in industrial and primary resource extraction, rural abandonment and an increasing geographical marginality, and the entry of new corporate and environmental interests—have left the region’s oldest inhabitants in an increasingly precarious periphery. New modes and values of productivism brought in from ‘outside’ (the West, the young, the city) have displaced older conceptions of work and the factors that previously underpinned belonging. These ‘foreign’ agents and ideas include environmental claims by (local and international) NGOs, the extractive aspirations of gold-mining companies, and control-seeking state agencies—all of which share an intent to reap, and introduce new ways of reaping, profit from nature. They are also often explicit about the need to physically displace local people to achieve their goals.

Part II’s chapters highlight under-explored reasons for and forms of local nationalistic sentiment. These nationalisms originate in strong attachments to place and often an appreciation of nature that tries to also naturalise the people who inhabit these places. In the present era of globalisation, these attachments cause friction with the agents of change that are seen to arrive through external sources, from resource extraction processes, or development and infrastructure projects, or as security forces from distant states. Local knowledge of the natural environment, together with historical claims, strengthen nationalistic convictions, and suggest that increased populist rhetoric by state authorities reflect as well as seed pre-existing sentiments of dispossession and othering. However, as Lubarda also notes, localism as expressed through “ecological forms of nationalism” may be “potentially progressive and desirable”, as local duties and responsibilities may give rise to non-exclusive ethics of care.

There is a rich vein of scholarship on the EE region concerning the continuities and transformations in local natural resource access and use customs. This work has focused on intimate local knowledge of landscapes arising from a number of activities on the land: from foraging, especially of mushrooms (where Poles are at the ‘top end’ of the “mycophilia spectrum”, Kotowski et al., 2019; Kovalčík, 2014; Šiftová, 2020); from vegetable gardening and the continued ‘embeddedness’ of local food growing, sharing and markets (Jehlička et al., 2020; Jehlička and Daněk, 2017; Smith and Jehlička, 2007); from high winter fuel dependency as a result of high rural poverty (Buzar, 2007; Staddon,
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2009), and the regional preponderance of largely undocumented forest extraction practices (Vasile, 2019). There has also been a continuity in the function and access of some local-level, community institutions that are at odds with more ‘macro’ legal changes (Cellarius, 2004). This makes the intersection between ‘top-down’ regulatory regimes and local customs and access an important point of critical inquiry, particularly as the persistence of local use regimes are often negotiated around or in spite of paper-based, formal systems.

Part III develops insights into these local practices, but also makes the conflict between regulatory and interventionist expectations, and local ways of doing things, explicit. The work in this section documents the ways in which local communities and practices have been disrupted by or have deliberately accommodated pressure from external financiers and private actors. When these initiatives go on to fail, there is then a reconsideration as to what went wrong, and what has changed or been left behind. The chapters document how particular Western ideas around development or environmental interventions have travelled, and document their messy fates at the local level in EE: George Iordăchescu considers conservation in Romania, June Brawner explores the transformation of Tokaj wine-making practices in eastern Hungary, Renata Blumberg emphasises the academic blinkers that fail to ‘see’ and learn from the value of extant local food practices in the east, Jovana Dikovic contests what success means within a rural region, and Éva Mihalovics discusses the structural and personal inequalities that set some people and projects up for failure in rural Hungary.

The people with whom we have engaged and written about in these chapters are frequently fragmented from one another and centres of power, and find themselves up against big legal-corporate machines. They cannot be completely excluded or left behind because they, their possessions and labour are required for continued production. However, local acceptance and modification of newly introduced ways of doing things have not gone smoothly, just as identity changes and the emergence of Homo oeconomicus were not inevitable with the collapse of socialism (Dunn, 2009). The chapters in this section also canvass how new production methods or environmental interventions in eastern Europe rely on, import and depend on Western ideas, actors, money, and so on. In Chapter 8, George Iordăchescu recounts
the transposition and contemporary evolution of fortress wilderness conservation in Romania, where wild nature is emerging as an environmental fix that generates capital. National-park approaches are the prerogative and modus operandi of conservation from its earliest days in the US, and have also been adopted by the EU. Today the prospect of touristic and other capital is a motivating factor for making inroads into the Carpathians of Romania as a ‘wilderness’ frontier. There is a stark scalar fragmentation of reactions and adoptions of this new conservation between formal institutions of the state, the (private) agencies tasked with realising the conservation area, and local land users. This chapter points again to the sources of disenchantment with top-down civil and state projects.

June Brawner’s work in Chapter 9 presents a fascinating case study of the production of (no longer so sweet) Tokaj wine, where changing practices in wine production cater to the palate of Western consumers. This very question of taste and palate is, she argues, a modern phenomenon: the advent of ‘expert’ wine tasting externalised taste judgement—and found the ‘traditional’ Hungarian ways lacking. Modern tastes have transformed the Tokaj wine market and has resulted in the active devaluation of traditional methods and land users. Brawner also questions the extent to which ‘local tradition’ has been eliminated or eroded by new values and processes of wine-making. Renata Blumberg in Chapter 10 takes up several of Brawner’s themes through a theoretical consideration of the ways in which research ideas travel: from the popularity, and even foundational role, of eastern European agrarian societies for the study of the political economy of food systems, to the region’s contemporary peripheralisation as a source of theory. Blumberg proposes a geographical approach to a political ecology of food systems that centres and recognises the many extant values and practices in EE that act as the envy of parallel ‘green’ or sustainability movements in the West, such as the persistence of local markets, household-level production and food storage.

Renata Blumberg also cautions against reducing all analyses of effects and processes to capitalism, as the contextual social and cultural logics of work, labour, production, and held and translated values must also be accounted for. The final two chapters approach the socio-cultural context of rural development with this objective. In Chapter 11 Jovana
Dikovic examines what constitutes ‘development’ and ‘success’ from the local perspective of land users and those dwelling in villages across Serbia. Her villagers’ accounts challenge the assumptions that belie the widespread use of economic incentives to influence land-holders throughout the EU, or show what may be at stake if CAP subsidies are introduced in the near future. These incentives supposedly reorient productivism and work to more efficient land uses. However, Dikovic asks whether such exclusively economic rationales fundamentally misunderstand what motivates land-users, who are keenly connected and sensitive to their neighbours and wider communities, and motivated by more than capital accumulation.

Éva Mihalovics in Chapter 12 questions why, from her experience as a practitioner and researcher, development projects seemingly ‘fail’ in north-east Hungary. Her account pinpoints the objectification and often patronising engagement of development practitioners with local communities and individuals. Éva’s discussion also highlights the clash of the local and pragmatic with the externally designed and funded requirements for participation in these development schemes. While these two chapters underscore the temporally limited success and longevity of ‘development’ imposed in technical ways from the outside, with little appreciation of (or interest in) local values or realities, they also agitate for more. In Dikovic’s case, there is a plea for meaningful local engagement prior to the introduction of any intervention or policy that may carry enormous implications for local livelihoods and values. Éva Mihalovics’s chapter effectively agitates for scholarly change—for all of us to reflect on how research and interventions intended to ‘improve’ local lives often replicate or give rise to new problems amongst communities.

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Taken together, these contributions provide a snapshot of the complex entanglements that make up the EE region’s ‘environmentalisms’. A strong grasp of these complexities is crucial for a better understanding of how a greener, more sustainable economy and way of life may be fostered. At the same time, they speak to the importance of ‘having an ear to the ground’, and the continued need for locally engaged scholarship.
References


