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Value of Forestry in Slovakia

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0. Introduction

I visited Jedľové Kostoľany, one of the villages in the Slovak region of Trábeč, for the first time in late April 2023. Inspired by the Czechoslovak ethnological works on kinship relations carried out there in the second half of the twentieth century (e.g. Švecová 1974, 1975), I had a number of topics in mind that I thought would be worth exploring. As soon as I arrived, my attention was drawn to forests, occupying a central position here—something I had, ironically, never thought of before. The village was surrounded by relatively low-altitude yet vast forested lands and meadows stretching out of sight into neighbouring places. I saw piles of wood stationed in almost every courtyard of the local houses. Somewhere in the distance, I could hear a sawmill humming irregularly. After entering the local administration office and having a brief talk about my research, the mayor himself remarked that work in forests had always been an essential part of life in the region, as if to confirm my spontaneous observations. At that time I was not aware of the fact that I would need to almost entirely re-focus my attention to the nearby village of Topoľčianky as the main centralised forestry site in the region. The forest itself proved, in any case, to be a pertinent starting point for my ethnographic enquiry into forestry and the creation of value.

A few months later, on a late September morning, I met Jozef, one of my main interlocutors, in Topoľčianky's picturesque central square. It was just a few minutes walk from there to the first arranged meeting of the day at the forestry office, but he insisted we needed a car so that we could easily get to other places later. The office was aptly situated in the famous village park, just a few minutes' walk from the renowned chateau and the national stud farm. The wood-carved building lay slightly off the main park road, but still offered an impressive view of the park with a spacious green scenery in front of it, decorated by an alloy-made bear statue and a small rustic fountain. Off to the side stood a small historic castle, nowadays used as accommodation for hunting tourists. Jozef noted that it was proudly owned by local forestry 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. Despite the fact that around sixty people work here, it felt quite relaxed inside. The carvings made of wood created an old-fashioned, warm, almost cottage-like atmosphere. I learned that it was built during the communist era for the then newly restructured state forestry department of Topoľčianky. The entrance hall was decorated with a multitude of hunting trophies, underlining the overall

“forest” energy. A variety of forestry-related items, such as books, photographs (both historical and contemporary), wines, or small samples of wood informing about the region’s trees from a botanical perspective, were all displayed in glass cabinets. As we were reaching the second floor, where the arranged interview was to take place, we met several people. Jozef seemed to know all of them personally. Each encounter was followed by a small personal conversation. I observed with interest how close the relationships seemed to be despite the obvious age difference between him and some of his former colleagues. Later that day he told me about how content it made him to know the people there. He had always maintained friendly relations with his colleagues and enjoyed visiting them regularly now that he was retired. At the same time, he admitted that he no longer knew all of the people and that the fluctuation of people seemed to make the whole office more “impersonal” and the relationships more “technical” when compared with the “past [socialist] times”.

Familiarity could certainly be felt when we entered the workplace of Oto (57), Jozef’s former colleague and a friend, who works in what is officially called the technical part of the administration. The technicians, as they are jointly called, work in different areas such as timber production, plantation, technical preparation, and planning. Oto is in charge of mechanisation, which he described as a mixture of all the aforementioned activities. Little jokes exchanged in familiar spirits between the two men opened our way into Oto’s office. Stacks of paper were literally everywhere in the small room. After we took a seat on two chairs prepared for us, Oto started by introducing himself and his work trajectory in forestry. What stood out particularly was that he repeatedly mentioned his plans to study forestry at university¹, which had not worked out for various reasons related to his personal life. Nevertheless, he presented himself as an educated professional who knew what he was doing and did it with full expertise and passion. The interview was randomly disrupted by an exchange between the two men about internal forestry issues, using the specific jargon I did not really understand. This instance further underlined his “professional” self-positioning.

The introduction was followed by a conversation on the current situation in local and national forestry. Oto was largely critical of the financial model on which the institution has been based since the regime change. Complete dependence on timber as the main commodity has led to a corrupt environment and insufficient financial stability. He contrasted the situation

¹ Oto was the only person I met who actively articulated the wish to study forestry engineering at the university. Other foresters were usually proud of what they had achieved in terms of “practical” forestry education and did not aspire to a university degree.

with Western European countries, which in his view manage their finances much better, more effectively and more sustainably. The so-called “non-production” forestry work elements such as water regimes, oxygen production, protection and maintenance also have their financial and economic value here. These crucial parts of forestry work are done “for free” in Slovakia, which Oto saw as unreliable, unfriendly towards foresters and unsustainable in the long-term perspective.

A related pressing issue Oto (along with Jozef who would be nodding in agreement) was seriously critical of was the growing tension between foresters and environmentalists from “green” NGOs. He complained that foresters and forestry as state actors were being perceived by the public as enemies of nature. This, he said, was a consequence of the “green” actors’ growing influence in public discourse, the media sphere and state policy. Both men described the “ideal” type of an environmentalist as a young person from the capital who only visits forests as a tourist and has no expertise in forestry work, including environmental protection and sustainability. I was well aware of this debate at the time, although my interlocutors would initially express the issue (verbally and in practice) less directly than Oto did here. These interrelated issues of value creation and the tension between state foresters and non-state actors followed me throughout the fieldwork and form the core of my thesis.

“The main question remains how to reach people, how to show that we need forestry and we can also be proud of it. That we are not enemies of nature and that we understand our profession.” These words from Jozef provided a fitting conclusion to the interview. Oto apologised for not having more time for us, which he said was a consequence of the current climate in the institution. It was an indication that he perceived work today as more stressful than ever before. He accompanied me and Jozef to the car parked outside the building. Similar to our arrival, we encountered a number of people as we moved from the fourth floor to the entrance door. Friendly, almost family-like conversations took place again, with topics ranging from specific forestry-related issues to their children and family life. The tense atmosphere of the institution Oto had mentioned just a couple of minutes earlier seemed to be 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 entered the park’s scenic green space outside. He lit the cigarette and talked to Jozef about the current situation around local forests. The relaxed feeling prevailed, underlined by the still warm, almost summery air, the local landscape and the wooden, cottage-like office building behind us. Standing there with the two men, both wearing the typical green colour foresters always wore

at work and in their private lives, talking passionately about forests, I felt more like I was part of an informal meetup between two friends, rather than standing in front of the central forestry institution in the region and one of the most important ones within the national context. After finishing his cigarette, Oto thanked me for the visit and joked warmly that my research had finally allowed him to see and talk to Jozef after quite some time. We got into Jozef's car, waved goodbye to Oto as he went back to the office and drove off to the next scheduled visit of the day.

I start with the scene from the very first and one of the final moments spent in the field to hint at the emerging central elements of my thesis, which have recurred throughout the research and will be elaborated in this work. That is, the thesis focuses on the negotiation of forestry in Slovakia, its transformation, value creation, and (conflicting) relations internally, with environmentalists, and with the public. The broader aim is to understand the ways in which these instances unfold, as well as their consequences (such as devaluation and revaluation of forestry work).

0.1 On Being in the Field: Fieldsite(s) and Research Contexts

I conducted my fieldwork over the summer of 2023, at various intervals for altogether four weeks from May to September. It took place (mainly) in Topoľčianky, a village with approximately 2650 residents, located in the central-western part of Slovakia² and Zlaté Moravce municipality, about an hour and a half's drive from the capital. Known for its surrounding natural landscapes, famous wine production, a national stud farm and a chateau used as a summer residence by the president of the First Czechoslovak Republic Tomáš Garrigue Masaryk, its connection with forestry has a long history especially in the context of the post-Habsburg period (1918-1938). Most of the local assets were acquired and administered by the newly established Czechoslovak state after the collapse of the monarchy (Šabo 2021). During the socialist period, forestry-centred production continued in the region. Topoľčianky is surrounded by a number of other historically and structurally less significant villages, which, together with the aforementioned characteristics, make the village a kind of rural "centre" and a prestigious forestry site within and beyond the region. The provincial town of Zlaté Moravce, less than ten minutes' drive from the village, is easily accessible and

² The country joined the EU in 2004 together with the Czech Republic and Hungary, among others. The official currency has been the euro since 2009.

is used by the majority of the locals for shopping, work or other kinds of “urban” activities not available in the village.

The convenient location enabled me to come to the village as often as I needed to. Alternatively, I would stay there for a few days and then come again the following week, having become more familiar with the data collected during the previous visit or if an interview had been arranged. This is not to say that my approach was culturally and spatially confined to one setting which would, in turn, imply the historical dead-end of anthropology as a discipline (Comaroff, Comaroff 2003). On the contrary, I moved around when conducting interviews, observing quotidian contexts (in the offices or timber warehouse, at foresters’ homes or simply in the village), attending a village festivity, or having an impromptu conversation. The local social and physical structure allowed me to do this. Most of the villages are close to each other, so I could easily walk from one to the other and back again. In this way I visited Machulince, Host’ovce, Obyce and Jedľové Kostol’any. Given its centrality, I do not name the places specifically in the work and simply refer to the setting as Topolčianky.

Throughout my fieldwork, I worked with three main interlocutors (see below) with whom I spent most of the time in the village and beyond. They very kindly shared their life stories with me and let me be a part of their day-to-day lives. From the outset, it seemed important for me to be in touch with people who had experienced the socialist period to understand value transformation in forestry as a historically embedded process. I did not know anyone personally in the region or in forestry before I started my research, which made the process of gaining access quite complicated. I repeatedly tried to establish contact with the local forestry office, but it was never really successful: either I got replies saying that the employees did not have time for interviews, or I got no response at all. Given the fact that the office currently employs around sixty people, I did not expect such reactions. My impression in those moments was that the forestry department was a rather “closed-up”³ institution for outsiders like myself, which, initially and ironically, aligned with the country’s negative public discourse on forestry—already mentioned in the conversation above—and its circulation in the mainstream media⁴. I was also warned about this before starting the research by some of my

³ Later it turned out that this was true, and something which forestry itself has been aware of and tried to cope with. I discuss these aspects in Chapter 2 and 3 in more detail.

⁴ Forestry’s negative reputation was intensely circulated in the national media at the time I conducted my research. It intensified further as national elections were held in September.

acquaintances who had been involved with the institution as part of their studies and/or as members of various NGOs.

I managed to obtain two crucial contacts at last (Jozef and Peter, see below), which then led me to the third one. The first contact came from the forestry office itself. The secretary told me that the man whose contact she provided was a retired forester from the village. He would without a doubt find time for me, she said. The second contact was from the local administration who promised to put me in touch with the father of one of the mayor's assistants, who they told me had worked in the local forestry all his life. Fortunately, both men were willing to meet me when I approached them and explained the details of my research. I also found out later that they knew each other well which proved fruitful for additional contacts in the long-term perspective, given my outsider position within local forestry in particular and the village in general. I became a more or less trusted person locally as a result of my established relations with both men. Whenever I was on my own and mentioned their names, people immediately opened up to me and were happy to answer my questions or show me certain places if I wished so. In this regard, it is important to acknowledge the role of friendships as a particular form of social relations. Killick and Desai (2010: 11) metaphorically argue that “the capacity to make friends seems to be one way in which to achieve full and perfected personhood, and thus enjoy a successful social career”. I realised after some time spent in the village that I was moving through a (mostly local) friendship network. It, indeed, enabled me to successfully gain access to the field and to the actors. Not only were my main interlocutors long-time close friends, they were also friends or acquaintances of other people from forestry whom I met. Everyone seemed to know everyone. Access to and encounters in the field would perhaps be more difficult if the relational constellation were more fragmented. Becoming friends with my main interlocutors also helped me to position myself as a familiar person in interactions with other people, despite the fact that I had only known them for a short time.

Age differences also contributed significantly to the way I was treated. My main interlocutors (and others) were for the most part people of a completely different generation, usually about twice my age. After entering the field, I noticed that the usual tendency was to accompany me, show me around, explain and help me with whatever I needed access. I was often confronted with remarks that I looked or sounded similar to my interlocutors' sons or grandsons, which further highlighted the constructed “protégé-mentor-like” relational pattern

the generational gap had led to. This view of generations as at once similar and different also contributed to the ambiguity of doing anthropology at home.

Marilyn Strathern reflected famously on the anthropologist's position when turning to "one's own society", highlighting the fluid nature of (ethnographic) familiarity and distance (Strathern 1987: 16). Linguistic competence and knowledge of the social context within which the ethnographer works have certainly been regarded as beneficial when doing anthropology at home (whatever and wherever home is). The ethnographic reality is yet, according to Strathern, more complex than such (Western) assumptions would suggest. Discontinuities occur (not only) between local understandings and analytical concepts used by the "native" researcher (ibid.: 18). In other words, the relationship between anthropologist's "techniques of organising knowledge and how people organise knowledge about themselves" (ibid.: 31) mediates the often taken-for-granted, static image of an ontologically and epistemologically "better-off" ethnographer conducting research in her/his "own" culture.

Along the same lines, my position during the research stayed more or less that of a trusted outsider, despite being at what I would call home (i.e. in the home country). The outsider position was, in retrospect, also something I had not expected at the beginning, precisely because I had relied on the fact that my interlocutors would be from "my own" society. Differently put, I was expecting an ethnographic context both known and unknown "where "others" are both ourselves and those relatively different from us, whom we see as part of the same collectivity" (Peirano 1998: 123). The presumed "better-off" position of a "native" ethnographer as a Western construct in itself, to which Strathern refers, was something I initially took for granted. This experience made me realise that the study of alterity as the main objective of anthropological research can take many *different* forms and may be produced at different scales—regardless of whether the anthropologist is located in and aims to study his or her own society and culture or not. After all, ethnographic distance and difference can be "challenged, blurred [and] relationally reconstructed" (Clifford 1997: 81).

Some people from forestry, for instance, started to recognise me in the village (they would mostly see me accompanied by one of my main interlocutors), although they usually did not approach me. I was, perhaps, still "the Other" to them on several levels: a generally unknown person, a student associated with the urban milieu without any knowledge on the studied

subject⁵ or any personal ties to the village, usually just walking around with a notebook in his hand. This attitude may, of course, have something to do with the simple fact that in the region, as elsewhere, people tended to be reserved at the beginning of a conversation or other form of interaction with an unfamiliar face. Forestry as a state institution, with its internal, politically charged dynamics and hierarchies, may also be considered a reason for a certain degree of reluctance towards outsiders. This is not to say that locals were not receptive to me. On the contrary, I did not encounter any person who would not want to talk to me when I started a (spontaneous) interaction. The snowballing effect my primary contacts (which later turned into friendships) brought was certainly important in this respect, as noted above. People may also have associated me with my interest in “all things forestry”, which was often seen and received with sympathy and gratitude.

In what follows, I will introduce my main interlocutors in more detail, as their stories, experiences and life trajectories are central to the work presented here. I use their real names as they wished me to do. They were enthusiastic when I told them that I wanted to write about their life stories. Despite the explicit wish to include their real names, the classic ethnographic dilemma regarding the extent to which to disclose any kind of personal and sensitive information remains important. The sensitive issues I touched upon during the fieldwork build a central part of the work, for which reason I tried to present and navigate them with tactful care during the writing process. For some actors with whom I did not establish a more personal relation (usually “non-locals” I met for an interview), I refer to their work positions instead of their real names. Extracted from the situated fieldwork experiences with my interlocutors in the village and beyond, I use the term “forestry” as a constructed collective actor for readability reasons. It also enables me to address the collective forestry identity and agency associated with it (Gehring, Marx 2023). It should however not imply that I focused solely on forestry as a static institution, nor that I engaged in any kind of institutional analysis per se.

Jozef, 70, is a retired forester who worked in state forestry all his life. After graduating from one of the country’s forestry schools in the 1970s as the very first (and last) forester in his family, he was assigned to work in different parts of western Slovakia to stay close to his relatives. A few years later he moved to Topoľčianky, the village where he was born and grew up. Here he worked in various positions: from a manual worker in the forest, to the

⁵ I was usually asked whether I study forestry or biology “academically” when introducing myself. Anthropology and social sciences in general were rather unknown to the people I met.

main forester, to the technical administrator, to the office's main secretary. Staying in close touch with the forest remained, as he emphasised, always important to him, even when he was working in the office. Over the years he became one of the most committed and consistent faces associated with local forestry in the region. He was also actively involved in local hunting and helped to organise various hunting events, something he still enjoys doing from time to time when being invited as an honorary forestry member. Moreover, he has been a passionate beekeeper and honey producer, participating in regional and national competitions in the past. His passion for the history of forestry has led him to write a number of short books about forestry and the village, and he enjoys photographing animals and plants in the local woods. He lives with his wife, who is also from the village and was a forestry employee in the office all her life. Both are well known among locals and their personal relations within forestry extend across the country.

Peter, 63, has worked in local forestry since completing his apprenticeship in the late 1970s. He was born in Jedľové Kostol'any, one of Topoľčianky's surrounding villages, where he has worked ever since. His parents, grandparents and other relatives were not forestry workers, but his son studied forestry engineering at the country's only forestry university in the town 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 an ordinary and later as a head forester. Interestingly, he has never been involved in huntings, which he liked to point out as an exception in the region. He simply never enjoyed it and did only what was officially required (preparing hunts for guests, feeding forest animals, controlling the number of animals in the territories). He used to be a beekeeper but decided to give it up a few years ago due to financial and time reasons and lack of energy. Recently he has discovered and is passionate about viticulture, although he does not produce his own wine and has no vineyards.

Ivan, 68, is officially retired but still works on a full-time basis⁶. His career trajectory in Topoľčianky was not as direct as the previous two cases. Although he was born and raised in the village and close to forestry (his father was a forester and later worked in the office), he went to the same school as Jozef in the northern part of the country in the town of Liptovský Hrádok. He stayed there for more than 10 years, working as an ordinary forester, mainly in machine work. After receiving an offer to return to Topoľčianky, he has been working and

⁶ As a result of low pensions and workforce scarcity, it is quite common in Slovakia to stay employed a few years longer after the "official" retirement age.

living there ever since. As he puts it, Topolčianky is his most favourite place in the whole world. He no longer has to work with machines, which makes the current position physically easier than the previous one. He has never worked in the office and has never aimed to do so (he received and rejected an offer several times). His main interest has always been working close to nature. He is a passionate hunter and one of the most prominent faces in the organisation and administration of today's hunts, both internally and externally for guests and tourists. He has also been active in beekeeping. As Jozef's good friend, they like to collaborate when trying new things in beekeeping or when facing any kind of challenges.

I met many more people throughout the fieldwork, both locals and non-locals. I interviewed members and the chairman of a "green" civic association, the chairman of the Slovak Forestry Chamber, the director of the Slovak Forests, and Pro Silva association members. These organisations were particularly, and sometimes unexpectedly, central to the local context, reflecting the dynamic, "beyond the local", non-parochial scale the research was embedded in. The theoretical assertion that the (rural) local "should not be reified and can never be understood in isolation but is constantly involved in a two-way interaction with wider translocal, national and global processes" (Kay et al. 2012: 59) thus resonated significantly with my fieldwork experience. These interviews were for practical reasons conducted online, with the exception of the "green" association which is based in the capital and was therefore easily accessible to me.

My primary intention to carry out these non-local conversations was to use them as a contextual "backdrop" to what I was learning and observing in the village. During the process, it became clear that the issues from "elsewhere" the actors were articulating to me were very much present in the village—whether materially or intangibly. As most of the non-local actors were located in urban spaces (the "green" association in particular), it led me to consider the broader context of the urban/rural divide and the stereotypical tendency to omit the latter when considering the former and vice versa. Post-socialist urban contexts, for instance, have typically been portrayed as (ideally progressive) catalysts of change, in contrast to rural areas "conceived as socially homogeneous spaces, with relatively passive or at least politically conservative populations, and therefore, as having little of positive value to contribute to [socio-economic] transformations" (Kay et al. 2012: 55). Such views in particular and the assumed urban/rural division more generally were challenged in my work, which pointed to more fluid, ongoing linkages and mutual entanglements between the local rural actors (and concerns) and their urban counterparts from "elsewhere". It turned out that

the village is indeed connected to the urban on different scales, as the chapters that constitute the main body of the work presented here will show.

The conducted interviews were for the most part semi-structured with questions around the past and present functioning of forestry, changes, challenges and ecological issues. This enabled me to concentrate on the instances I was interested in, while leaving enough room to adjust in case the interlocutors narrated what was important to them and what was not the primary focus of my question—such as various personal stories from their professional and private lives, which usually led to fruitful insights. The situation was quite different with my main interlocutors with whom I spent more time on a day-to-day basis and with whom I developed more personal relations. Informal “free-flowing” conversations (Fontein 2013: 78) in various situations exceeded here the number of semi-structured interviews significantly (I usually used the latter in the first and/or second meeting when the rapport was not “fully” established). More broadly, my experience aligned with the assertion that ethnographic interviews and their forms depend primarily “upon the accessibility of a particular informant, their social status, and [the researcher’s] relationship with them” (Fontein 2013: 79). The interview I conducted with the director of the Slovak Forests, for example, was, unsurprisingly, more formal and required more planning ahead than the situations when I repeatedly visited the forestry office with Ivan or sat in the local bar with Jozef. In some cases I also positioned myself “in-between” the formal and the more free form, for instance when I met people in the office whom I had never met before and would never meet again. On the one hand, I was introduced as a close friend (Jozef would always use these words explicitly); on the other hand, I was also an “unknown” student from “elsewhere”. The combination of these identities required me to negotiate the “in-betweenness”, shifting from the serious to the more relaxed personal and back again when asking questions I was interested in or when intervening in a conversation that unfolded spontaneously. I recorded all the semi-structured interviews and transcribed them for analytical purposes. The excerpts I use in the work were translated from Slovak into English by myself. The numerous informal conversations were usually not recorded. In such cases, I made notes in my diary which were also used in the analysis.

Participant observation as “the quintessential ethnographic fieldwork method championed by Malinowski’s call for anthropologists to get “off the veranda” (Fontein 2013: 75) was certainly not as easy in practice as I had imagined it to be before entering the field. The initial idea that I would collect key ethnographic data by accompanying foresters during their

workdays proved unrealistic to execute for a simple reason I had, ironically, not expected. For official safety reasons I was not allowed to spend long periods of time in the forests where they worked. Fortunately, the local office allowed me to experience at least parts of the work practices on-site under my main interlocutors' guidance, who also showed me places I could not enter without them (such as the timber storage house). They also took me for a number of walks in the forests and around the village. The forestry office and the mundane village setting in itself provided further opportunities to observe and look behind "the obvious". As was already noted above, my position in these contexts remained that of an observing outsider, which, for obvious reasons, did not allow me to participate directly in the work activities I observed and took part in "indirectly". Disclosing my practical and knowledge-related inadequacies to do so (Fontein 2013: 77) was indeed fruitful, as my interlocutors tended to explain everything they felt was important for me to know. This enabled me to let them navigate the research process, at least to some extent. Additionally, I used various relevant online sources, ranging from official websites, to media archives, forums and newspaper articles, which provided further insights into some of the issues I was confronted with during the fieldwork.

0.2 On Post-Socialism

Although my aim here is not to engage with post-socialism as a theoretical concept per se, it remains a crucial reference point of my interlocutors. It is therefore useful to briefly summarise the anthropological debates around post-socialism that emerged in the 1990s and early 2000s, both as a theoretical concept and as a time-space condition. Caroline Humphrey, for instance, argued already in 2002 that post-socialism as an analytical category should always rest on particular historical conditions to capture the difference within actually "existing socialism(s)". The experiences of and changes in former socialist countries have certainly been eclectic and non-linear. This is precisely why the concept could serve as a "common ground" for comparative studies within the region. Humphrey, however, also pointed out its potential (temporal) limitations by concluding that

if socialist values come to be rejected in several entirely different ways in different regions of the former socialist zone, and if 'actually existing socialism' comes to be relegated into a largely forgotten past of yellowing newsprint, then it will be time to lay the category 'postsocialist' finally to rest. (Humphrey 2002: 15)

Two decades later, that still does not seem to be the case—at least not in the context of my fieldwork. Nevertheless, the lack of wider influences of the post-socialist anthropological theory on the discipline has been criticised (Gallinat 2022: 107; Thelen 2011). Blind spots such as the premise of socialist shortage economy, neo-institutionalism and Western understandings of the post-moment derived from ex-post analysis of socialism (e.g. the alleged linear retreat of the post-socialist state or the “other” socialist personality preventing a smooth transition to capitalism) have all contributed to such developments (Thelen 2011: 51, 53). Recent commentaries, however, suggest that the concept’s epistemological potentialities may have prevailed, despite occasional calls for its complete abandonment (Müller 2019). Rather than implying the local boundedness of area studies and a temporal emphasis on the static past, it has been argued that post-socialism can presently re-articulate its extended spatio-temporal reach with actors shifting from the East to the West and vice versa as the former “became integrated into global [capitalist] value hierarchies” (Gallinat 2022: 109). Accounting for temporal (non-linearity) and spatial (beyond static East-West dichotomy) complexities can open up new horizons for future inquiry into post-socialist contexts. As Kaneff (2022: 215) aptly argues, post-socialism “references multiple temporalities and also integrates many spaces, applicable far beyond the limited boundaries of former socialist and Soviet states”. In the same vein, my thesis presents a fluid rather than a bounded context of post-socialist present (and possible future) realities in which the “past” socialist experience still matters in various, even if implicit, valuable ways. They coexist simultaneously with a variety of other experiences on different time-space levels.

0.3 Chapter Overview

Focusing on historically embedded creation of value within state forestry in contemporary Slovakia, the main body of work presented here is divided into three successive chapters. The reader is invited to read them as interconnected rather than separate units. The first chapter explores the ways in which my interlocutors remembered and attended to the socialist past in relation to forestry. In so doing, it presents the perceived consequences of the post-socialist transformation both in forestry and in the local (rural) community—particularly through the phenomenon of post-socialist nostalgia as a critique of the present. The overarching focus on the ambivalent accommodation of socialist values (“lived”, remembered, imagined or otherwise) and the absence of the pre-socialist period in the narratives penetrates the chapter further. In the second chapter, I move to the very present moment in forestry, focusing on the

ongoing tension between foresters and non-state/NGO environmentalists and its consequences, such as the public devaluation of foresters' work. I analyse the ways in which the notion of "good" forestry has been re-negotiated in the post-socialist context, re-producing the boundary between the two sets of actors further. The chapter focuses simultaneously on different forest care practices and variously negotiated notions and values of care as concomitant phenomena within the production of mutual exclusivity. The tension has resulted in efforts to present forestry in a positive light and to bring it, along with the devalued work of foresters, closer to the people. I analyse these endeavours in the third chapter using the ethnographic case of a local village festivity and the production of "traditional" forest foods. As already noted above, the chapters are thematically and contextually interrelated, even if they differ in their respective scope. The thesis closes with a summary that highlights the common thread of value creation: value as both a material and immaterial central element in forestry today.

1. “There Were No Problems, There Was No Stress”: Socialism, Socialist Forestry, Village Community and Post-Socialist Nostalgia

It was a hot July afternoon when I visited Peter for the first time. It was also the first time I had travelled by bus from Topoľčianky to a more distanced locale. I had no address where to get off. Peter just informed me on the phone to tell the bus driver his name and he would know where to stop. The bus was quite full of people travelling from the nearest town back home. Given the isolated nature of the small villages the bus passed through, it was not surprising that they seemed to know each other well. Some of them talked about mundane things and others remained silent. The atmosphere was the exact opposite of anonymity. I was the only one who got on in Topoľčianky. Some of the elderly passengers looked at me curiously, perhaps wondering who I was and where I was heading. I felt that I did not fit in; at the same time, it reminded me of imagined past times when villagers were united as a rural community.

The driver knew immediately what I meant when I mentioned that I was visiting Peter. He kindly suggested that he would let me know when we were near. After a 15-minute drive we arrived. There was no bus stop. The driver told me to cross the road and I would find Peter's house. I thanked him and got off. There was literally nothing to see except the regionally typical forests illuminated by the intense summer sunlight. The road which brought me here was narrow (it was not really visible from the bus) and the forests clearly dominated the landscape. It was very quiet and I did not see any cars or people. I could not call Peter because there was no signal on my phone. A little uncertain, I crossed the road as the bus driver had advised me to do.

There were three houses behind a line of trees. As I came nearer, I heard a whistle from one of the courtyards, followed by a shout calling me over. I was relieved to find out that it was Peter who had seen me from behind the fence of his house. He opened the door and greeted me warmly, laughing that I looked lost. He asked if the bus driver had done his job and if everything was all right with the journey as we moved and entered the property. It was green, spacious and full of different kinds of things I could not really discern properly. Two cats and a small dog were running around freely. Although Peter called it a garden, there were no vegetables or fruits growing, as was typical of these more remote places around Topoľčianky. A wooden table and two benches made of the same material were hidden under

a terrace roof right next to the house. Peter invited me to take a seat and offered me a glass of water. He was still wearing his green work clothes, the same colour I had seen other foresters wearing in the village. Complaining about the hot weather, he sat down on the other side of the table. It was the first time we had met in person, but it felt like we had known each other for a long time. Peter sometimes compared me to his grandson, who he said looked and sounded like me. He seemed pleased that I was interested in the work and life of foresters, as were my other interlocutors throughout the fieldwork.

Before I started asking questions, we talked a little about the house and its location in the middle of “nowhere”. Peter proudly told me that the property was owned by the forestry department before 1989. 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. Capacity was limited, so the houses were allocated based on how far the forester lived with his family or what kind of position one held at work. Peter recalled that the “main” foresters were usually given the house, while buses were provided on a daily basis for “ordinary” workers. He got the house around 1980 for what he called a “symbolic price”, while the property remained officially owned by the state⁷. 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”. With a smile on his face, he recalled how he and his neighbours from the other two houses—also foresters—would come home together from work every day. The families also got together after work or at weekends. Their children grew up together. Although this was not an uncommon way for families to live in the socialist countryside, Peter insisted that it was somehow special—the place was geographically and socially isolated from village life. However, this did not mean that the foresters and their families had no contact with Topolčianky. He explained that in those years the village was the centre of the local forestry which had to be visited regularly, but not every day as is the case today. After the regime change, state forestry put the houses up for sale. It was not a straightforward process, though. At first, they had to pay rent (Peter could not remember exactly how much) and were officially registered as tenants. Peter’s neighbours left the houses at that time. The reason was that, according to him, the situation felt quite insecure. All the paperwork regarding the rent was improvised and they were not sure if they would be able to continue living in the house at all. About 10 years later, the central forestry office made them an offer. Peter admitted that

⁷ A similar system of “mixed” ownership was used in Czechoslovak urban housing.

he was very happy that he and his wife had bought the property at that time. They still enjoy living in nature and it is still as close to the forest as it was 40 years ago.

The first encounter foreshadowed how people in the village would relate to the socialist period through a combination of relational and material perspectives, as well as the ambivalence of post-socialism as a reference point.

1.1 Ambivalent Recollections of Socialist and Post-Socialist Realities

1.1.1 Forestry Administration under Socialism

Talking about the house was an apt introduction which led us directly to the subject of life and forestry work in socialism. The repertoire of personal stories Peter had at hand seemed vast and I wondered how long it would take him to tell them all. He began with a descriptive account of how local forestry functioned under socialism. Its internal organisation was certainly less “centralised” than it is today. While Topolčianky was the seat of the main office and the warehouse, each neighbouring village in the region had additionally its own office and warehouse. The technical equipment needed for the work, such as sawmills, chainsaws, tractors, fertilisers, petrol, and in some places even horses was also provided. These regional workplaces were completely dismantled after 1989.

Peter admitted nostalgically that foresters could only dream now of such “technical completeness” provided by the state. He recalled that they did not have to worry, for example, about whether there would be enough fertiliser for each forester in the village, or whether they would find enough money for a new sawmill to replace the old one which had stopped working. All they had to do in such situations was to tell the local technician in the village office who would make sure that a new machine would be delivered, either from Topolčianky or from another region. The fuel tanks were always full. There was no need to worry about the current fuel price or the amount used. All of these instances became strictly controlled after the regime change. Some of the foresters bought their own sawmills because the ones provided by the institution were either too old, not working or the number provided was not sufficient. The fuel quantity prescribed for use is apparently so low now that it seems as if “they don’t want us to work at all,” he said angrily.

1.1.2 A Small Shed Tour and Post-Socialist Ownership Changes

Peter got up from the table and suggested that he would like to show me some of his own equipment he uses at work. He seemed excited about it so I agreed and we walked to the back of the house. There was a small, old-looking shed. Peter opened the door and we went inside. It was packed with all sorts of different things. He joked that I should just concentrate and look to the right, everything else was apparently unnecessary rubbish that needed to be cleared away. He showed me two chainsaws, one of which he had bought only recently, proudly claiming that it was a great piece of technology and that he liked to work with it as much as possible. He reiterated that state foresters usually use much older models, which he described as “a complete disaster”. I asked about the price and Peter admitted that he had used some of his savings to pay for it, otherwise he could not afford it. He was proud to own it and told me that most of his colleagues did not have this privilege; they had to rely on the state-owned ones. He held the machine representatively with the utmost care in his hands, perhaps to show how much he valued it. Apart from the chainsaws, he showed me a couple of specifically shaped shovels, together with a collection of green boots and clothes. The latter were apparently of much better quality during socialism and were also provided for free, which was no longer the case.

Ending the small shed tour, Peter locked the door and we went back to the table to continue our conversation. I asked what had happened to all the technical equipment provided by the state after the regime change. Peter recalled that at first it was rented, much like the houses. It was also very chaotic, and there was a rumour in local forestry that a small group of locals had taken control over the majority of the assets. In other words, the rent system was allegedly used as a manoeuvre to hide the fact that the formerly state-owned work equipment was now held in the hands of a few. Similar to the house cases, there was also an official sale to interested forestry actors and offers were made to “outsiders” as well. This procedure was also questioned by Peter and other local foresters who viewed it with suspicion as “completely corrupt”. Prices were too low, so the typical pattern was for a person to buy three tractors, for instance, leave forestry, and then sell the machines for a much higher price in a few years. Peter described one of his former colleagues who, according to him, was part of this group and did a lot of selling in the 1990s when he left forestry altogether. It should illustrate the seemingly widespread “illegal” practices that occurred after 1989. More than thirty years later, Peter still seemed quite disappointed when he described these occurrences. I

also had the feeling that he did not want to talk about it any further; perhaps because it was too personal and “political” (he did not trust “politics” at all, as he told me on another occasion a few weeks later).

1.1.3 Work and Togetherness in the (Socialist) Village

He then turned back to administrative issues. Work in the socialist region was divided into two main sectors: a refrigerator factory on the outskirts of the nearby town and forestry. Peter recalled how the latter structured life in the villages. It was not “only” about the work, but also about the village community revolving around forestry. As the villages are small and the land here is not suitable for large-scale agriculture, most villagers—both women⁸ and men—worked in forestry “because there was nothing else to do”, he claimed.

A particularly important event Peter remembered vividly was the cooking of game meat goulash. In winter, when there was usually less work due to the cold, snowy weather and shorter days, the foresters organised it in the local house of culture (*kultúrny dom*). The whole village was involved in the preparations. The atmosphere was warm and, in Peter’s words, it felt like one big family. He seemed happy he could talk about it. To take it even further, he suggested that I look at some photographs he had carefully kept in a photo album. It contained more than a hundred pictures, arranged alphabetically according to the occasions on which they were taken. Some sections were also marked with a year or an entire date. He started to look for the “goulash cooking event”; he was sure that there were many photos from the occasion. When he found it, he looked excited and started explaining to me who the people in the photos were. The descriptions were lengthy and I got lost in the context after the first few sentences. He kept saying how much he missed the socialist times when “life was much simpler and nicer”.

Scenes from the house of culture (*kultúrny dom*) dominated the photographs. Demolished in the 1990s, Peter lamented that the place, a “cultural heart” of the village, no longer existed. It was used not only for forestry events but also for all kinds of “culture”: children’s dance and theatre classes and performances, meetings with the mayor, activities organised by the local school, and others. During the cold winters, some women from local forestry would sew clothes for foresters there. One of the photographs, marked with the caption “forestry

⁸ Women were usually responsible for planting and maintenance work in forests. After the regime change, forestry became almost exclusively a male domain (with the exception of office positions).

goulash”, showed the house packed with people sitting around long tables in cheerful spirits. Peter recalled that it always felt like a family celebration. People knew each other, there was none of the anonymity of today. He admitted that he no longer knew most of the people who lived in the village. Since the majority of locals worked in forestry under socialism, their relations were all the stronger. It was not unusual for colleagues from neighbouring villages to be invited over. He recalled how he and his wife would usually host some of them, while others slept in the house of culture on provisional folding beds. The goulash cooking events usually lasted all day and into the night. Drinking and dancing were part of the programme. Peter admitted that in recent years the forestry department had tried to organise similar events, now held at the central office in Topolčianky (for instance, before Christmas or once a year during summer). Although he liked the idea, it was apparently not at all similar to the socialist events “just because the whole village organised it together back then [...] now it’s about catering organised by the institution [...] it feels rather “empty” in comparison”. As if to illustrate his point, he took a photograph of a group of foresters behind a huge cooking pot. Pointing to his younger self, he recalled how they used to laugh together while cooking, as opposed to the current situation—they just come to the office and everything is served to them. They are also no longer allowed to drink alcohol, which he thought was good but made the whole collective less open and joyful.

1.1.4 Work Relations Now and Then

We were in the middle of our discussion when Peter’s wife Eva (also in her 60s) joined us. She has worked in forestry administration since the 1980s. Interestingly, she claimed that at first, she did not want to disturb us, but when she realised that we were talking about the socialist era in forestry, she felt the need to contribute to the debate. With a gentle smile on her face, she looked at the photographs spread out on the table and recalled how it was the women's job to organise all the practicalities, from setting the tables to making sure there was enough wine and beer for the whole day. This “division of labour” worked very well, she said: everyone knew what their role was 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. Eva also looked and sounded happy and excited to be able to share her thoughts and memories with me. The focus of her narratives was mostly on work relations (see below), which complemented Peter’s earlier accounts of village life and forestry administration.

She recalled how she and her colleagues from the office used to eat lunch together every day—a seemingly “small and unimportant thing”, she said, but it created a sense of belonging together. It was a sense of daily rhythm and regularity that had completely disappeared, she explained. Peter added that the same was the case with foresters. They would have lunch together and it was a “standard” part of the working day. After finishing work, it was also “normal” to stay for a beer or two. Eva told a short story about how she used to visit her colleagues before going home. They would have a coffee and cake together, chat about how the day had gone, about their children and families, and also about life in the village. She admitted that she was still lucky enough to have friends and family aside, but these “collegial relationships” had, according to her, become almost non-existent over time. Peter nodded in agreement, insisting that “people in the village, but also more widely, were much closer back then”.

Peter offered to drive me back to Topolčianky as there was no other bus connection that day. It surprised me given the fact that the timetable showed at least three more. When I told him this in the car, he started laughing and explained that the official timetable does not work as it should. In reality, only some of the scheduled rides actually took place. He used the context to come back to our discussion. This time, however, he told me that the post-socialist change was not as dramatic as many people thought it was—at least not from a forester’s point of view. I was somewhat reluctant to accept such a narrative, as it contradicted what he and Eva had said earlier. He now described how the change in forestry was implemented “step-by-step” and, albeit chaotic and “unfair” (as described above), the work in itself did not change much. After arriving in Topolčianky, he remarked with a smile on his face as if wanting to explain further what he meant: “It was kind of crazy, but we made it through [...] it was such an unusual period”.

The conversation with Peter and Eva evolved, as we have seen, around several central themes. Peter’s nostalgic narratives of the socialist past and the forestry work in it described the village community as a central unit of local sociality, which got allegedly lost with the regime change. This apparently resulted in a more anonymous constellation in the village with an increased number of unfamiliar faces. Eva remembered how personal relations in the forestry workspace structured and ritualised the everyday contexts. The sense of relational and material loss after 1989 was further nostalgically narrated through a state of emptiness and decay in the village and in the region (see below).

As illustrated by Peter's last comments from the scene above, the (variously positioned) ambivalences on the aforementioned regime change aspects were what seemed to be an integral part of my interlocutors' narration. The prevailing aspect was one of perceived loss and deterioration of personal and structural instances. When I visited some of the more remote villages, I could certainly understand, or at least have a clearer picture of what Peter and Eva meant when talking about the post-socialist "emptiness" (discussed below). Even today, despite the well-kept public space, each of these places felt "empty" in some way. The small forestry warehouses, once full of machines, were still there, abandoned and falling apart. A church, a bar and/or a small grocery store were still the main points within the central squares. Standing there, I imagined the times when people suddenly lost their daily rhythms and the places fell into "decay". More than 30 years after the regime change, the people who live there still depend on irregular bus connections to the nearest town where most of them work in a private factory⁹. In short, some (socialist) infrastructures were lost, while others remained abandoned.

Beyond forestry, the perceived deterioration in the quality of life in post-socialism was also the dominant sentiment people expressed to me. When I talked to locals in Topoľčianky, I usually got similar nostalgic accounts from the older generations who had lived in the village their whole lives. They remembered how things used to be much simpler and more equal. Even though Topoľčianky faced a generally smoother transition than the smaller units in the region, locals still reminded me of the fact that socialist life was more relaxed and "good". People did not need to relocate to the capital, for instance, to find a job in the hope of making a decent living, as is the case today. Everything was available either "on-site" or in the nearest town. They also told me about their trips to different places in the country and abroad which were sponsored by the state. Nowadays, most of them cannot afford to visit a theatre in Bratislava, spend a week in the mountains or on the Bulgarian coast.

Yet, the everyday realities often (at least tacitly) contradicted the ethos of material and relational deterioration and loss I was confronted with so intensely. Building on these and other observations from previous pages, I now turn to post-socialist nostalgia and emptiness in more detail.

⁹ The factory is built on the exact same site where the socialist one producing refrigerators used to stand before.

1.2 From Socialism to Post-Socialist Nostalgia and Emptiness

The recollections of (rural) socialism from the scene with Peter and his wife, together with those of the locals in Topoľčianky, were reminiscent of Frances Pine's words in the context of her ethnographic work in post-socialist 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). Anthropologists have long observed the prevalence of post-socialist nostalgia in contexts all across the former Eastern bloc. Various definitions of what nostalgia actually means here have emerged. Velikonja (2009: 538), for instance, argues holistically that

nostalgia is a complex, differentiated, changing, emotion-laden, personal or collective, (non)instrumentalized story that binarily laments and glorifies a romanticised lost time, people, objects, feelings, scents, events, spaces, relationships, values, political and other systems, all of which stand in sharp contrast to the inferior present. [...] Its usual repertoire consists of images of a safe society, calm times, prosperity, and solidarity among people.

Romanticisation may have certainly played a key role in my interlocutors' nostalgic recollections of the socialist past and its perceived superiority in comparison to the capitalist "present". My aim, however, is not to question whether they were actually based on and responded to the once-lived reality, or whether they functioned as romanticised longings for irreversible (imagined) times that would "never return". Rather, I understand the communicated nostalgia as an ambivalent "counter-narrative" on the present, mixed with an underlying sympathy for certain socialist values, both real and imagined. While Peter's personal life trajectory was more or less materially stable after the regime change, it has been argued that nostalgia also tends to contain and be grounded in "a material basis, even in the case of those who have not become worse off in absolute terms" (Hann 2015: 111). Material loss in the broadest sense was certainly the most "obvious" element when recalling the consequences of the local transformation and the shifting position of forestry in it. Beyond the explicitly material domain, we have seen that my interlocutors' commentary on the changing social and emotional relational aspects was equally significant.

The nostalgic "counter-narration" can then be understood as a form of opposition and resistance to the mainstream discourse on socialism, which in Slovakia, as elsewhere in the

wider post-socialist region, tends to be presented in a “one-sided” way. In this context, what my interlocutors actually wished for, or at least felt was important to articulate, were the “positive occurrences, institutions, patterns [and values] of rural life” as experienced in and remembered from socialist times (Pasička 2012: 72, 73). It becomes clear here that nostalgia is less about the past and more about negotiating and shaping the present. It involves reconstructing what people miss to bring the (sometimes idealised) “good past” into the present (ibid. 74). In particular, my interlocutors expressed “the good” through a combination of rural sociality (intimacy, closeness, kinship-like) and (forestry) work, both of which constituted, in their view, “good” village life. It is precisely these aspects that have remained completely muted in public discourse and media coverage. They have tended to portray rural life under socialism as uniformly backward and, consequently, as an obstacle to a “truly democratic” transformation after 1989. In short, nostalgia acts “as a strategy of resistance [which] manifests itself both as an opposition to the dominant discourse and as a way of coping with [the post-socialist] transition” (ibid.: 79). In so doing, it enacts “emotionally laden commentaries of pasts, presents, and futures” (Haukanes, Trnka 2013: 4).

Back at Peter and Eva’s place, I asked them how they remembered the period immediately following the regime change. They told me that the change occurred pretty quickly, so there was no time to think in depth about all that had happened. Eva recalled that it suddenly felt different in the village and at work because people seemed to be much more invested in themselves. There was a sense of “freedom” in the air, but also a new sense of insecurity and indifference to the “social things” that used to be important under socialism. Technically, forestry was moved to Topolčianky altogether. This had tangible consequences for the small villages in the region. Without forestry, they remained, in Eva’s words, “completely deserted”. The daily rhythm changed and apart from a small grocery store, a bar and a church, there was usually nothing else. Community activities became sporadic. The former forestry offices now belonged to the local administration of each village. The local warehouses remained empty as all the equipment was either transported to Topolčianky or elsewhere. Peter remembered how foresters were sent to these places to prepare tractors, sawmills and other things for the transport.

Both agreed that a general feeling of “emptiness” emerged in the villages, not only materially but also relationally among people. These developments brought a number of new faces to local forestry in Topolčianky from the now non-existent offices in the villages. Describing the experience as “disorientating”, Peter explained how the foresters had to adapt to the

ongoing restructuring, which “wasn't easy at all because we didn't really know what the next day was going to be like”. He also admitted that for a number of men from more remote areas, it meant having to move closer because the forestry buses had been put out of service and those that remained only ran sporadically (as they still do today). For women who worked in forests during socialism, the situation changed even more dramatically, as Eva pointed out. Their work positions were completely dismantled and their former duties shifted to the foresters, leaving the women unemployed and often struggling to find decent work in the region. One of Eva’s friends, for instance, had no other choice but to stay at home and rely on the money her husband earned as a truck driver in Germany. Eva stressed that many other women were in the same situation, which led to a significant deterioration in their quality of life. Peter agreed, adding that life in the region’s villages became duller and harder at the same time.

The scene illustrates further the more critical accounts of the “post-moment”, articulated through the general state of emptiness (*prázdnota*) and/or decay (*úpadok*) in the villages. Similar to nostalgia, these instances have been observed by anthropologists—both literally and discursively—across the former socialist states (and beyond) as a consequence of “the post–Cold War geopolitical reorientation, the neoliberalisation of the economy and the state, and the (re)establishment of the national state” (Dzenovska 2020: 22). Although my impression was that the post-socialist emptying was clearly not as intense here as in other parts of the world, I was struck by how often my interlocutors actually used the term to describe changes after the fall of socialism and their memories thereof; as a general condition in and of the “becoming” post-socialist villages. As already described, the “actual” emptiness in these places was certainly materially present, aptly illustrated by the abandoned forestry warehouses. However, it was not on a too intense scale. I saw, for instance, only a very small number of abandoned or decayed houses. If the particular village had its own school, kindergarten, or even a small accommodation house in one case, all of these infrastructures functioned and were well-kept. So were the offices of local administrations (partly former forestry offices). The main squares looked tidy. Yet, the “affective dimension of emptiness” (Dzenovska 2020: 11), i.e. the feeling of it, was indeed noticeable. This may be an inherent part of remote rural areas and may have to do with their “far-off” geographies. But there is also more to the “empty” rural. As Pine (2007: 196) argues, socialist villages in Poland and elsewhere were “upheld as the moral centre of autonomy and authority/discipline, opposed to the state, which was viewed as a source of intrusion from the outside”. In the context

of lost “centrality”, rather than describing solely the changed material state of the villages, I would argue that what my interlocutors expressed as “emptiness” acted more broadly as a time-frame orientation which “stood for a transitional state between a world that was coming to an end and a world yet to come [whereby] the contours of the new world were not yet visible” (Dzenovska 2020: 11). More specifically, socialist forestry, known (much like agriculture elsewhere) as “a social fact, a way of making relatedness and sociality, at least as much as an economic necessity” (Pine 2007: 196), was supposedly ending, while “the new” was not yet in sight.

Taken together, what my interlocutors recalled from the socialist and post-socialist past was, as already noted, very much about the critique of the present. Without questioning the role of forestry in structuring socialist rural life in the region and the moral centrality of villages in socialism more broadly, the process of emptying and a sense of loss and decay were bound to the current (socio-material) uncertainties, apathy and/or distrust that have emerged as a result of the transformation. I turn in the following section to another scene from my visit to Ivan’s place to illustrate this point and the vision of forestry further.

1.3 The “Good” Socialist Past (and Critique of the Present)

Ivan and his wife live on the outskirts of Topolčianky, about a 15-minute walk from the central square. The first time I went there, I was not alone. Jozef suggested that he will accompany me because he had not seen them for some time and also because he thought it would make the first meeting easier and more straightforward. I agreed and was glad to have company. On the way, Jozef told me about his friends in the village and showed me their houses as we walked along the main road. When we saw the central forestry warehouse, he recalled how it had been in a better condition under socialism. I took the opportunity to ask him more about it. Similar to Peter, he told me that it was better organised because each village in the region had additionally its own “small” warehouse. After 1989 they were merged into one. He was convinced that the way the warehouses were organised under socialism made more sense, because the work was better divided. It was also less chaotic, as the timber was stored in smaller quantities across the whole region. According to Jozef, this made forestry more present and visible in the villages. What he said reminded me a lot of our conversation with Peter and his wife. It made me realise that nostalgic narration of the socialist past might be a widespread phenomenon here. As it turned out, it really was.

After reaching Ivan's place, we entered the courtyard without ringing the bell. Jozef insisted that we did not need to as the gate was apparently always left open—a common practise in Topolčianky. Ivan was waiting for us at the front door on the other side of the garden. He was wearing his green clothes and looked excited to see us. We were invited to take a seat on a sofa in the living room. There was a radio playing oldies in the background, which in itself evoked a sense of nostalgia and was a fitting backdrop for the questions I wanted to ask. Ivan's wife came to greet us and offered us coffee. She did not stay for the interview, though. The conversation was a mixture of my questions and a free exchange between my two interlocutors. Ivan started with a descriptive narration of his trajectory in forestry, combined with anecdotes about socialist forestry life in the village. Jozef sometimes added his own recollections of the same or similar occasions, echoing precisely those communal aspects of forestry (and the whole village) that seemed to have disappeared after 1989.

1.3.1 Socialist Certainties and Post-Socialist Uncertainties

The socialist past was not the only explicit point of reference during the conversation. National elections were to be held in a few days at the time of the visit. Ivan repeatedly mentioned it with humour, irony and apathy. At some points, he used the situation to draw a direct comparison with socialism. Consider the following quote:

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.

Jozef agreed and started to complain about politicians and their incompetence in the forestry context and also more generally. Both of them wished the political figures would care about what people need instead of being interested only in their own enrichment, regardless of their political affiliation. Here, Ivan again drew a comparison with the socialist past. Although he claimed that he had never been a fan of socialist politicians, the system as a whole “worked much better because the needs of society were met” and life was therefore easier. There was more free time and everything was more relaxed, albeit many people worked hard. Since the regime change, things have become uncertain in many ways. As an example, he told a story about the house where he and his wife now live. It was an old house, built in the 1980s, they had renovated a few years ago. He was very clear about the fact that they could not afford to

build it after the regime change, nor could many other people in the village and across the country. Under socialism, it was, according to him, almost unproblematic to build one's own house with the help of family, friends and, crucially, with material support from the state. Jozef added his own story, which was more similar to Peter's, as his house was built by state forestry and bought directly from the institution after the regime change.

1.3.2 From Relational Togetherness to Anonymity?

Both of my interlocutors repeatedly commented on the social relations in socialist forestry and beyond, which they said were more “human” and less “tactical”. Jozef recalled how the whole collective of local foresters would regularly sit down for a glass of wine after work with the then head of Topolčianky's office, a situation that would be “completely unthinkable” today. The more egalitarian tendency was also remembered from birthday parties and other communal activities that used to be organised for forestry employees. Ivan told another story about how foresters in the village were involved in the preparation of the annual Workers' Day. Such events became, according to him, less frequent after 1989, resulting in more “anonymous” personal constellations in forestry and also in the village. In support of this view, he also mentioned various state-sponsored leisure activities for foresters, such as collective week-long stays in the High Tatras. These were, according to Jozef, “unforgettable experiences never to be repeated again in the more individualised society we have become”.

The “relaxed” tendency was also illustrated by the way in which (not only) forestry work was carried out. The work practices were hard, but both men recalled how everyone “took it easy”. If logging, for instance, was not done on time, it would simply be done a few days later, without any kind of problems or warnings from the forestry office. During the mundane workday, there was always time for a coffee, a cigarette or just to sit and relax. They described these tendencies as “healthy”, something that made the forester's life slow. In contrast, after 1989 the work became in many ways “too intense” as a result of increasingly “aggressive” top-down imperatives.

1.3.3 Generational Differences

At last, Ivan commented on what had been said earlier through the “generational gap” lens, mentioning his own family members (daughters and grandchildren). He enthusiastically pointed out that the younger generations are “stuck” because they did not experience socialism and all the positive things associated with it. They do not know, in his opinion, that “politics” can be “done differently”. As an example, he talked about one of his daughters who had successfully completed her studies in economics at the university in Bratislava, but still struggled to find a job there. She took a secretary position which was offered to her by a friend. Ivan admitted that her salary was low and she could not afford basic necessities such as living in a decent apartment on her own. Instead, she shared a room with a roommate and sometimes also worked in a café at weekends to earn some extra money. This, he said, illustrated the direction the country had taken since the regime change. He admitted he was glad she held a university degree and acknowledged that universities were more accessible to anyone who wanted to study, albeit more expensive. Yet he also claimed that his daughter’s precarious path would not have occurred during socialism because “things were more secure and stable [...] and there was a job and an apartment for everyone”. Jozef added that he was happy his children did not have to face similar struggles. He claimed that under socialism, people were guaranteed a job and a place to live, which he saw as “very positive and necessary”.

1.3.4 “It was such a period...”

What struck me again during the conversation was an underlying ambivalence my interlocutors implicated when talking about socialist life. Ivan concluded by remarking in a pensive tone that “it [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 the fieldwork when my interlocutors commented on the socialist past and the post-socialist present and future. The more ironic question “How do we live now, after 30 years?” (“*Ako žijeme po 30 rokoch?*”) was also frequently used to articulate dissatisfaction with the contemporary state of affairs. While praising all the “good” (Pine 2002) that socialism brought into their lives, the phrase seemed to indicate nostalgia for something valuable that will not return back, combined with a critical tone towards the regime that *should not* return.

Coming back to the concept of nostalgia as a “counter-narrative”, the “negative” hegemonic coverage of and discourse on socialism probably influenced here the way my interlocutors remembered and attended to it. As Haukanes and Trnka (2013: 11) argue in the context of post-socialist memory and imagination, visions of the future and memories of the past are usually (even if implicitly) “governed by hegemonic scripts and normative values [...] be they particularly programmatic or more open-ended.”. This is not to say that my interlocutors engaged in the nationally established hegemonic elitist “need” to remember solely “communist atrocities” (and nothing else), as observed in the Czech Republic, for example (Trnka 2013). In the same vein, the following section examines the remembrance ambiguities connected to a scene from the village park.

1.4 Nostalgia for and Critique of Socialism: The Case of Village Park

It was one of my first days in the village and Jozef suggested that he would show me around. We started with a beer in the local bar near the central square and took a seat at one of the bar’s few plastic tables placed freely on the sunny street. Jozef recalled how it had changed in recent years from a very basic local pub (*krčma*) to a more fancy place serving craft beers to attract tourists and urban visitors. He admitted that he still liked it because it reminded him of socialist times, when he and his colleagues used to come there every day after the work was done. A beer and a sausage with bread would cost one crown, something “we can only dream of today with prices exploding”. The comparative commentary on the cost of living was no exception here; all my interlocutors mentioned it at some point during our conversations.

After finishing the beer, we headed towards the park. A group of elderly Czech-speaking tourists showed up as we entered the main park road. Jozef smiled happily and told me that more and more people from neighbouring countries were discovering Topolčianky in the summer months. He remembered how the now very well-kept spacious green space with numerous botanical rarities was left “untidy” during socialism. The only thing that functioned properly was the castle used for hunting guests, mostly members of the Czechoslovak Communist Party, their acquaintances and official visits from other socialist countries. He proudly admitted that, after the regime change, forestry had collaborated with the mayor’s office and the local gardening association to make the park attractive again. In fact, Jozef was one of the main initiators of these processes, because he could not stand “how damaged the whole park and its heritage was after the socialist period”. While we were walking, we

encountered people of different age groups. This was a common occurrence during my time in the village. Jozef recalled that people also liked to visit the park in socialism, but only small parts of it were accessible at the time. There was no particular interest in the park as a tourist site; it was mostly local people who visited it back then.

We approached a large open area of the park with a rustic lake where swans swam elegantly. The mixture of various old trees, green grass, decorative stone pathways and a number of wooden benches created a soothing atmosphere. Jozef claimed that the lake and its surroundings had recently been renovated, as it was located in a part of the park that had been completely neglected under socialism. He managed to get financial support for the case from the local administration, which the forestry department could apparently not afford on its own. He recalled how, under socialism, children from the village used to come and bathe in the lake when it was full of water from the summer rains. There were a number of stories he told me about this, such as how foresters would come to the lake every summer to keep it as clean as possible so that children could safely have fun during the summer break. I felt a strong sense of nostalgia as he recounted these memories, which was reinforced by statements such as "we don't have that spontaneity anymore" or "kids just sit at home with their phones instead of going out". I found out later that the village organises a number of activities for children of all ages during every summer break, which contradicted Jozef's claims. Moreover, while he welcomed that tourists were coming to the village, he also pointed out that he felt the influx of non-local people was making the village even more "anonymous", something he associated with towns and cities. This, in turn, contrasted with the socialist past he remembered as "quiet" and "very local", despite the park's bad condition and the alleged fact that "under socialism, there was a general disinterest in the aesthetic quality of public space", as he repeatedly stressed.

We left the lake area and entered another part of the park dominated by the famous chateau. I asked Jozef if the building had undergone any renovations since the change of regime. We sat on a bench in front of the main gate and he started to tell me about the days when foresters had full access to the chateau. It was, in fact, part of their job to ensure that the building remained in good condition, which was necessary for the organisation of the aforementioned hunts. After 1989, forestry was "taken out of it" and the village administration was declared the main administrator. Jozef admitted that they had done a good job of keeping the chateau attractive, opening a small history museum, organising concerts and other events, and taking good care of the building's materiality: things that were "unthinkable" under socialism. At the

same time, he was dissatisfied that forestry was not involved in any of these organisational activities directly. He claimed that “if forestry could manage the building today, it could use it for its own benefit and simultaneously for the benefit of local people and tourists alike”. He saw the administration of the building during socialism as limited in scope, but also admitted that “at least it was associated directly with forestry”.

Similar comments were made by Jozef when he showed me statues standing freely and decoratively in various parts of the park. Some of them had a typical socialist aesthetic, to be found all over the former Eastern bloc. The ones thematically connected to forestry and hunting seemed, unsurprisingly, particularly important to Jozef. In the case of a deer statue, which stood in an open green space near the forestry office, he recalled how the socialist administration had dismantled it and left it in a basement, where it was stored without any maintenance. He said he could not bear it, as the statue had apparently been made by a famous local sculptor in the 18th century as a symbol of local forestry. Ultimately, he proudly described how he was able to save it immediately after the regime change, together with some of the other statues now placed in the park.

While criticising the ways in which some of the forestry statues were treated during socialism, he also pointed out that he liked the “typical” socialist ones as well. He told me he was proud that they were still in good condition and did not have to go through reparations. Similar to the infrastructure ambivalence mentioned earlier, Jozef praised the aesthetic qualities of socialist decorations in the park while condemning particular socialist practices associated with their maintenance. The perceived time frame as manifested in the statues is also important here. We have seen above that the value of the deer statue was evidenced by the fact that it originated in the pre-socialist period. Ironically, the latter was not mentioned again. Jozef admitted that he did not know about how it had been handled or stored before the socialist regime took over. In fact, he seemed disinterested about it.

The muted position of the pre-socialist period mirrored the broader tendency from the previous pages: my interlocutors did not mention it at all when remembering the past. Their recollections remained grounded in the socialist/post-socialist dichotomy within which there seemed to be no (personal and social) need or will to mention the pre-socialist times (compare with the central role of pre-socialist imaginaries discussed in Chapters 2 and 3).

1.5 Community and Dis-Continuity: Dialectics of “Before” and “After”

More generally, what Jozef was trying to convey during the walk-around was, again, a sense of the now lost structure forestry provided to the socialist village. As illustrated above, his personal, often nostalgic memories connected to the village’s particular places and experiences mixed with critical accounts of both the socialist and post-socialist realities. It has been argued in a similar vein that nostalgia can act 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).

This view becomes particularly evident in the context of forestry’s present-day socio-political position (as discussed in Chapter 2). At the same time, the implied assertion that nostalgia always rests on a duality between what is perceived as the “good” past and “bad” or “worse” present is contested here (Todorova 2012: 6). We have seen that Jozef (and others) tended to articulate variously positioned “positive” *and* “negative” sides of the socialist regime in their recollections of the past, reflecting the broader tendency of ambivalent attitudes towards (actually experienced) socialism in post-socialist countries (ibid.).

Broadly, it has been argued that in socialist contexts “work was established [...] as not only a right but a duty [which] meant that there was, to all intents and purposes, no choice in accepting the place of work in structuring most other spheres of [community] life” (Stenning 2005: 240). As already noted above, my interlocutors bemoaned the post-1989 situation in the village as increasingly “anonymous”, “de-personalised”, “random” or even “urban-like”. While forestry work may indeed “be increasingly unable (and unwilling) to structure community institutions, to form the centre of a community” (Stenning 2005: 253), my observations from the village challenge the one-dimensional perspective my interlocutors tended to present to me. The value of community continues to be present at different levels within and beyond forestry, even if its local significance has been restructured and its scope reduced after 1989. Importantly, this should not imply writing off my interlocutors’ accounts of the socialist past as presented here and calling it “mere” nostalgia. After all, “if nostalgia always implies the impossibility of return, its appearance is furthering the project of

neoliberalism” (Creed 2012: 43). Although contemporary forestry does not structure rural life to the same extent as it did during socialism when “work was the [main] unit around which wider lives were centred and routinized” (Stenning 2005: 240), community-making still presents a big part of foresters’ work and forestry as such¹⁰. These processes sometimes also directly attempt to mimic the (imagined, remembered) socialist past.

The communal tendency was somehow unexpectedly confirmed to me one day by a forestry employee from a different generation (in his late 30s) whom I briefly met in the office. Having no direct lived experience of the socialist past and coming from the eastern part of the country, he told me how much he valued the opportunity to work and live in Topolčianky for two main reasons. Firstly, he valued the village’s prestigious reputation as a forestry site due to historical reasons. Secondly, the presence of the local community—both in forestry and beyond—gave him a strong sense of belonging, despite not being a “proper local”. The warm, often close personal relations between foresters of different generations I observed throughout my fieldwork can indeed be seen as a confirmation that the alleged radicality of post-1989 change has not completely dismantled the “forestry-as-community” aspect my interlocutors felt was vehemently lacking in comparison to the socialist period. In short, the post-socialist “rupture and continuity [of the socialist past] are dialectically interwoven” (Todorova 2012: 8) within a “simultaneous coexistence and discontinuity of socialist pasts and presents” (Kay et al. 2012: 56). Processes of value creation (not only) around the community, which actively contest “flat” temporality, will be further demonstrated in the subsequent chapters, focusing on forestry’s present-day situation.

¹⁰ In Chapters 2 and 3 I discuss the community-making aspects within present-day forestry practices from various contextual angles in more detail.

2. On Tension and Care: Post-Socialist Forestry Transformation and Its Aftermaths

In the turning moment of 1989, the socialist property order was brought into question, if not abolished altogether. Western advisors were eager to introduce privatisation reforms as they had done in their home countries. The idea that a simple change of institutional structure would transform the backwardness of “failed socialist” into Western-style capitalist societies permeated public debates and policy choices (Lampland 2002). Privatisation was an inherently political rather than a purely economic and technical process (Verdery 2003: 78, 113). Using the (ideological) language of a new order, private property and market creation, both by national governments and Western advisors alike, it also “symbolised a commitment to instituting the rule of law, which the communists were accused of having violated” (ibid.: 78). The newly elected anti-communist elite in Czechoslovakia (as in Hungary and Poland, for example) saw the fast abolishment of socialist institutions as an effective way in which to hinder the return of the socialist regime back into reality—despite the fact that many socialist managers still held their positions (ibid.: 80).

The privatisation of forests in Czechoslovakia was formalised through Law 229/1991, which addressed “adaptation of property relations in regards to land and other agricultural assets” (Stockmann 2016: 934). The process continued within the newly established Slovak Republic in 1993, marked by a pivotal document “The Principles of State Forestry Politics in Slovakia” (ibid.: 942). It established, among other things, equality of all forest ownership forms. I learnt in the restitution office in Topoľčianky that the restitution question of forests is, to various extents, still an active one. One of the secretaries remembered that the transition period was “completely messy” as the state bureaucracy did not function properly (or did not exist at all). People wanted to get access to their claimed ownership entitlements, but very often did not have proper documented evidence. Even today, there are still some unresolved cases, and new ones—usually connected to inheritance—appear from time to time. Restitution has thus not been a linear technical process with a clearly defined endpoint as emphasised in standard liberal theories of individual land ownership (Hann 2007: 294). Although Slovakia (and also Hungary, for instance) took the road of allocation and distribution instead of turbulent forest/land ownership “renewal” on the basis of historical records as in Romania (Măntescu, Vasile 2009), the result has been one of rather fragmented nature¹¹.

¹¹ The extent of fragmentation or “fuzziness” in the Romanian case has probably been, despite many similarities, much more intense than in Slovakia (e.g. Dorondel 2016).

2.1 Private Forests, New Work Potentialities and (Potentially) Neo-Liberal Subjects

The established mixed ownership structure of forests (state-owned and private) opened up additional income venues for a number of foresters in Topoľčianky. The former “urbaria” (*urbáriaty*) in particular—forests owned simultaneously by a number of private actors on a shared basis—have begun to employ state foresters, a trend observable across the whole country. The central forester (*lesný hospodár*) position is in this regard of primary significance. Slovak law requires private owners who carry out logging that they must be controlled by a person who holds an official certificate to do so and has a minimum of 10 years’ work experience in state forestry. Jozef (although retired) and Peter work in this position. Both men were very proud of the fact that they hold the certificate, which required them to pass an examination organised by a state committee.

One day, Peter took me to the private forest where he has worked since 2005. There was no particular purpose, he just wanted me to see it. I saw this as a sign of personal pride that he had managed to do this “additional” work form. He admitted that he valued the position because it gave him the opportunity to earn some additional money¹² and a sense of variety: being able to work in a different forest, for different people than he did on a daily basis. It is a part-time job, meaning that he comes there only two, sometimes three times a week for a few hours, usually after he has finished his work in Topoľčianky. He interpreted this as practical and not problematic in terms of his daily schedule and energy.

The private forest lay outside the immediate village surroundings. I would literally describe it as “the middle of nowhere”. At first glance, it was almost indistinguishable from the state-owned ones I had visited before. As we came nearer, we saw a fence clearly demarcating its boundaries, along with a sign informing us about the fact that it was private property. It made the difference more tangible as state forests in the region usually do not have fences around them. I learnt that, despite the private ownership, people from the “outside” can enter the forest, although, as my interlocutor said, they probably never do because there are forests much closer to the village that are used for walking. We took a short walk and Peter showed me places where he had recently given permission for logging. He reiterated that it would not be possible without his personal supervision. Holding authority in this way meant that his personal and professional decisions counted, which undoubtedly

¹² The average monthly net salary of state foresters was around 600€-800€ in 2023.

made him proud. His expertise comes to the fore when working in the private forest, without having to fulfil administrative, often unnecessarily complicated tasks imposed from “above”, as is, according to him, the case in state forestry. He also seemed much more “technocratic” in his approach here. He did not talk about any personal attachments to the forest or particular trees, nor did he mention any personal relations that he would cultivate here (as he did in his full-time job). When I asked him about the relational aspect, he admitted that he rarely sees the owners; if they need something, they just call him.

Two machines were working on-site at the time of our visit. It was noisy and the work seemed heavy. The fallen timber was being moved into prepared containers. Peter waved to the two workers from a distance. They seemed to know each other well. As he explained to me how the logging process worked, one of the machines stopped and the worker came over to us. He was curious about what we were doing there. His name was Marek, in his 50s, and after I introduced myself, he told me that he worked for a small private company which provided logging services to both private and state-owned forests. Back in the 1980s, he completed an apprenticeship in forestry machine work and then worked for state forestry. These technical jobs were dismantled (i.e. outsourced) in favour of private companies after the regime change. “I had no other possibility but to join them [the private company] or leave forestry altogether, which I didn’t want to do. What else would I do?,” Marek explained. A short exchange between the two men followed, during which Peter expressed his dissatisfaction with the contractors (outsourcing) model introduced after 1989. “It only makes the rich richer and that’s all,” he said repeatedly. Marek complained that the working conditions were indeed very bad: his salary was low, the company was corrupt and tended to employ people who lacked the necessary knowledge needed for such a “machine-heavy” job, partly due to workforce scarcity¹³. Peter wished that forestry without private companies and the whole outsourcing model still existed, and Marek agreed.

Jozef also holds the central forester position in another private forest near Topolčianky. As has already been said, he is retired, but because the pension of a former state employee is not very high, he values the opportunity to earn some extra money. He has been working there for six years (and before that for a different owner). The job was offered to him by his friend, one of the owners. When I visited the forest with Jozef, the setting and overall atmosphere were quite different from Peter’s case. There was a small cottage-like house nearby, which served

¹³ I encountered similarly critical views on the external private providers from different actors such as the director and members of the Pro Silva association or from the director of the Slovak Forests.

as a meeting place for the owners. Jozef told me that some of them used to work in state forestry and they are all friends. He has known them for many years, and he enjoys having a chat and a glass of beer with them, pointing to the small house¹⁴. I had the impression that the work here was carried out on a more familiar basis, in many aspects similar to state forestry in Topoľčianky. Jozef also admitted that he enjoys working here because it allows him to combine his passion for spending hours in the forest with a practical purpose. As a pensioner, he explained that he finally has enough time to spend in nature—something he loves to do and had always longed for but could never fully realise when working in the forestry office. Working for private actors thus represents for Jozef a form of personal self-realisation and a corrective to his previous career trajectory.

Both stories illustrate a more general trend within local forestry. Working exclusively for the state institution in state-owned forests has transformed for a number of foresters in Topoľčianky beyond the “confined” work domain. The neo-liberal logic of the post-1989 transformation brought private actors into the forestry sector, which had been structured as a homogeneous state unit under socialism. The position of central foresters in privately owned forests—the former “urbaria” in particular¹⁵—has since then become a valued source of additional income. We have seen above that the picture is nonetheless more complex than that. Apart from the economic aspect, working in private forests enables foresters to negotiate their own position in ways which differ from or even contradict practices exercised in state forestry. The role of “learned” expertise, i.e. passing the specific and what is perceived as a difficult exam in front of a state committee, entangled with personal pride, self-worth and respectability (Henig, Makovicky 2017: 4), comes to the fore, as Peter’s case showed. Holding complete authority over logging decisions based on Slovak forestry law acts as a “counter-practice” to the work in state forestry, which is defined by a number of administrative top-down imperatives. At the same time, less personal, more technical connections and conditions may characterise these work spaces as opposed to more familiar, “kinship-like” constellations of state forestry. Jozef, in turn, saw his “part-time” job for private owners as a more social, friendship-based constellation connected to personal, almost hobby-like self-realisation, opposing the hectic times of his employment in state forestry. Marek as a “non-forestry” worker contradicted both employment cases with his explicit

¹⁴ The house was empty at the time of our visit, hence I did not meet any actors there.

¹⁵ Church-owned forests and so-called urban forests owned and administered by towns complete the private ownership structure. None of the foresters I met in Topoľčianky had worked there, although they admitted that some people left state forestry after the regime change to work for these actors.

criticism of the private company he has worked for and the precarious conditions he has faced since the regime change.

Elizabeth Dunn argued in the context of a privatised Polish factory that the transformation from socialism to capitalism corresponds with a “transition from an orderly, bounded and rigid system to a fluid, flexible and global one” (Dunn 2004: 74). It involves the constitution of a “different kind of person: one who is active, mobile, and endowed with the ability to choose” (ibid.: 165). Despite the inherent dualism and linearity in her argument, it can be argued along the same lines when considering the foresters’ situation after 1989 when private actors entered state forestry. In Topolčianky, some of them left state forestry altogether while others, as we have seen above, used the (valuable) opportunity to work in both sectors simultaneously. At the same time, the entrance of private forest service contractors—both self-employed and company-based (Štěrbová, Kovalčík 2020)—into state forestry has destabilised its structural and functional rigidity, possibly leading to precarious work conditions for those who remained to work in the now private service sector. The newly established (unequal) private pathways and choices the actors make in-between the “ordinary” and the “additional” work signalise the constitution of a neoliberal personhood, generally characterised by proactive attitude, individualism, entrepreneurship and flexibility (Sekeráková Búriková 2014: 153). Yet, the hegemonic Western idea which saw the former socialist worker turned into an entrepreneur on the free market, oriented *solely* towards economic profit (Dorondel 2016: 10), has been, to various degrees, contested. The essentialist Western representations of the post-socialist subject “marked by socialist paternalism because of their age or lack of (re-)education, a predicament evident in their inability to find employment in the new economy” (Makovicky 2014: 9) have, in any case, proved inadequate.

The active presence of private actors in state forestry—whether owners or contractors—should not imply that the “post-socialist” state is less present than before, or that it has retreated completely. Since forestry law requires logging in private forests to be supervised by a state-employed forester with a state-confirmed certificate, the central forester (*lesný hospodár*) position ensures that the state controls private logging and other activities such as ecological measures. As we have seen above, holding such responsibility may be seen by foresters as a valuable source of social capital, contrasting with the more task-oriented, top-down approach of state forestry. From the contextual perspective of private owners, the perception of state forestry may then be not too far from what Blundo calls in the very

different setting of Senegal, West Africa “simultaneously a suppressive state and a state as provider of services” (Blundo 2014: 71).

Moving from the ownership question, the next section focuses on the very practices of forestry as negotiated and executed *vis-à-vis* the neo-liberal state in more detail.

2.2 Negotiation of “Good Practice”: Post-Socialist Forestry as a Way to Pre-Socialist (and Socialist) Future?

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 educated and had enough professional experience or not. In socialism, we just needed to fulfil the plan: planting, caring, cutting, hoeing. There was no room for personal intervention in the 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. Nowadays, while we still have plans and certain actions are mandatory according to forestry law, the rest is merely a recommendation.

Ivan's words bring to light the perceived duality between socialist and post-1989 forestry practices. This was certainly not a singular case; in almost every interview I conducted with a forester, the idea of change and rupture of at least certain aspects within forestry (rather than their continuity) was usually emphasised. One of the central aspects, as the case above explicitly illustrates, was the perceived technicality of socialism, which 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 bemoaned the fact that the quality of forestry education in Slovakia had declined significantly after the regime change. While the socialist educational infrastructure—typically comprising brigades and work in forests alongside professional foresters—was referred to by my interlocutors as high quality, valuable or “comparable to or better than in Western countries”, the socialist working principles and the functioning of socialist forestry were perceived (due to the focus on routine and “pure” technicality) *as if* in conflict with the mentioned qualities.

To understand the sketched tension, I would propose to start with the perceived discrepancy between what my interlocutors judged as “bad” socialist forestry work principles and what I would like to call forestry as a “good practice”. That is, a complex set of relational work practices within which foresters place value on expertise acquired through institutionalised forestry education and a particular reading of (imagined) pre-socialist history, combined with moral commitment and self-realisation.

We have seen above that the socialist ethos of plan-based, “technical” forestry was contrasted by my interlocutors with “good practice”, which they valued as the ultimate outcome of the post-1989 transformation. The pre-socialist context of the First Czechoslovak Republic plays in this regard a crucial role and blurs the seemingly flat temporality. The ability to carry out “good practice” was seen as a way in which to return to practices of that period, despite the very limited pre-socialist sources available and the lack of pre-socialist personal experiences. Pre-socialist forestry 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 the creative self-expression (i.e. the personality) in foresters’ work. Comparisons with and claims of superiority over Western countries, especially neighbouring Austria, were also included. Yet, these claims were usually based on popular romanticised narratives of the First Republic known from Topolčianky (as a heritage site) and the national media¹⁶. Even foresters whose parents worked in forestry had no particular resemblance to what forestry practices were actually like at the time.

Jozef showed me some Czechoslovak forestry books published in the 1930s and archival material from Topolčianky’s office, which were used as valuable evidence of pre-socialist superiority. He admitted that most of the foresters had probably never read them, though. When we went for walks in Topolčianky, he would excitedly show me certain things that were supposedly related to the period, even when I did not ask or when we were talking about something completely different. It seemed that it was important for him to point to the “tangible” evidence of that time. Interestingly, as Chapter 1 has shown, he seemed rather disinterested in it in other (personal) contexts. Similar accounts on the value of pre-socialist forestry were made by leading members of the Slovak Association of Foresters. The idealised reading of the pre-socialist past thus acts as a grounding corrective to 40 years of plan-based

¹⁶ The Slovak and Czech mainstream media have tended to circulate liberal imaginaries such as modernity, a developed democracy, a plurality of ideas and Western standards of living as defining characteristics of the First Republic to distinguish it from the supposedly radical “backwardness” of socialism.

forestry, which allegedly transformed the forester from an educated and creative professional into a seemingly “machine-like” socialist worker, alienated from his expertise, creative “self-expression” and moral commitment to the “good” of forests and nature.

However, the socialist forester was educated in socialist schools, which have reportedly faced a decline in quality since the regime change. As noted above, my interlocutors were very proud of their educational trajectories, because it was precisely these socialist institutions that had provided them with the necessary skills to become professional foresters, reminiscent of the imagined pre-socialist ones. Beyond the local level, the director of the National Forestry Association was also explicit in this regard, very much in line with 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 diminished 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.

The internal tension between socialist forestry education on the one hand and practice on the other becomes, despite mutual interconnections (brigades and work in forests at least during the final year of studies), once again clear here. I would hence argue that forestry as “good practice”, in the sense of what my interlocutors referred to as acquired expertise, is a continuation of rather than a radical rupture with the criticised socialist past. The necessity of a “good” education for a “good” forester is tied to those socialist principles that were simultaneously criticised as being problematic for the reasons described above. The idea of a profound rupture functions then as a critical commentary on and expression of dissatisfaction with the present, rather than being tied to “actual” past experiences. The following story will further illustrate this “mixed” form of temporality.

It was my trip with Ivan to his place of work, just a few minutes’ drive from the main square in Topolčianky. As we drove along the meadows and forests, he repeatedly highlighted that “here” or “there” (pointing with his finger) used to be a clear-cut area during the socialist era: “It was pretty bad because everything that mattered back then was how many tons of timber we got: the more, the better.” These places were vital looking young forests now. It was impossible to tell that clearcutting had taken place here. He seemed relieved about it and told me that now, “after 30 years”, these lands are finally looking good again. I was not paying

much attention to these comparisons back then. It, however, came to me one day when we were discussing what aspects had changed since the regime change. We were visiting the so-called production department, the main timber storage and offices for foresters situated on the outskirts of Topoľčianky. Ivan showed me a vintage-looking map from 1983 which hung on the wall in the office building's hallway. It graphically depicted "forestry production" in the region over the previous five years with a number of large areas marked in green colour as "plantations". Ivan explained, much in contrast to his earlier criticism, that forestry after 1989 could only dream of such large-scale areas of renewed and newly planted forests. This scale of plantation was, according to him, only possible because of the direct involvement of forestry schools in these activities. They provided the necessary additional workforce. A lengthy description of his educational trajectories followed, in which he repeatedly highlighted the high quality of forestry schools in socialist Czechoslovakia. He remembered that his class would go to the forests to do the "full job" with foresters, helping where it was needed. These "hands-on" experiences ensured that one became a true professional forester, rather than learning everything from books as had been the case since the regime change¹⁷.

Ivan's critical account of socialist forestry, articulated through the clearcutting problem, and the subsequent praise of socialist forestry schools *as if* two separate rather than entangled entities, leads us back to consider post-1989 forestry as "good practice". That is, a practice positioned against the socialist and in favour of the pre-socialist past. Anthropologists have generally argued that the separation of socialism and post-socialism as two distinct "before" and "after" episodes is problematic. Instead, they have proposed that "they are discontinuous and interconnect by leaps and jolts, not part of a smooth transition along a single chronological timeline" (Kay et al. 2012: 56). The negotiation of forestry as "good practice" in the post-1989 capitalist realm has occurred along the same fluid lines between "pasts" and "presents". Despite the perceived difference between the criticised socialist past and "good" forestry mimicking the (imagined) pre-socialist period, we have seen that certain practices and values of the socialist period—particularly those related to forestry schools, but also those of communal work more broadly (e.g. foresters and students working together effectively)—have, in fact, remained central for a "good" forester. In other words, foresters in Topoľčianky have attempted to re-define what it actually means and what it should mean to

¹⁷ The post-1989 focus on theoretical knowledge instead of work in forests was also explicitly criticised by the chairman of the Slovak Forestry Chamber. When interviewed, he highlighted the need to return to practice-oriented teaching in forestry schools.

be a good forester in a “post-socialist” capitalist system. These negotiations have incorporated certain aspects of the socialist period, while referring to a radical break with it.

If something has tangibly represented a radical change after 1989, it has certainly been the constructed social and political need to publicly articulate state forestry explicitly for the “good”. This shift is a consequence of the ongoing and recently intensified devaluation of foresters and their work. The next section examines these processes from a contemporary perspective, dominated by a tension between foresters and environmentalists.

2.3 Us Versus Them: Experiences of Foresters’ Work Devaluation and Forestry Politics of the “Now”

My interlocutors shared the belief that the public image of forestry in Slovakia has continuously deteriorated since the regime change. They were concerned about the fact that people today tend to perceive their work as harmful to the environment, and as focused solely on financial profits. The most commonly used example within this context was logging which, according to Jozef, for instance, is publicly associated with the destruction of forests, carried out by the state and embodied in the forester and his work activities. Ivan added that the situation has been especially pressing during the last decade, and the Covid-19 outbreak made it even more intense as people started to go into the forests more often. He recalled that in the spring of 2020, in the midst of the pandemic, the office in Topoľčianky received a number of emails from anonymous senders with photographs of logged timber taken in local forests. Aggressive commentaries in it questioned the legitimacy of such practices and of state forestry in general. There has been a similar public outcry over hunting, usually seen as synonymous with forestry and associated with unprofessional killing of wild animals, old-fashioned manners and destruction of nature. Technician Oto’s words on the public devaluation of forestry aptly expressed these particularities, comparing it to the socialist period: “We used to be valued forestry workers in socialism, now we are enemies of forests and nature.” Notwithstanding the criticism of the ways in which socialist forestry operated (as discussed in the previous section), this period was remembered by my interlocutors as a time when the value of work in general and forestry work in particular was politically and publicly recognised.

The chairman of the Slovak Forestry Chamber, himself a forester in central Slovakia, told me that with the regime change, the Western-style field of environmentalism, both state (Ministry

of the Environment and its related actors) and non-state (NGOs and civic organisations), emerged, as elsewhere in the former socialist region. 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 discussions not experienced before. They resulted in a mutual exchange of knowledge, despite sometimes completely different points of view. What he referred to as “politicisation” of state forestry (the direct influence of and entanglements with party politics) generated, according to him, the current discourse based on a sharp boundary between state forestry and “green” environmentalism. The latter has in recent years achieved a deeper integration¹⁸ into state administration¹⁹, including increased flows of capital.

The problematic financial situation of present-day forestry is at the heart of the ongoing conflict, and was sometimes commented on by my interlocutors interchangeably with the critique of “politicisation”, directed towards both the local and national levels of the institution. Even in situations where I had no intention of doing so, we always ended up discussing it at some point. It was clear to me that the issue of unequal financial distribution and the position of forestry *vis-à-vis* the non-state “green” actors and the state was a pressing issue for my interlocutors. Their tone in these conversations was usually expressive and sometimes also angry, which seemed to further confirm my observation regarding the centrality of the tension. The current model of forestry financing, based exclusively on market profits from timber production, was introduced immediately after the regime change. The so-called “non-production” elements, such as water regimes and water management, oxygen production and protection of the environment, remain entirely without economic value in this system—despite the fact that these instances are an “equal” part of the foresters’ work according to Slovak forestry law. In Topoľčianky, my interlocutors pointed to the “wood-heavy” financial model as the main reason for the institution's consistently precarious financial situation since 1989. Comparisons with other European countries—the Western ones in particular—were used to demonstrate that “non-production” can and should be used for economic purposes as well.

¹⁸ The national-conservative constellation that came into power after the election in September 2023 has addressed the issue and tried to reverse the “green” discourse—yet, unsurprisingly, mainly for its own capital-driven ends.

¹⁹ The Ministry of Agriculture as the main administrator of forestry appears to have far less power and resources than the Ministry of Environment, which is directly responsible for the conservation agenda, the allocation of related EU funds and recently also for some of the protected forests. I do not analyse this institutional discrepancy in detail; it remains, however, contextually important.

Apart from the “impersonal” financial matters, the (sometimes angry) narration of betrayal and disappointment framed the ways in which my interlocutors expressed their views on the current state of affairs in forestry. I would argue that through these emotions they expressed the ongoing power struggle and a sense of disempowerment, inferiority and devaluation they have faced, to various degrees and in various forms, since the regime change. They explicitly connected it to the present-day tensions. A similar tendency regarding the connection between “negative” emotions and current socio-political realities has been observed in a multitude of post-socialist contexts as a concomitant phenomenon of the post-1989 transformations (Svašek 2006). Along these lines, the next section sheds light on the “green” practices as the “other” side of the tension.

A table, two chairs and two people in a dimly lit studio. This was the setting in a late-night talk show aired on a private channel. The guest, a biologist and a member of a “green” association, answered the presenter’s questions and persuaded the viewers why the “green” vision for Slovak forests is the right one. The primary discussion was about the current situation regarding disputes over national parks and, much to the guest’s liking, the government’s plans to introduce a logging ban in certain areas of the country. Yet it was not only about what was presented as professional and scientific arguments. The show had a noticeably “lifestyle” character, and also discussed, among other things, the current situation around party politics in the country. During the talk, pictures of devastated forests were shown to take the audience in and criticise the foresters (without explicitly using the term state forestry). This visual material gave the impression that they wanted to remind the viewers that forests and national parks were the main issue here. Without these images, the discussion might have been mistaken for something entirely different.

As the talk show indicated, non-state “green” environmentalism pushes for a so-called “zero-intervention” paradigm: that is, forests should either remain completely logging-free, with no technical forestry activities (especially in national parks), or forestry interventions should be minimal, with logging executed only in certain forests that are supposedly less important for the ecological balance than the rest. Such an interplay between “heres” and “elsewheres” presents a structural characteristic of the “green” ethos which has been observed globally (Fairhead et al. 2012). While the “here” should remain without any intervention to preserve its re-claimed natural value, the “elsewhere” can serve economic needs. Put another way, the green economy of “repair” operates under the logic of “unsustainable use ‘here’ [which] can be repaired by sustainable practices ‘there’, with one

nature subordinated to the other” (ibid.: 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 (ibid.: 240, 241).

On an early weekday afternoon in August, I met the chairman, an ecologist in his late 30s, of what is currently the most prominent environmental civic organisation in Slovakia “We Are the Forest” (*My sme les*), in one of the capital’s “hip” old town cafés. It was his place of preference, as he had indicated when I had communicated with him via email beforehand. Unsurprisingly, the whole setting contrasted very much with the village scenery I had enjoyed during my stays in Topoľčianky. When I arrived, the small, stylish-looking café was half empty. He was already sitting at a table in the corner. I thought he would be wearing green clothes, but that was not the case here. His style was casual and his manners “intellectually urban”. The atmosphere during the whole interview was relaxed and open. He showed interest in my research and at times I felt that he automatically assumed I shared his positions (which I did not articulate). After we ordered coffee and lemonade, he started explaining what the association stood for and how it worked. The vision of what he referred to as sustainable forestry and agroforestry relies, similar to state forestry, on economic profit. Wood grown “elsewhere” is of primary importance, however: “It’s all connected economically. We can protect forests, but if it doesn’t make sense economically, if it’s not viable, we can’t save them. We can choose certain forests for logging and leave the rest untouched.” He was not explicitly critical of the financial model based on the timber business, which surprised me given the critical accounts I encountered in Topoľčianky and the general logging restrictions the “green” model advocates for. That said, he also pointed out that “non-production” functions of forests should also be important, if not central “commodities” as well.

The whole interview was framed by the boundary between the superior “us” and the inferior “them”. While the chairman acknowledged that a minority of state foresters shared their views, most of the foresters aged over 50 (i.e. the majority) tended to see the organisation and its activities as a form of urban activism, which lacked relevant knowledge about forests and forestry. He also expressed concern that foresters wrongly see their lifelong experience and expertise in forestry as the key feature that distinguishes them from environmentalists. Foresters’ knowledge is, in his view, old-fashioned and “extremely conservative”, making it irrelevant to the “urgent climate crisis we live in”. While he seemed to imply that this was

largely a generational problem, he did not explicitly mention it, nor did he agree when I asked him about it. He conceptualised forestry as a technical discipline in which “the most basic understanding of forests is very different from that of ecologists, who see them holistically”.

What struck me during the interview was that he did not really make a distinction between forestry and state politics. While he was explicitly critical of certain political figures (from the “non-green” political spectrum), he implied that foresters shared the same views and ideas, or even willingly participated in what he perceived as “wrong” political decisions made by elites. This morally charged attitude, within which the association operates also more broadly (e.g. the official programme, political affiliations, financial supporters), has perhaps contributed significantly to the ongoing public devaluation of forestry work. It constitutes an image of foresters as “the others”, automatically excluded from the “green” and trendy, “good” ecological discourse. The digital presence as the de facto main domain in which the association operates has further exacerbated the boundary: from online petitions, to reposted appearances of its members in talk shows, to morally-driven visual materials depicting devastated *vis-à-vis* healthy forests as the ultimate goal of the ecological and modern “future-making” project, without “rendering the forest technical” (Li 2007). In such more-than-human oriented worlds, the work and viewpoints of “the others” (i.e. foresters) remain excluded.

2.4 The Tension as a Local (Relational) Affair?

At the time of my fieldwork, intense disputes over national parks, conservation policies and logging zones were taking place²⁰ and dominated the public debate across the country. My interlocutors were eager to talk about the issue whenever the opportunity arose, usually with a critical and angry attitude. The most pressing issue for them was the fact that they were completely left out of the discussion. Comparisons were made with environmentalists and members of the Ministry of the Environment. In foresters’ view, these actors have not only been able to present their ideas on the issue publicly, but have also been able to participate

²⁰ Debates and disputes over national parks and conservation areas concern the northern and to a lesser extent the eastern mountainous parts of Slovakia. The main idea of state policy—in accordance with the environmentalist agenda—is to extend the so-called no-intervention zones, i.e. the absolute ban on logging. The administration and management of these forests should then be carried out by the Ministry of the Environment instead of the Ministry of Agriculture (the latter being the official state forestry administrator). The obstacle is that many of these forests are privately owned and used solely for material purposes.

directly in policy formulation and promotion without any kind of “real” opposition from foresters. The expertise and knowledge of these actors was repeatedly questioned under the term “political games”. There seemed to be a clear consensus in Topoľčianky on this aspect, often expressed through the financial lens, implying a widespread political distrust in the state and EU institutions. More specifically, my interlocutors accused the environmentalists of having unequal access to funding—both from the state and the EU—which enabled them to have a strong position within and beyond state policies (particularly those of the Ministry of the Environment). Peter aptly commented on this widespread view during a discussion with other foresters about the current situation when we visited the local office: “Their [the “green” 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 will start logging; otherwise, they wouldn't survive financially.” The other foresters at the table nodded in agreement. The perceived unequal power structure was further illustrated by recent developments in one of the forest territories in the High Tatras, which had been managed by the Ministry of Environment for about six months as part of the “green” agenda (the same forests had previously been managed by the Slovak Forests). Peter explained that the logging had started there again two months ago, despite initial claims that the “zero logging” policy was an absolute priority for the new administrator and the reason for their appointment. I heard similar stories about other mountainous territories from the chairman of the Slovak Forestry Chamber as well.

In sum, the “green” policies formulated and enforced by the state in symbiotic partnership with non-state actors were perceived within local and national forestry as attempts to gain direct financial benefits from EU funds, while at the same time rearranging the forest ownership structure to secure full control over state-owned forests. My interlocutors also pointed out that the money could have been used for forestry—being in its worst financial condition since the regime change—if the state wanted to support the institution. They felt, on the contrary, completely excluded and forced to accept whatever the state/non-state partnership dictated from “above”. In the process, the state as the institutionalised “owner” and an inherent “part” of forestry was transformed into an unapproachable “other”, working for the benefit of “others”. The often taken-for-granted clear boundary between state and non-state actors (i.e. the state and NGOs) becomes blurred in consequence (Mitchell 2006).

In moments like the one in the office described above, the current conflict was intensely tangible at the local level, even though none of the affected forests were located in

Topolčianky and the wider region. Here, I would suggest to grasp the situation more broadly and move beyond the explicit state/non-state dualism from a “state” perspective: that is,

as a relational setting that cannot be categorised according to simple hierarchies or a governing centre, but that exists within the relations between actors who have unequal access to material, social, regulatory, and symbolic resources and who negotiate over ideas of legitimate power by drawing on existing state images (Thelen et al. 2017: 7).

The tension framed by the “us versus them” dichotomy seemed to put local forestry actors relationally beyond the local and bounded into the realm of the national and the “green” global. Jozef told me one day as if consciously confirming this view: “Of course your main interest is where you work [...] but at the same time, as a forester, you’re part of the whole industry. We follow what is going on in the whole country, we care [...] it’s all interconnected somehow.” Ivan went further, expressing very clearly that the “green” paradigm and the ban on logging could mean that in a few years, there would be only very limited, if any, need for state forestry. He criticised the ways in which the “green” actors wanted to “dictate” how foresters should and should not work, without any kind of wider discussion and equal opportunity. Ultimately, in his vision of an imagined future, foresters would lose not only control over state forests and the obligation to manage them, but also their jobs and thus the material income needed to make a decent living. The imagined potentiality of this threat to local practices was again based on reported lived experiences occurring beyond the local level.

Building on these examples, I would argue that the tension—and the aforementioned boundary-making more broadly—has highlighted the value of solidarity among Slovak foresters, regardless of whether or not they work in the regions presently subjected to “green” policies. Jozef remembered that he and other foresters from the village went to a demonstration organised by the Slovak Forests in the capital back in 2021, at a time when the dominance of non-state environmentalism in state policies and institutions (especially in the Ministry of the Environment) was becoming apparent, and the debate on logging permissions had just been opened. He emphasised the action was in retrospect less about political goals than about the communal aspect, which reminded him of the times when they prepared for the Workers’ Day under socialism, although they were aware of the very different circumstances. Similarly, when I visited the foresters’ office, I witnessed a spontaneous debate about a group of foresters from northern Slovakia and their struggle as the forests they

worked in were under the “green” administration of the Ministry of the Environment. They were allegedly not allowed to work in the way they had worked before; all the work practices were apparently changed somehow, “imposed from above”, without any kind of “logical reason”. As an example, one of the men present, who claimed to be a friend of one of the discussed foresters, described how the routine task of filling bureaucratic paperwork during a forester’s workday had apparently become more complicated under the new administration. Telling and discussing these stories in the office not only connected local foresters with their colleagues across the country, it also created an atmosphere of shared, relational uncertainty. The men wondered about the future situation in the village, expressing their fears through pensive thoughts such as “Who knows how this will end?” or “Let’s see if this will also reach us”. This is not to negate their agency, though. Being a rather passive observer in the situation, I understood such uncertainty-driven forms of collective sociality (in the office or elsewhere) as direct relational manifestations of the actors’ agency in navigating precarity within the contemporary context of local and state forestry. Mundane rituals, such as coming together in the office for a cup of coffee and talking about current affairs, have strengthened precisely the kind of valued sociality my interlocutors told me had become increasingly rare after 1989 (discussed in Chapter 1). These rituals were not confined to the foresters’ office; on the contrary, I observed similar tendencies in the central office where people also got together to discuss the current situation in an informal atmosphere (see also Chapter 3 for the village festivity context).

Interestingly, generational differences seemed to influence, to some extent at least, the ways in which the actors attended to and participated in the current tensions. When I asked younger foresters and technicians in the village how they felt about the situation, I usually received more “neutral” and less straightforward answers. While I could still detect the “us versus them” dichotomy articulated through a sense of unease in their brief answers, it seemed to me that the younger generation did not want to talk about the conflict or preferred to stay as far from it as possible in their answers. Their attitude seemed to be similar during the group conversations, where they usually remained silent or passively nodded in agreement. Despite these differences in the articulation of the present situation, a sense of unity and shared solidarity prevailed, as was evident in a number of office meetings such as the one described above. I also tried to understand their views through what my interlocutors told me, but they usually assured me that their younger counterparts were on the “same wavelength” and did not agree with the “green” agenda as much as they did.

Coming back to Jozef's illustrative account that local foresters "care" about their colleagues elsewhere, a sense of shared solidarity and unity was also expressed and practised through the notion of care. At the same time, it was used as a valuable mark of differentiation from "green" environmentalists and their care practices. In the next section, I turn to care as a negotiated, politically charged "modus operandi" in Topolčianky and beyond.

2.5 Forestry Work as Care

The communal aspect within local forestry has undoubtedly played an important role in navigating the conflicting relations and uncertainty of the present and the possible future. My general impression from the very first moments in the village was that foresters and other forestry employees valued personal relationships with each other. In other words, it seemed to me that they mutually cared for each other, and were thus inter-connected *through* care. Regular acts of kindness, friendliness and mutual support framed the mundane, day-to-day interactions inside and outside of the office. Whenever I visited the central office with Jozef, he would first go from door to door to have a small talk with people, inquiring about how they were doing, what was new in their lives, or asking about their children. Initially, I thought he did this because he was retired and wanted to take the opportunity to see all the familiar faces from when he worked there. However, I later found out that the same ritual was performed by Ivan, who was in the building on a daily basis. When discussing family members, which was perhaps the most commonly discussed topic apart from forestry-related issues, people tended to mention other people's children or partners by name, signifying familiarity and personal closeness. These interactions were not limited to specific age groups but were cross-generational.

Once when we were driving with Jozef to meet one of his friends, he spotted his former colleague (in his early 40s) on his way to the office with a number of large, weighty-looking bags. Jozef promptly stopped the car and offered to take the bags to the office, as the man mentioned he was heading to the local café for a meeting with a colleague from another town. Clearly pleased to see Jozef, he accepted the offer without hesitation. A short conversation, similar to those described above, unfolded before we left to leave the bags in the office. As we drove past the café to the arranged meeting, the man smiled and waved to Jozef—a gesture of gratitude for the assistance.

The short scene is to illustrate the observed tendency of friendly togetherness and mutual care, which seemed to prevail in Topoľčianky, even among people who do not share a direct personal relation. These instances contested my interlocutors' remarks that "relationships are more technical now than in the past" and that "forestry used to be like a big family which is not the case anymore" (discussed in Chapter 1). Without questioning these perceived views, the fact that foresters care about other foresters and forestry employees enables them to draw a line against the "other" side of the present-day tension. In other words, through the acts of (mutual) care, foresters negotiate their political belonging within the current precarious situation dominated by the state/non-state "green" partnership. The next part will illustrate these processes further with a focus on forest care.

It was an ordinary Friday in August and Ivan offered to take me to the forest with him. There was not much work for the day because of the high temperatures, and Fridays were usually more relaxed than the rest of the week. Ivan was waiting for me at his place, so once I arrived, we were ready to go. As usual, he was dressed in his green work clothes, the same colour worn by every forester in the village, whether at work or during leisure time. The drive was short, and we soon reached the forest. Ivan mentioned that he had been working there since the 1990s and knew the territory very well. We started our walk and Ivan began to talk about the current conflict-driven situation in forestry. My impression that this was a pressing issue locally was confirmed, as I did not ask him about it; he just started on his own. In fact, hearing him express the criticism directly in the forest where he has worked for many years made it even more tangible.

This time the critical accounts included all sorts of technical information I did not really understand. He showed me, for example, freshly logged timber being prepared for transport to the storage room and explained in technical terms how to make the correct cut. The scene reminded me of the machine work I had seen in the private forest (described in section 2.1). Even though I was not really interested in the technicalities described so intensively, I realised how precisely and with affection Ivan not only explained but also practised what he wanted to show me. For instance, he touched the timber gently and with precision, commenting that "this is how you work with wood properly, with care". As we walked in the forest, he also touched or caressed some trees with affection, which he told me he always did when measuring a tree or doing any kind of "care work" (*starostlivost*), as he explicitly called it. At one point he told me directly that it was precisely this approach to work which made foresters "much better" than their environmental counterparts. "The care work we [foresters]

provide is necessary for the trees, for the forest, for the animals and all the other living organisms here,” he expressed proudly, while questioning the “zero-intervention” approach. “If the forest is left alone on its own, without any kind of help, without cutting down certain trees that may be diseased, it can actually become a complete disaster, leading to its complete extinction,” he said.

When we arrived at the main logging area, which was somehow less spacious than I had imagined it to be, Ivan told me a story he said was circulating among foresters and clearly demonstrated why “green” actors are not only incompetent but also active “political liars”. Back in 2020, a photograph of a completely destroyed forest in northern Slovakia appeared in the media. The “green” actors publicly declared that foresters in the region and the state forestry in general were to blame. Excessive logging was named as the main reason behind the forest’s catastrophic condition. Ivan admitted that the logging scene was not really aesthetically pleasing. I could observe this in that very moment standing on one such logging site, which was perhaps much smaller and less catastrophic than the circulated one. In fact, it looked quite natural to me. Only a relatively small number of trees were cut down. However, some forestry members found out later that the circulated picture had actually been manipulated and that the devastation was in reality the result of a severe storm from a few years ago. “You see, so this is who they are. The only thing they’re good at is the ability to create political affiliations which work in their favour. Otherwise, they don’t really care,” Ivan seemed to have a look of disgust on his face as he asserted this view. When he finished the story, I realised that it had nothing to do with regional forestry or Topoľčianky, despite the urgency expressed. The sense of mutual, interpersonal care was again evident to me (even if only tacitly entailed in the story), as was the “beyond local” rather than the isolated scope of village forestry.

After spending a few minutes in the logging area, we returned back to the forest pathway. We passed by several seemingly dried-out trees. The ground beneath our feet cracked from the excessive summer temperatures and the lack of rain for more than a month. Ivan turned to the subject of ecology as a reaction to the environment around us, while continuing to delineate the boundary between the foresters and the “others”. Apparently, all the foresters in the village and beyond are well aware of the current pressing environmental situation, in which “the future looks bleak”. He made it clear that if foresters stopped doing what they were doing in the forest, the result would be a complete destruction not only of the forest but also of nature in general. “Have you ever thought about all the insects that live in the forest?” he

asked and I was not sure what kind of answer he was expecting from me. He then urged me to look at one of the trees nearby, a solid beech full of green leaves, similar to others around us. Gently touching its trunk, Ivan disclosed small orange and yellow marks all around its lower part, which he told me were caused by a specific kind of “wood-rotting” insect. He then stressed that “if we stopped caring for the forest, as they [the “green” actors] want us to do, we would lose the whole forest, because these insects jump from one tree to the other extremely quickly”. As if feeling an urgent need to show me immediately what he meant by “care work”, he took a small knife from his pocket and started to do the “caring process”. First, he scratched the trunk to see how deep the actual damage was. His moves were skillful. Having found even more marks made by the parasitic insects, he declared that the tree would have to be cut in the near future because the risk of infecting other trees was too high—so high, in fact, that whole areas of the forest could be affected within a few months. He then went on to point out that if there were no foresters and the forests were “left on their own”, without any kind of intervention or “help” in accordance with “green” policies, the ecological damage would certainly be much greater than by cutting down the now sick trees. These can even be used economically as firewood. In other words, through foresters’ care practices, the much-needed environmental balance was ensured, *as opposed to* the seemingly uncaring practices of “green” environmentalists.

The very skill of forestry practice seemed to be very important to Ivan. At some points, I had the impression that he was consciously staging what he was doing and saying to show me that he truly knew what he was doing and saying as a forester. After we had moved away from the sick tree, he touched different leaves from different trees to emphasise that without the proper care work there would be “no real green”. There would also be no different generations of trees in the forests—the generational diversity of trees being a crucial aspect of ecological balance for foresters. He then started to name the approximate age of each tree around us. Again, it seemed to me that this was to illustrate that he knew the forest very well and that what he did there every day as part of his work was truly professional. In short, I got the impression that he was trying to show me that he really cared for the forest, for nature, as well as for foresters and forestry in general. Perhaps this was also a way of distinguishing himself from “the others” and redrawing the boundary between “us” and “them”.

As we slowly approached the entrance point to the forest where we had started our walk, he suggested going back to the logging area because he needed to measure the timber that was being prepared for transport to Topolčianky’s warehouse. He was happy that this was the

only task for the day, as working in such high temperatures was anything but easy. We came back and he immediately started to do the work. He looked happy when I told him that I was going to stay next to him and watch what he was doing. I thought that this time he would be fully immersed in the work without any kind of commentary. The opposite seemed to be the case. He explained each and every step in detail, using the same technical language as before. However, this time forestry as a state institution was also addressed critically. He started by skilfully measuring the timber using a measuring tape, moving from one side of the logged material to the other with unexpected speed. After each completed piece, he entered the numbers into an application on his mobile phone. Each piece of timber had a specific number which had to be checked and recorded on a record sheet. He seemed bothered by it. At one point he started measuring a new piece without entering the numbers of the previous one. The whole scene gave the impression of unfamiliarity with the system. After finishing the measurement, he came back to me, still holding the phone, and explained that there was no point in entering the number digitally and then writing it down in the office, as had been done before the mobile application was introduced. He complained that it takes more time now as he must enter and check the numbers twice. The digitalisation effort was recently introduced by the Slovak Forests as part of an EU initiative, which he said was completely out of touch with the foresters working in the villages. Addressing the EU, he claimed that the institution was dictating foresters what to do. It was not usual for my interlocutors to judge the EU as explicitly as Ivan did here.

Through the direct intervention of the state (entangled with the EU), as in the case of the recently introduced digital application, Ivan seemed to see the “proper” caring work of foresters as endangered and simultaneously transformed into a rather precarious practice build upon the criticised difference between “them” and “the others”—this time creating the boundary *against* the (supposedly) uncaring state. He finished the work after about 40 minutes. Complaints about the state’s failure to provide enough of the technical equipment he and other foresters need every day accompanied us on the way back to the car. He managed to briefly show me some trees he was not able to care for because he did not have enough natural fertiliser, as did his colleagues from Topoľčianky. The sense of shared struggle and mutual care among foresters was again tangible here.

The following week I visited the central timber warehouse. Ivan wanted to show me the timber he had measured in the forest so I could see where it was stored now. The warehouse area was a spacious site filled with neatly organised timber. The machines and sawmills were

located outside. There were three storage buildings scattered around the site. Outsiders were officially not allowed to visit, so we had to fill in a registration form confirming that I was “a visitor” accompanied by forestry employees. A friendly man in his 40s greeted us in a small rectangular office in front of the entrance to the warehouse area. He was curious to know who I was and why I came, which led to a conversation between the two men framed by a familiarity I have encountered in other places before. The man had worked as a sawyer in the past, but due to health reasons he moved into administration a few years ago. After talking about their children, we left and went into one of the warehouses. Ivan said with pride that all the timber around us has been “supervised” by foresters from the very first moments of its existence. He added that despite the financial complications of relying solely on the sale of timber, it remains one of the most essential resources for human existence, “produced” by foresters. Again, I felt that the repeated articulation of this self-positionality was important to Ivan, as was his implication that foresters—as opposed to “other” actors—care.

“Even if they do produce timber, it’s of much lower quality than ours,” he compared directly as we approached the warehouse. Inside, the timber was arranged according to the respective date it was measured in the forest and transported to the warehouse. Ivan’s latest addition from the week before was right next to the front door. He explained how the whole system works and was repeatedly critical of digitalisation, which seems to have made the work of both the foresters and the technical staff in the warehouse more complicated than before. The boundary between foresters and “green” environmentalists remained simultaneously a hot topic. He came nearer to the timber and started to touch it, as if to convey the passion for and importance of forestry work and its intimate relating over time (similar to the moments in the forest). When asked about storage rooms in parts of the country administered by the Ministry of the Environment, he said that the environmentalists didn’t really know how to do it professionally, unlike the Slovak forester who had been doing all the timber work, including the proper storage, for more than a hundred years. The allegedly uncaring attitude of the “green” actors was further evidenced by the fact that state forestry in general and local forestry in particular regularly participated in timber auctions with international participants. This was not the case in the regions managed by the “green” partnership. As we left the warehouse, Ivan reiterated that what “they” really care about is just the “green” agenda, which was ultimately about demagoguery and money, not about the “real” profession or the needs of society.

2.6 Less Work, More Nature: Towards More-Than-Human Forest Care?

Turning our attention back to the “green” association *My sme les* allows us to observe a different notion of care through which the difference between “us” and “them” was re-produced and articulated. As opposed to the foresters’ approach of “proper” care based on collective solidarity and technical forestry expertise as shown in the story above, the chairman of the association claimed 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 mechanisms, none of these things is needed. Forests can care for themselves—they can regenerate on their own if there are for example 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.

At the same time, he also made a more pragmatic argument using the economic lens linked to the environmental crisis as a point of reference:

All these unnecessary practices are also very expensive. The consequences of the climate crisis are becoming more and more tangible [...] I think we are reaching the limit, we just can’t afford to measure all the trees that have fallen after an intense rainstorm, for instance, because they 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 not sustainable, and we can see this increasingly in the present. Our forests will become more and more wild, that’s for sure.

The justification for the “green” approach, which aims to care for forests in the name of supposedly environment-friendly attitudes, lies hence in the constructed need to abandon state forestry practices. These are understood as uncaring, inefficient and detrimental. What my interlocutors in Topolčianky saw as valuable care work for both the forestry community and the forests is presented here as the antithesis of care. In other words, leaving forests “on their own”, with only minimal human intervention (if any), will provide them with all the necessary, *as if* natural care, negated by the practices of “the others”. Saving financial resources in increasingly difficult conditions linked to climate change should also evidence the fact that state forestry must change in favour of the “green” agenda and its “natural” care.

I asked the chairman further about possible ways in which to ensure that the kind of care he described can unfold. He told me that it was important to take natural ecosystems holistically into consideration and to acknowledge that humans can not control everything; that there are natural processes beyond human intervention. This, he said, was in the broadest picture what needs to be acknowledged. Ironically, this view reminded me of my interlocutors' accounts of how forests are more than "just" timber, and that all of the valuable "more-than-economic" functions should not be forgotten when talking about forestry work and climate change.

Theoretically, the "green" care as proposed here can be read as a form of more-than-human care, characterised by an increasingly urgent obligation of humans towards their more-than-human counterparts in the age of the Anthropocene and its environmental crisis (Latour 2013) to make it "as short as possible" (Haraway 2015: 160). The elimination of (technical) human intervention is understood as a way in which to "allow nature to take center stage" (Bocci 2017: 437). It is about ensuring that valuable forest ontologies remain intact, without precisely those human forestry practices identified and labelled as harmful. Ironically, we have seen that "green" care actually does not operate on the claimed more-than-human basis in the regions currently administered by the "green" partnership. Logging—supposedly the main problem causing natural destruction—is still executed and the timber is still being sold exactly as before. Sick trees are still cutted down to ensure that the insects can not damage other trees. Birds are still monitored. The difference between "green" and forestry care practices seems then not that big, after all. But does this mean that more-than-human care does not "work"? I would propose to understand "green" more-than-human care as a tactical way in which the "green" association and environmental actors engage in the public narration of their political difference *vis-à-vis* state forestry. In practice, more-than-human care is transformed into (more or less) the same practice as executed by foresters' assemblage-like caring, including both non-humans *and* humans. Without human intervention—while taking non-human influences on humans seriously—there would perhaps be much more natural destruction than there ever was. The "green" actors seemed to be cognisant of this, even if they publicly claimed the opposite.

2.7 Exclusion Through Care and Care as Difference

Anthropological and other social scientific explorations of care have tended to use it "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). In so doing, these studies have inscribed an exclusively positive value to care, distinguishing it dualistically and morally (good/bad) from supposedly impersonal domains of the market, for instance. Such views may “run the risk of underestimating its productive force for legitimising partialities, difference, and inequality” (ibid.) Along these theoretical remarks on fluidity and open-endedness rather than a pre-given “goodness” of care, both foresters and environmentalists negotiate particular notions of care constructed in opposition to the “others”, whose “otherness” is simultaneously being produced. Values entailed in the respective care practices and discourses are mobilised to produce the boundary on which the present-day tension between the two sets of actors rests. These processes were of particular public primacy in the “green” milieu. We have seen that the association’s vision of more-than-human care is one which not only criticises, but usually also calls for a significant limitation of state forestry work. There seems to be very little, if any, room for the activities of foresters in it, whose legitimacy is questioned.

Yet the “other” side of the conflict negotiates care in a similar way: that is, through exclusion. The scene from Ivan’s working day has illustrated that foresters’ self-understanding is based not only on mutual care for each other—including interpersonal relations and closenesses stretching beyond the village—but also on care for forests, the environment and society. They feel that only they can provide the “proper” care because they have the technical knowledge and understanding of how it should be done properly, while also having the “true” passion for it. This view is then used to draw the boundary against and distinguish forestry from the uncaring, impersonal “others”, who are perceived as being incapable of all the mentioned care attributes and only interested in personal enrichment and socio-political capital.

Furthermore, a differently negotiated temporality within care expectations and obligations is at stake here (Thelen 2015: 507). Foresters claim that their care work has played an essential role in social reproduction over the centuries and therefore needs to be continued further as it is irreplaceable for society’s existence. The “green” association, in contrast, articulates a position which is based on the “here and now”, characterised by the Anthropocene’s environmental challenges and a vision of future radically different from the past. The latter point in particular is mobilised to express the need to switch to “green” more-than-human care and, simultaneously, to exclude (or significantly limit) forestry’s “old-fashioned” care practices from Slovak forests. These practices are seen as not relevant for and incompatible with the challenges of the present and, even more so, the future.

2.8 Moving on and Being “Close to Nature and People”

As a reaction to the developments described on previous pages, forestry has tried to cope with the current situation through participation in “new” partnerships. One such relation was built with the European association and national civic initiative *Pro Silva*. The aim of the cooperation is to enforce “close-to-nature” forestry, i.e. “restoring and maintaining diverse and species-rich forest ecosystems, which are more resilient and better adapted for climate change [while] large logging areas are avoided” (Pro Silva 2022). International knowledge exchange networks led by foresters themselves present the central tenet within which the partnership operates. Strictly excluded is the “green repair economy” ethos and the no-logging paradigm to ensure sustainable economic and cultural production. All local forestry offices across Slovakia use the description of “close-to-nature” forestry on their web pages as the main work principle in the particular region. This was also confirmed to me by my interlocutors in Topoľčianky and by the director of the Slovak Forests. As the chairman of the Slovak Forestry Chamber told me: “We have truly underestimated the positive propagation of forestry work. What they [the environmentalists] do is in practice the same; they also do logging, but they communicate it differently. We really need to change in this regard. In fact, we’re slowly advancing.” A weekly TV talk show and an increased presence on social media across different platforms have recently been established to communicate forestry’s “positive” value publicly.

In Topoľčianky, the endeavours to initiate “positive” relations with the public have also resulted in forestry’s active participation in local village festivities and the production of gastronomic products sold under the label “Forest Delicacies”. The following chapter examines these instances and their implications in more detail.

3. Producing Nature Through Culture: Folklore Festivities, Gastronomic Products and Forestry as Heritage Practice

“We are here to remind ourselves of the distant past, our traditions and how our ancestors lived. We also remind ourselves of the importance of preserving these traditions for future generations.” Presented by the leader of a local folklore ensemble, the line opened the annual harvest festival in Topolčianky on a Saturday afternoon. It was already September, but the weather was still warm and the surrounding picturesque landscapes were green. As I made my way to the main square in the village centre, a mid-age couple approached me with the question of where to park their car conveniently. They did not know because they were not locals (as they told me). I showed them the nearby central parking space, and it surprised me to see there a number of cars from more distant parts of the country. The village was certainly more packed than I had expected. Young and old, families with small children, couples, but also people on their own—the variety of visitors was quite astonishing. Gastronomic stands offering fresh young wine (*burčiak*), beer, grilled pork, and sweet pastries (*buchty*) paved the way to the central stage prepared for musical guests. Even though the festivity was not a “purely” local affair (given the structure of the crowd), locals were easily discernible. For instance, they would sit around one of the wooden tables in front of the beer stand and talk in the local dialect. People often greeted each other, and I overheard some conversations about village affairs. A sense of “the local” prevailed—at least at first sight.

The main musical programme was preceded by a harvest parade, which started in front of the chateau and moved across the park to the stage in the central square. Members of regional folklore ensembles dressed in traditional, region-specific costumes, local gardeners, winemakers, and a few foresters marched together and sang folk songs lyrically specific to the harvest occasion. A sense of togetherness and unity was created. Many people joined the march and walked slowly behind, clapping their hands, singing, or even dancing. Once the group reached the main stage, one of the foresters took the microphone and announced: “Work in forests, the fields and vineyards has been finished. We can officially start with the harvest celebration.” The audience cheered, and good spirits continued as the musical programme started.

I was walking around the sellers offering all kinds of “traditional” rural products (ceramics, wooden decorations, knitted textiles, homemade pickles, jams, fruit spirits, etc.) when I

noticed a forestry stand. Green in appearance, the colour reminded me of foresters' working clothes. A paper flag with the word *lesníci* (foresters) written on it waved at the top. Pamphlets about forestry work were prepared on a small table located in front of the stand. A group of foresters and technical employees—some of whom I had already seen in the local office but did not know personally—all dressed in the typical green colour were preparing goulash inside. Products labelled as “Forest Delicacies” (*lesné pochútky*) were ordered on a centrally located shelf, decorated by pieces of wood and pictures of forest animals. “These are the original products from our forests”, read one of the photographs depicting wine yards in front of a forested landscape, which, interestingly, looked nothing like the local one. The offer consisted of different kinds of wine, honey, and rosehip tea, each marked as a *forest* product (e.g. forest wine) on the packages. Game meat was listed separately for pre-order on a small board, as it was for practical reasons not possible to sell it directly on-site. The forestry actors engaged with their potential customers in a direct, open manner. Goulash was offered immediately as a welcome gesture whenever someone approached the stand. When more people gathered around, the gastronomic products were presented. Small tasting quantities were usually provided. Descriptions such as authentic, traditional and regional were communicated while serving. The village setting combined with the folklorised atmosphere of the festivity created an almost ideal background for such claims. Most of the visitors left the stand with goulash and/or a bottle of wine. Less frequently, honey was also sold. After spending some time observing, I asked the woman who conducted the product presentation for more details about the activity:

We're doing this because we were invited by the village. We would probably want to come even if they didn't call us (laughs). It's very important to give people something they can associate with forestry—something tangible. Together with the historical heritage of Topolčianky, we can offer exactly that. That's also why we took part in today's parade.

She explained that the stand is officially organised and managed by the central office of which she is a member. She elaborated further that she sees participation in such events and festivities also as a form of coming together internally while “presenting forestry to the people.” The overall atmosphere in the stand confirmed the communal tendency she described and differed in this respect from other sellers' more anonymous, less personal manners. The stand was a place for relaxed personal conversations (among each other and with locals), sharing wine and beer, and telling funny anecdotes.

As the day went on and the evening came, the festivity changed quite significantly. The live folk music performances on the central square were replaced by a DJ set playing different kinds of retro electronic music. The audience was transformed into a younger dancing crowd, increasingly under the influence of alcohol. The setting reminded more of a summer party rather than the “traditional” harvest festivity experienced during the day. While a few gastronomic stands remained open, sellers of crafts and local specialties were already absent. I was a little surprised to find out that the forestry stand was still open, but not for selling forest products or promoting forestry as before. In fact, it had been transformed into a private event in its own right. Despite the fact that I did not know any of the actors personally, some remembered me. I was welcomed and immediately asked what I would like to drink. The personal constellation changed quite a bit: new faces mixed with some of the members I had encountered there during the day. The whole group—all men in their 50s and older—were dressed in the typical green colour. There was a familiarity in the way they communicated and laughed together. I was almost certain that there were no “outsiders” among them. “This is what forestry in Topolčianky is all about, my friend. It’s less and less like that now, but we are still like a family when we get together on common occasions such as this one.,” one of the men told me. After spending some time there as the only “outsider”, listening to funny stories from forestry life, I left with a bottle of wine they had given me as a present. “It’s nothing special but at least it’s got forestry on the bottle and it’s free for us to drink!,” one of the men shouted in a witty tone. I laughed, but somehow I also felt that this was not just a late-night joke.

The scene shows the ways in which participation in local village festivities enables forestry to articulate a sense of “the traditional” *in situ*. The contextual situatedness within folklorised cultural/ritual production in general and among other “traditional” sellers in particular links the practice to what Hobsbawm and Ranger (2012 [1983]) famously called the (re-)invention of tradition as a socially embedded process. Here, “the traditional” is variously defined and negotiated in the present against the backdrop of multiple readings of the real and/or imagined past (Bendix 1989: 132). The locality itself (i.e. forestry’s place in it) plays a crucial role. The constructed historical-rural idyll of Topolčianky, mixed with the surrounding landscape and the life stories of pre-socialist elites from the village, has served as a core narrative to articulate a regionally specific, authentically “displayed” local setting. Within this context, forestry emerges as a cultural practice occupying an (allegedly) irreplaceable position. A similar interplay between rurality, locality and tradition/authenticity has been

documented in the domain of “re-ruralization”, the heightened value of rurality and rural tourism across the wider post-socialist region and beyond (Csurgó et al. 2018).

The village festivity offered, furthermore, a glimpse of the ongoing re-production of different community forms within (and beyond) forestry. First, there was the very local village unit, which in practice remained rather fluid. It was not an exclusively static domain of foresters and other forestry employees. Symbolised by the forestry stand, it remained open to locals who were familiar with the “actual” forestry community from Topolčianky’s office. Some stayed for hours, others had a quick chat and left, but all seemed to be relationally connected through the local level. Second, forestry as a unified national community was evoked when presenting the gastronomic products. Also, during the parade, for instance, there was no distinguishing mark to indicate that the Slovak foresters wearing the national emblem on their uniforms were actually from the village. This was in contrast to the folklore groups, who wore distinctive regional costumes, and other participants with decorative banners indicating their village of origin. Third, the festivity in general and its harvest context in particular established what could be termed a “socialist” forestry community. The social togetherness (also discussed in Chapter 1) reminded foresters and guests of that era through the experiences in the stand: cooking goulash as the central event of local socialist forestry, drinking wine, talking about “past” times, but also more broadly within the folklorised context.

The instances of community production were closely interconnected with different forms of temporality negotiated at the festivity. As already noted, the general context of the festivity mimicked, to certain extent at least, the socialist past and its seasonal folklorised rituals (such as the harvest). The notion of traditionality, as observed in the stand and during the products’ presentation, was indicated by descriptions of idyllic “historical” peasant times and forestry practices in it. The “historically traditional” contradicted the often mentioned First Republic and its elitist context of the village. The contemporary and future-oriented temporality was evoked by presenting the gastronomic products as ecological, sustainable and closely connected to nature.

Both community production and the negotiation of different temporalities were, to varying degrees, integral to the (production) processes associated with gastronomic forestry products, to which I turn in the following sections.

3.1 Tradition, Materiality and Value

Zooming in on the materiality of “traditional” gastronomic products sold under the Forest Delicacies label—the central tangible aspect of forestry “traditionalisation” to attract public attention—enables us to observe forestry’s participation in a commodity production based on articulations of variously positioned and negotiated authenticity. Game meat and wine, presently the two most produced and sold forest commodities, are not new phenomena when it comes to gastronomic production in Topoľčianky. The forest winery was first opened in 1970 and has since then grown to its current size of 4 hectares of land, producing 24 tonnes of grapes and around 18 000 litres of various types of wines each year: Riesling, Pinot Gris, Chardonnay, Alibernet²¹ and Cabernet Sauvignon. The quality has significantly increased in recent years according to my interlocutors. A list of prizes won in national wine competitions was usually presented as evidence for such claims. Game meat production officially dates back to the 18th century, although it may have been practised much earlier due to the direct link between forestry and hunting. In both cases, authenticity is articulated through the variety of temporal distinctions mentioned above, from the “traditional” peasant (rural context, “historical” evidence, heritage), to the socialist (folklorised contexts, the winery built during socialism), to the contemporary (natural, close to nature, high quality).

Processes of value creation through gastronomic encounters have been observed by anthropologists across time and space. Cavanaugh and Shankar (2014), for example, use the term “linguistic materiality” to show how materiality (products) and language (labelling) work together to generate profit in capitalist market arenas. Contrary to their ethnographic case of local salami producers in Italy, forest commodities are produced on a smaller scale and go, to various extents, beyond the instrumental profit seeking on a global market. The latter point echoes Hann and Gudeman’s (2015) important contribution to anthropological studies of (post-socialist) rituals and economy as two inherently interconnected rather than separated entities. They argue that rituals such as village festivities, defined in the broadest socio-economic context “through the social connections they make and break” (ibid.: 7), may “express something of value to a larger collectivity” (ibid.: 4). It does not necessarily need to be connected to material gains. In the same way, the mutual interplay between (the production of) economic-cultural value aspects represents the underlying principle through

²¹ Alibernet is a dark-skinned wine grape variety that originated in the Ukraine and is currently cultivated on small to medium-sized plantations, mainly in Slovakia (Wine-searcher 2023).

which forestry re-produces its practices as a tradition, historically linked to (imagined) local heritage. This dynamic also enables forestry to engage in the production of nature per se (see below), which, in the wider context of the present and future, is an attempt to renegotiate its publicly devalued position (as discussed in Chapter 2).

My very first direct contact with forest products happened through a random visit to a small shop located directly next to the forestry office in Topolčianky. Small and cosy in appearance, its walls were lined with a multitude of stylised photographs of what appeared to be local forests and meadows, combined with wine diplomas won in various competitions. Wine bottles dominated the shop. Situated on wooden, vintage-looking shelves, the entire range of wines was elegantly presented to the potential customer. The price labels were written on small green slips of paper with the forestry logo next to them. The very same logo was displayed on some bottles under the Slovak Forests (*Lesy Slovenskej Republiky*) label written in a decorative font. A small illustration of Topolčianky's hunting castle surrounded by trees added a sense of craftsmanship to each bottle. Given the noble aspect of the castle, it was a somewhat contradictory but seemingly functional "quality" symbol tied to the village's elitist past. The "Protected Designation of Origin" (*Chránené označenie pôvodu*) logo appeared at the very bottom and had a similar aesthetic quality. Its standardised red and yellow form was absent. The rest of the delicacies range (honey, rosehip teas and jams, dried rosehips) was displayed in a glass case next to the counter. Lying aside, it gave the impression that these products were somehow marginal when compared to the dominance of wines in the room (which may be the case given the higher demand for wine and meat). There was a fridge full of game meat products behind the counter. A small selection of books on Topolčianky and local forestry, together with some wooden souvenirs, rounded off the offer. These "accessories" seemed to remind the customer of the local *terroir* from which the gastronomic products derived their claimed authentic quality. The overall atmosphere of the shop was rather ordinary. Presentations, tastings and personal interactions similar to those observed at the festivity were not carried out. The woman behind the counter told me straightforwardly that she was "just the shop assistant here" and that she only had limited access to information about the products. She claimed that people usually know what they want when they come into the shop (especially regular customers who buy game meat and/or wine). Tourists usually take some wine and honey as a "random" gift from their trip to the village, she claimed.

I only witnessed a small number of customers in the shop throughout my field visits, mostly buying game meat directly or ordering larger quantities in advance. At some point I realised that it was rather empty during its daily opening hours (and remained closed at weekends). This contrasted with a similar shop owned by the local winery Chateau Topoľčianky, currently one of the biggest national wine producers in Slovakia, founded in 1993 by former members of the dismantled socialist state winery in the wider region's largest town Nitra. The shop is situated on the central square, right next to the local administration office. According to the winery's staff, it is a well-known place for wine connoisseurs and casual consumers alike. In the course of the days I spent in the village, many people came there and went with a number of bottles. The shop organises regular tastings and offers customers professional advice from its staff.

Given the fact that the forestry shop was opened much later²² than the one operated by Chateau Topoľčianky, my impression was that the former was trying to imitate the concept of the winery shop. This observation led me to the question of who, where, and under what circumstances actually produced the forest wine and other “traditional” products offered under the delicacies label in the forest shop and at village festivities.

3.2 Forestry Wine and Its “Others”

I arranged a meeting with Ján, a long-time forestry employee who is officially responsible for the production of gastronomic products (*stredisko služieb*) and is directly engaged in wine and meat production in particular. I asked him to show me the forestry wine cellar and tell me more about the whole production process. He kindly agreed, so we met in front of the office and made our way straight to the cellar located in the park opposite the chateau. As we approached it in a few minutes' walk, Ján pointed to the picturesque vineyard in front of us, which had been owned by the local forestry department since the 1970s. Its original size was about 1.6 hectares and the wine produced (of low quality as Ján admitted) was at that time used only for internal consumption. After the regime change, the vineyard was abandoned. Renovation began in 2005, and it was restored to its present state in 2010. We went inside the cellar and I was surprised how spacious it was. There were three sections. The first one was what Ján proudly called the technological section, used for wine fermentation and processing.

²² The forestry shop first opened in 2015, more than a decade after the one operated by the Chateau Topoľčianky winery.

Four modern, high-capacity stainless steel barrels used for fermentation dominated the room. Ján told me that these were the latest additions to the cellar and that he was very pleased to have such high quality equipment, which he felt was necessary to produce good wine. Next, he showed me the storage room full of relatively small wooden barrels lined with hay and neatly arranged bottles of wine sorted by production year. The last of the three rooms contained a long wooden table with old but stylish chairs in the same colour tone, creating an inviting, cosy atmosphere. The walls were thematically decorated with a series of wine-related paintings. Ján told me that all of the wooden barrels and the table were made from local oak wood of the highest quality, which gave the wine additional quality and specificity when it was stored in these barrels. He added with a smile: “So our wine is really in touch with the local forests, which makes it unique”.

After the finished cellar tour, he offered a small tasting right at the wooden table in the tasting room. I expected to learn more about the wines, but he gave none of the information that a classic tasting performance would normally provide. My overall impression here was that Ján was a hobby winemaker with limited knowledge of viticulture rather than a “full-time professional” similar to those who work in the Chateau Topolčianky winery. In fact, I learned that there is a very direct connection between the two actors, not only in terms of personal friendships, but also directly through the materiality of the production processes. As we were sipping the wine, Ján explained that the commercial winery plays an active role in the technological side of the production. The chemical analysis (pH measurements, acidity, sugar content), yeast cultivation (forestry does not cultivate its own yeast) and bottling are all carried out by the forestry “outsiders”, using their own technical equipment and space (the main production hall). Ján recalled that before the purchase of the fermentation barrels, the entire fermentation process was also done in the winery, so that the quality of the wine would be acceptable.

To ensure that the wine produced is of adequate quality, the direct intervention of Chateau Topolčianky is necessary to bring the final authentic and “traditional” product into existence. Forestry does not have the necessary technological capacities and capabilities to do otherwise. Despite the fact that the forestry-owned vineyards are almost exclusively cultivated by its employees²³ who also work in the forestry cellar, the bottled wine itself is a

²³ Ján explained that at harvest times, they usually need some seasonal workers for assistance. Due to practical reasons, they usually ask employees from Chateau Topolčianky who are then paid separately by forestry.

“hybrid constellation” when it is placed on the shelf in the forest shop or in the stand at a village festivity. It is the aforementioned branding *Lesy Slovenskej Republiky*, written decoratively on each bottle, together with the depicted drawing of the local forestry castle, that ultimately makes it a “traditional” and valuable forest product. As Cavanaugh and Shankar (2014: 54) similarly note in the case of Italian salami producers, using particular words and images as “regional markers” on the product packages attempts to distinguish these commodities from materially similar ones circulating on the market—thus rendering them authentic and specific. Such visual qualities are used to “point to small-scale, non-industrial (aka “traditional”) production” (Cavanaugh 2019: 5), which signallises authenticity. Although technological infrastructures, including professional equipment and scientific knowledge, can be used by producers to demonstrate the high quality of “traditional” gastronomic products (e.g. as recently observed in *terroir* wines, Ana 2023), they remain well hidden in the case of forest wine in Topoľčianky. The involvement of the “non-forestry” winery is, moreover, completely muted in relation to the final product. Not only was there no reference on the wine’s label, it was also not mentioned in the information pamphlets, during the festivity, in the shop or anywhere else.

3.3 Politics and Poetics of Forest Meat

Game meat presents a slightly different production and circulation story. Ján showed me a building on the outskirts of the village where around 200 tonnes of game is processed each year. For hygienic reasons I was only allowed to enter the main hall of the production plant, the only one in the entire country specialising in game meat. Four large rooms used as refrigerators and filled with meat were visible through transparent glass as we entered. My companion explained that the plant has everything needed to produce and store game meat in the highest possible quality. Currently, it only processes meat from state-owned forests in collaboration with various hunting associations. The production is thus not purely local, as it processes animals hunted from all over the country. However, Ján assured me that they manage to sell mostly local meat in Topoľčianky and the wider region. Only in times of potential scarcity would they offer meat from other regions. All packaged meat (whether raw meat or salami) is labelled with the place of origin, together with the forestry logo, so that “the customer knows what he or she is eating,” Ján explained. The circulation of these products extends well beyond the local context. The plant holds an official certificate that

allows it to export to EU countries, particularly Slovenia, Austria and the Czech Republic, where demand is highest.

“We want to offer our customers a healthy game that comes from Slovak forests, is hunted by Slovak foresters and hunters, and is also processed in Slovakia”. With these words, the Minister of Agriculture launched a project called "A delicacy from the forest, 100% Slovak" in 2020 in front of the forestry office in Topolčianky, aiming to promote game meat produced in Slovakia. The articulated national aspirations, oriented also more broadly towards private producers, have not proved fruitful so far; only the state-owned plant in Topolčianky has participated. Ján reflected that despite initial pessimism and political distrust within forestry, what he called “positive promotion” has slightly increased the demand. In the broader picture, the project shows (even if tacitly) that economic gain from meat production is an important, if not an essential part of local forestry financing. Ján compared it with other forest products which, in his view, serve more of a symbolic function in bringing forestry closer to people within the tourism domain. Game processing combined with the organisation of hunts is a “real business to earn money” as he directly framed it. The “promotional”, heritage-based cultural potentialities of meat production remain, however, intact, despite the perceived hegemony of the economic realm. As we have seen, the preparation of goulash and the articulation of its traditionality through the direct historical link between forestry and game meat, derived from the expertise in hunting, is one of the central parts of forestry’s presentation and self-positioning at village festivities. The general observation “that all foods—industrial, “real,” and otherwise—are enmeshed in a field of political economic forces and the fact that all food-related activities are modes of cultural practice” (Weiss 2016: 5) becomes particularly evident in the case of forest meat. The underlying dynamics, characterised by the mutual co-constitution of and interplay between economic and cultural value, albeit embedded in the market logic, complicate Ján’s narrow description of meat as a commodity oriented solely towards economic profit. In other words, the distinction between economic and cultural value as two distinct phenomena becomes blurred, regardless of the locally perceived opposite.

It is important to note, however, that the distinction still *does* exist. The work that goes into the value separation is evident when we look back at the festivity context and compare it with the shop. Whereas the former case presented game meat as part of forestry’s cultural production, made “tastable” through the goulash cooked on-site and given to visitors for free or for a small fee, the buying and selling of meat in the shop is usually a “purely” economic,

exchange-based affair. The value separation also operates on a different scale. The cultural aspect is used to distinguish the product from similar ones produced elsewhere (within or, to a lesser extent, outside the EU), which tend to circulate on the market at a lower price and are perceived to be of lower quality. As we have seen above, forestry as a national Slovak community in particular is mobilised here to ensure that its “traditional Slovak” product is more valuable than those produced in other national settings (and can perhaps cost more as well) .

3.4 A Sense of Place or Terroir “Otherwise”

Both wine and meat as distinct local forest products from Topolčianky are also anchored in the relation between taste and place, which renders them “traditional” and authentic. The concept of *terroir*, originating in French viticulture, has become increasingly popular in a variety of heritage-based food contexts to address such connections. It refers “to the material conditions of a local—soil, topography and microclimate—and also to the cultural know-how behind agricultural products that helps constitute “place” as a locus of shared custom and affective belonging” (Paxson 2010: 444). In this way, the *terroir* discourse leads to the particular product’s value augmentation through the transformation of “culturally constructed criteria of authenticity and quality into ones that appear natural” (Ulin 1996: 39). However, the observed forestry delicacies do not make explicit reference to the *terroir* discourse (on the bottle, packaging or elsewhere), which is interesting especially in the context of wine, given the recent boom in *terroir* wine markets across post-socialist Europe and globally (Ana 2023). I asked Ján if the forestry department had any plans to implement the concept in the production. At first, he seemed uncertain, not sure if he understood what *terroir* meant. After I explained it in more detail, he seemed to recognise the word but apologised for not knowing enough about it. He drew, unsurprisingly perhaps, a direct comparison with the private Chateau winery where “such terms are being used and discussed internally”. Indeed, the winery discusses *terroir* both internally and publicly, notably on its official website where potential customers can learn about the concept and how it relates to the winery’s extensive range of wines.

Ján admitted that for now, the priority for forest products is to hold the “Protected Designation of Origin” (*Chránené označenie pôvodu*) certificate, which, according to EU legislation, stipulates that the wine was grown and processed in the specific region. Each

bottle of forest wine also carries the label “A Slovak wine”. Meat and salami packages state that “game meat comes from wild animals from Slovak forests”. As we have already seen in the context of the programme launched by the Ministry of Agriculture, I would suggest that the national sentiment seems to play an equally important role within forest gastronomy when considering the relationship between “taste and place”. That is, the “traditional” and authentic forest products are constituted as inherently connected to local and national contexts *because* they are produced by the state institution inherently linked to forests/nature of the Slovak territories. The traditional in this sense derives from the culturally constructed, naturalised national. The latter, in turn, is manifested in the heritage-based homogeneous local, which acts as a value guarantee in the age of global, market-driven circulation (Demossier 2011). Moreover, the fact that one cannot buy these products in a casual supermarket, but instead has to visit Topoľčianky or participate in a local festivity, transfers the “designation of origin” to a tangibly local, on-site embodied experience. Within this experience, one can directly “enter” the heritage realm of the village and local forestry in it.

The European Union as the main actor in geographical indication food policies of its member countries defines the “designation of origin” certification as those products “that have the strongest links to the place in which they are produced” while “every part of the production, processing and preparation process must take place in the specific region. For wines, this means that the grapes must come exclusively from the geographical area where the wine is made” (European Commission n.d.). It can be argued that such regional ontologies, in the context of “products that come from specific regions and have specific qualities or a reputation linked to the production area” (ibid.), do indeed point to *terroir*, albeit in a somewhat narrower sense. The explicit links to the (supposedly) natural qualities of that particular region as mediated and expressed through the product are missing here. There is also no specification on the constellation of producers involved. We have seen above that in practice the “certified” geographical links to the final commodity do not automatically mean that the product has to be made solely by forestry. On the contrary, actors located outside forestry are actively involved in the production process, which would not be possible without their essential assistance. Demossier (2011: 698) observes a similar tension among Burgundy *terroir* winemakers who “play the local, traditional, and natural cards even when they are almost entirely detached from their social environments, do not cultivate their wines, or do not even make their wines themselves.”

Forest rosehip tea, marmalade and dried rosehips are perhaps even more illustrative examples in this regard, although they do not hold the official “designation of origin” certification as wines and meat do. Once the fruits have been collected throughout the country by the forestry service, the entire production process is transferred to various private producers, such as Fytopharma, one of the country's largest producers of herbal and pharmaceutical products. The national context is then mobilised to articulate that the final product “belongs” to forestry. It certainly does in its unprocessed form, as rosehip is grown and collected in state forests and meadows. Yet, the production process remains almost completely muted. The product packaging states that the rosehip tea, for example, was produced by an unspecified external *Slovak* producer for the Slovak Forests, while the latter visually dominates the materiality of the packaging.

By avoiding the explicit *terroir* discourse, I would suggest that forestry in Topoľčianky participates in a form of “counter-*terroir*” positioned between the local (as in *terroir*) and the national (defying *terroir*-related specificity): a fluid nexus that emphasises the regionality of the forest products and simultaneously refers to their more-than-local (national) context as indicators of quality, tradition and authenticity. While *terroir*, as already mentioned, has gained global prominence in recent years, the forest products do not necessarily aim to enter the global market arena increasingly dominated by “traditional” heritage foods valued for their perceived specificity as opposed to conventional, mass-produced items. With the exception of meat, which is particularly popular in neighbouring countries, all other forest products circulate within more or less closed networks on the national market.

3.5 Towards the Global Domain?

Recently, however, there have been attempts to challenge the limited intra-national circulation. Ján told me that in 2021 the online e-shop was established with the defined goal to tackle the Covid-19 pandemic’s limited personal contact measures and, at the same time, to overcome the above-mentioned parochial tendency by opening up potential new economic avenues. He admitted that two years later, no orders had been placed from a different country and summarised that the e-shop had been a disappointment so far, with only a very limited number of customers from Slovakia. The online ambition highlights what Grasseni calls in the context of alpine cheeses transformation into valued heritage foods the “as if potentiality”

of producers: “the arena they choose as audience, although in practice very local, is symbolically, rhetorically and normatively global” (Grasseni 2016: 9).

The “global” e-shop case, which shows only a very limited amount of interest in forest products outside of their “traditional” local contexts, leads us also back to consider the wider role of “the place” within gastronomic encounters through forest products. As we have seen, Topolčianky’s rural setting and its (real and/or imagined) historical heritage intertwined with forestry enables the actors to articulate that the products offered on-site are indeed local and authentic—even if they are produced elsewhere or do not have any direct connection to the region. Vidacs (2015: 92) similarly argues in the context of Hungarian pig sticking events that gastronomic festivals usually tend “to emphasise the uniqueness of a locality, sometimes inventing a story to accompany the celebrations, sometimes tapping into a pre-existing local event or characteristic”. Together with the general assertion “that in food-related practices, an appeal to some form of historical legacy or heritage is often at issue” (Weiss 2016: 244), it can be argued that the place, in fact, constitutes the essence of forest products and their allegedly traditional properties. This, in turn, addresses the traditionality of forestry as a local artisanal practice. The e-shop case has demonstrated that the products probably cannot associate forestry with value, tradition and nature—precisely those objectives defined at the festivity by the forestry actors—when they are taken out of the concrete context of the place connected through historical and natural links to its heritage. In other words, “to truly appreciate such a product and what its label [the “traditional” forestry product] means, the consumer would want to visit, know, and experience the place itself and become tied to it in some respects” (Barham 2007: 294). The role of place-making, defined “as the conscious use, construction, and reconstruction of social, historic, cultural, and ecological elements native to a particular location” (ibid.: 279), is thus an important domain in the local forestry’s food-related endeavours. However, this role extends beyond guaranteeing quality and uniqueness, as is usually the case with *terroir* products circulating on the global market.

In Topolčianky, as noted above, the very direct embodied experience of the locale is crucial for the products to attain value. This was particularly evident in the festivity’s context, when most of the visitors to the forestry stand actually left with at least one bottle of wine. The tourism aspect and its entanglement with “place and culture” certainly play a role here as well. After all “rural tourism has been a buzzword ever since the regime change” (Vidacs 2015: 92) in Slovakia and the wider post-socialist region (Bitušíková 2023). The notion of an artisanal past, as if embodied in the work of foresters, also conveys a sense of a high-quality,

traditional craft, symbolically linked to the region's natural-cultural landscape (Ulin 2002). In turn, forestry can position itself as a historically legitimate actor preserving the natural-cultural heritage of Topoľčianky and beyond²⁴, imagined or real.

3.6 Honey as Valued Nature

The last forest product I have intentionally omitted in the previous sections because of its slight peculiarity is honey. In describing it in more detail, I will show how the regional, national and in this case also supranational levels became involved in its production process, although it holds the very local “produced in Topoľčianky” label. I will further argue—taking what has previously been said into consideration—that through the production of gastronomic products and participation in local tourism, forestry takes part in the production of nature as well: nature that is regional but also extends far beyond the local or even national setting.

The practice of beekeeping in local forestry dates back to the pre-socialist period of the First Czechoslovak Republic. Its state administration was actively engaged in the cultivation and expansion of honey farms scattered across the region (Šabo 2021: 90). In the 1980s, local beekeeping almost completely disappeared as a result of a bee epidemic (ibid.). It remained largely absent after the regime change until it was reinvented in its current form in 2017-2019 as part of the EU-funded regional development project “Hungarian and Slovak Foresters for Bees” (*Maďarskí a slovenskí lesníci pre včely*) through a partnership between Topoľčianky and Vértessolna, a Hungarian village in the border region with a similar forest landscape. I learned from Jozef, himself a long-time beekeeper, that the project brought not only honey farms to both villages, but also a complete small-scale production facility to Topoľčianky. Forest honey has since then been produced here. A large billboard with the EU flag located near the office building informs about the project's main goal: “Preservation, protection, and development of the natural and cultural heritage through the joint revival of beekeeping traditions in forestry as a heritage of Hungarian and Slovak rural areas closely connected with forests.” The forestry website also states that the project aims to make “better use of the natural and cultural potential of both regions through the processing of bee products, and thus supporting the sustainable growth in local rural economies”, as well as “to support the

²⁴ Topoľčianky is one of a number of heritage sites on the map called “Important Forestry Sites” (*Významné lesnícke miesta*), a forestry initiative which explicitly mimics the UNESCO-led tangible heritage projects by “categorising architectural, technical, and artistic monuments related to the forestry history in Slovakia as significant forestry sites”, whereby “foresters pay increased attention to these sites and mark them with uniform information signs” (Lesy SR n.d.).

educational function, to raise environmental awareness and to increase the attractiveness of the border region".

As I found out in the village four years after the project's finalisation, the popularity of local beekeeping remains rather muted when compared to other tourist attractions in the village. Jozef also admitted that the economic success envisioned in the project was completely absent and that honey, like other forest products, remained more of a "symbolic commodity". This was also confirmed by my visit to the honey farm with a small thematic museum²⁵ nearby. It was completely empty and felt deserted. Neither during the festivity nor in the shop was the product's value promoted in relation to the supranational context of the EU-supported collaboration. Yet, numerous references were made to local nature (more than was the case for other products) with attributes such as "pure" and "ecological", providing ideal living conditions for bees and thus producing honey of the highest possible quality as a "purely natural product". In other words, nature was presented as the sole producer of honey and as a "consumable" entity. The EU project, the production plant as its main asset, or the Slovak and Hungarian beekeepers were never mentioned. By consuming the honey, the customer could apparently taste ecological and healthy nature.

Drawing on Tim Ingold's (2005: 503) assertion that "the life of human beings, even when configured by the institutions of society, is not carried on in a world of its own, beyond the edge of another world of nature wherein the lives of all non-humans are contained", I would suggest that through the production of forest delicacies, of which honey is the most "evident" case, forestry participates in the production of nature *through* culture. More specifically, nature in Topoľčianky and beyond is constituted through social relations (both local and non-local) which extend to the situated production, presentation, circulation and consumption of forestry products. People and things (together with other living species), i.e. humans and non-humans, assemble a relational ontology called nature here. This view echoes what Bruno Latour (1993) famously called in the symmetrical context nature-culture. Similar to Haraway's (2003) notion of natureculture, these authors argue that "nature cannot stand outside of culture, just as culture cannot stand outside of nature" (Latimer, Miele 2013: 11). Ultimately, as Marilyn Strathern (1980: 177) puts it, there is "no such thing as nature or

²⁵ The museum was created as part of the project's educational aims to "support the educational function of the main target group consisting of children and youth by enhancing environmental awareness" (Lesy SR n.d.).

culture, each is a highly relativised concept whose ultimate significance must ultimately be derived from its place within a specific metaphysics”.

This also becomes evident when we look back into the shop. Pictures on the wall depicting a bricolage of “forestry-related” nature, the use of wooden stands for wine bottles, books on local nature, the use of green colour associated with nature and forestry, the forestry logos used, and the products themselves—in short, the materiality of the shop—all hint to the social production of nature rooted in cultural practice. This challenges the tendency to separate nature/culture into isolated, hierarchically ordered entities as the classical Western divide would suggest. The participation of forestry at the harvest festival can be viewed similarly. Being surrounded by local landscapes, dressed in green (as associated with forests and nature), using freshly cut wood for the fire on which the goulash is prepared, and, again, the materiality of the presented and sold “natural and traditional” forest products: all these instances contribute to the production of nature. Moreover, given the plethora of actors involved in the production, circulation and consumption processes of forest products, the constitution of nature is perspectival and spans multiple scales: the very local setting of Topolčianky and the wider region, the national context of forestry as a state institution, the cross-border supranational context of two regions in two different countries supported by the EU-led project, the EU-wide circulation, and the “global” online presence. After all, “the concept of nature, like that of society, is inherently and intensely political” (Ingold 2005: 503).

3.7 Nature, Culture and Value

Coming back to Hann and Gudeman’s assertion that rituals may “express something of value to a larger collectivity” (2015: 4) which is not necessarily connected to economic profit, I would propose a similar view when considering the case of forestry’s participation in folklore festivities and rural tourism more broadly. We have seen that the gastronomic products can be clearly read through the economic lens. The whole assortment is, indeed, produced to be sold—whether in the village or online in the recently established e-shop—and to bring financial profit into local forestry. This was particularly evident in the case of game meat which is a popular commodity not only locally but also in the wider context of neighbouring countries.

At the same time, these instances constitute and communicate value which goes beyond the “mere” economic profit and its primacy as known from liberal theories. They challenge the

capitalist “narrowing of [value] to budgetary or commodity terms” (Humphrey, Verdery 2004: 14). The cultural value of “self-awareness” (Rowlands 2004: 212) enables forestry to negotiate its own position and identity as a historical, natural-cultural heritage practice and tradition within which its members belong “to a particular [shared] culture and [act] upon it” (ibid.) in variously constructed temporal and communal constellations. To put it differently, forestry’s “practices which were “taken for granted” in the past now become acts of self-awareness and the foci for political action” (ibid.). The present-day socio-political struggle for (positive) recognition and the ongoing devaluation of foresters’ work (as discussed in Chapter 2) have highlighted the importance of the “more-than-economic” value dimensions within and beyond the cultural productions described in this chapter, both internally and in relation to the “outside” world.

4. Conclusion: Negotiating, Devaluing and Revaluing Forestry after Socialism

My thesis examined various interconnected forms of value creation in Slovak forestry. Focusing primarily on local foresters from a generation which experienced the socialist period, it helped me to elicit the concomitant processes and experiences of the post-socialist transformation in a rural “periphery” and extending beyond it. I started in the first chapter with the exploration of ways in which my interlocutors remembered socialism in forestry and in the village more generally. Rather than understanding their narratives as “pure” recollective fractions of the past, I argued that it is necessary to view these as having to do more with and being grounded in the present (and possible future) situation. The phenomenon of post-socialist nostalgia, observed by anthropologists throughout the former Eastern bloc (Todorova 2012), provides an important analytical category. In this regard, I argued that recollections of certain “lost” values from the socialist period my interlocutors evaluated as positive and missing in their lives since the regime change can all be read as forms of counter-narrative to the mainstream depiction of socialism as uniformly backward and unjust, and as a critique of post-1989 uncertainty. They also contest the stereotypical picture of the post-socialist rural population as a frozen in time obstacle to national transformation towards “complete” Western-style democracy. At the same time, I showed how the “positive” (nostalgic) narration of socialism sometimes mixed with critical commentary, reminiscent, ironically, of the hegemonic discourse. The expressed, variously positioned, dualistic tendency in-between “good” and “bad” socialist values and characteristics was in line with the ambivalent perception of the period and its post-aftermaths observed across the wider post-socialist region (Todorova 2012: 6). Simultaneously, it is also important to add that the ambivalent nostalgic memories of the past were perhaps, to various extents and despite numerous collective consistencies among my interlocutors, “filtered through a speaker’s personal experiences” as well (Herzfeld 2021: 136). Against the backdrop of lost values, this chapter laid the groundwork for understanding the practices of reinventing them or creating new ones, such as forest and community care.

Thus, the second chapter shifted the perspective to the ways foresters’ work transformed after the regime change when private forest ownership was re-established and private service providers entered state forestry. New job opportunities were brought into existence as a consequence of these developments, which were welcomed by my interlocutors as a means of

generating additional, albeit rather low income. They also saw it as an opportunity to practise their valued forestry expertise outside the usual work territory. The latter aspect was specifically admired when working as a central forester in the private forest, a position enabling to hold central authority and control over the logging decisions and other matters (such as ecological measures) the private owners must follow in accordance with Slovak forestry law. The position requires the forester to successfully pass a complex examination in front of a state forestry committee, which was by my interlocutors addressed with pride and as another sign of their professionalism and the value of what they do as such. By contrast, external private services providers were seen in the village and beyond (e.g. in the Slovak Forestry Chamber Association) as not competent enough, employing people without the necessary knowledge and skills to work in the forest and simultaneously providing precarious conditions for proper work.

The negotiation of what it means to be a “good” forester and of forestry as a “good” (work) practice constitutes another related characteristic of the value creation in the post-socialist moment. I showed how the “good” was rooted in an explicit critique of the socialist regime and its production-oriented values, which were seen by my interlocutors as obstacles to the practice of “real” forestry, supposedly known from the pre-socialist times and enabled again after 1989. The ambivalence and complexity of these cases were exemplified by the tacit accommodation of precisely those socialist values within “good” forestry that were simultaneously criticised and considered problematic (e.g. knowledge acquired in and brigades supported by socialist forestry schools). The value of creativity, self-realisation, environmental responsibility and communal character as essential parts of the “good” practice were associated with, and allegedly derived from, the romanticised pre-socialist times. None of my interlocutors, however, had any direct personal experience or specific knowledge of the period. Furthermore, the central position of the pre-socialist period within “good” forestry complicates the socialist/post-socialist timeline sketched in the narrations in Chapter 1.

Closely tied to the recent need to renegotiate forestry’s “goodness” publicly has been the tension between foresters and “green” NGO actors as a consequence of the latter’s increasing influence over the formulation of state policies and public discourse. Using the case of forest management in different parts of the country’s north, recently carried out by the Ministry of Environment in close partnership with the “green” spectrum, I showed how the dispute between the two sets of actors was actively present and tangible locally, even though the

affected areas were located elsewhere. My interlocutors used the case and the tension more broadly to pessimistically envision possible futures for local forestry and their workplaces in it. They saw a risk in giving the “green” actors a chance to continue with their agenda and further strengthen their presence in state institutions and public discourse. I also argued that the “green” influence has contributed significantly to the public devaluation of foresters’ work—a transformation from “good” (socialist) workers to “bad” enemies of nature—which foresters themselves perceived as unjust and as a form of unequal “political” game. There was no space left for them to take a stand on the situation and express their views.

The dynamics of the forestry-environmentalism tension are closely linked to different notions of care in the processes of forestry’s devaluation, revaluation and, ultimately, value creation. I argued that the stereotypically positive connotations of care in Western thought were actively contested here, leading to the production of boundaries between “us” and “them”: that is, constituting mutual difference and the exclusion of “the others” from “our” domain. While foresters saw human intervention in forests as essential for their health, ecological stability and future existence, the “green” milieu, represented most predominantly by the association *We Are the Forest*, advocated for a more-than-human form of care. It aimed to radically minimise forestry work (including logging and other “technical” aspects), conceptualising it as unnecessary, old-fashioned and harmful in terms of sustainability. The latter argument was usually used publicly as the main justification for more-than-human care, in which “nature” as the main agent would maintain itself on its own and thus ensure that society would be better able to cope with the environmental crisis. Care here meant de facto non-caring. Ironically, it turned out that logging was still executed in forests under the “green” administration, and the cultivation of mutual entanglements and interdependencies between humans and non-humans that foresters considered crucial had not ceased to exist. This observation implied that more-than-human forest care may not work in practice, that the mutual co-dependencies between humans and non-humans remain intact, despite the activists’ claims to the contrary. The respective instances of care were, furthermore, brought together with different temporalities. Despite the common interest in the vital future of forests and their healthy economic viability, the “green” association articulated forestry’s inability to respond adequately to the contemporary and future environmental challenges. It thus automatically excluded supposedly backward foresters from the “green” debate. These actors, in turn, insisted that forestry has historically been an integral part of the economic and socio-cultural reproduction of (not only) Slovak society, and must therefore be continued for

the survival of both humans and nature (non-humans). The boundary between “us” and “them” continued to shape the temporal orientations and prevented the actors from finding a common ground for open debate with equal access available for all. Taken together, the foresters were caught in a kind of double “disembeddedness”: from the modern, Western-style “green” and, perhaps more crucially, from the state they perceived as a detached entity which should, but did not support them in their struggle, favouring “the others” instead. This should in the broader analytical picture, however, not indicate the idea of the state’s linear retreat or absence after socialism. The state remains relationally present through a constant flux between various forestry and non-forestry actors on multiple scales (Thelen et al. 2017). Yet, as a consequence of the newly established administrative order (related to particular forest policies), its boundaries have shifted to include actors who were previously understood and labelled as non-state or who did not exist at all (especially in socialism).

Forestry’s response to its devaluation has resulted in endeavours to publicly re-connect with people to demonstrate its value. Participation in local village festivities was one such activity I described and analysed in Chapter 3. Here, notions of tradition and authenticity were actively communicated against the backdrop of Topoľčianky’s (romanticised) rural idyll in order to present forestry work as “traditional”, historically charged heritage. The narratives of a “traditional” peasant, close-to-nature lifestyle were ambiguously mixed with elitist contexts of the village’s pre-socialist period, both of which were used to evoke the impression that forestry had been an integral part of society for centuries. Simultaneously, multiple overlapping forms of community making took place at the festivity. The very local, as if traditional forestry community level was aptly symbolised by the forestry stand, where both local foresters and non-forestry villagers interacted together in harmonious, almost kinship-like constellations. This coincided with another form I called the “socialist” community. The socialist regime was evoked not only within the broader context of the folklorised harvest festivity which explicitly aimed to mimic the regime’s harvest and folklore parades. The relational qualities and practices of the festivity (such as goulash cooking) were remembered by my interlocutors as characteristic of the period, as outlined in Chapter 1. The production of forestry as a national community permeated both of these instances to varying degrees. The idea of forestry’s homogenous “Slovakness” was exploited during the presentation and selling of gastronomic products under the “Forest Delicacies” label, of which authentic uniqueness, quality and “traditionality” was usually evidenced by

the very fact that they were produced either specifically in Topolčianky or more generally in Slovakia. By zooming in on the production and circulation processes of the gastronomic products, I showed how the local, the national and even the seemingly more distant transnational and global were intermingled further. I argued that forestry used the narrative of valuable local-national uniqueness and traditionality to set the products' value apart from similar ones circulating on the market, a tendency observed by anthropologists in the context of "traditional" heritage foods globally (Cavanaugh, Shankar 2014). Drawing on the mutually entangled practices of village festivity and gastronomic production, I argued that forestry has participated in the production of nature (as the "ultimate" value) through culture: a non-linear, multi-scalar and perspectival process involving both human and non-human actors.

As a result, I argued that the economic value, while still important to the institution (especially in the context of forest meat exported to neighbouring countries), presents only a partial motivation behind the re-invented "traditional" cultural practices. Once valued socialist workers, the cultural value of "self-awareness" (Rowlands 2004: 212) leads foresters to position themselves as historically significant, heritage-like, "traditional" actors—both local and national—who value, produce or even own "all things nature" (from various foods to timber, whole forests and work expertise). In so doing, they contest the increasingly popular "green" mainstream discourse and forestry's devalued position discussed in Chapter 1 and 2. Rather than being motivated solely by the capitalist economic profit and self-interest, the allegedly defining characteristics of the post-socialist capitalist logics based on the Western liberal model, foresters engage in "beyond-economic" cultural practices which open up avenues for socio-political action otherwise unavailable to them. This is then not far from Humphrey and Verdery's claims about the concept of cultural (more-than-economic) property, they argue is based on "a homology between the oneness of the group [...] and certain kinds of objects in which they see their identity as residing" (Humphrey, Verdery 2004: 7), and can also become "the basis for a "politics of recognition" in which marginal groups make [agentic] claims so as to improve their situations or seek redress" (ibid.).

I conclude by echoing Comaroff and Comaroff who reminded us long ago that "neoliberalism aspires, in its ideology and practice, to intensify the abstractions inherent in capitalism itself: to separate labour power from its human context, to replace society with the market, to build a universe out of aggregated transactions" (Comaroff, Comaroff 2000: 305). It is especially visible, they argue, in the context of what they call "postrevolutionary" societies "that have

[...] witnessed a dramatic metamorphosis of their political, material, social, and cultural structures, largely as a result of the end of the Cold War and the growth of the global market economy” (ibid.: 298). My thesis has shown that more than thirty years after the turning “revolutionary” moment, Slovak post-socialist transformation has perhaps been less uniform, one-directional, and neo-liberal as to what the authors predicted at the time of the immediate regime change. Forestry in Slovakia has coped relatively successfully with the post-socialist change, despite the increasingly precarious relational and financial situation it has faced, and despite the fact that foresters themselves perceive the situation as more problematic than not. In practice, it has negotiated and accommodated values that stem from, imitate and/or do not necessarily contradict socialism, while at the same time challenging, to certain extent at least, the capitalist “radicality” as defined above. This is not to say that it has remained frozen in time, backward or even dependent upon its past. On the contrary, the ways in which foresters negotiate and attend to the post-socialist challenges—both past and present—demonstrate situated agency and resilience in coping with and adapting to “whatever comes next” (Verdery 1996: 16). The prevailing dissatisfaction with the living conditions and the functioning of post-socialist forestry for a variety of material and socio-political reasons remains, however, still present. Yet, we have seen that the articulated loss of (socialist) community and relational social intimacy, for instance, has continued to be present in practice, albeit in different (sometimes difficult), less direct forms and constellations than was the case under socialism.

In the present-day context marked by environmental concerns and climate crisis on a global scale, the renegotiation and ambivalence of forestry’s value come to the fore in Slovakia and beyond. Foresters from Topolčianky delineate the value of their work as resting on a subtle yet passionate cultivation of care relations between humans and non-humans, and thus as 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, masked by the institutionalised curtain of “free market” capitalism. Yet, “the apparent fixity of contemporary neoliberal arrangements and a desire for otherwise futures” (Valentine, Hassoun 2019: 246) remain encoded in foresters’ hopes and wishes, within which domains for valuable change may open up: relational spaces located at a fluid junction of “temporal agency and multiplicity” (ibid.), containing pasts, presents and futures, socialist, post-socialist or otherwise.

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6. Appendix

6.1 Abstract English

This master's thesis examines the negotiation of forestry and its value in contemporary Slovakia. It is based on ethnographic fieldwork with foresters in the rural setting of Topoľčianky, a village located in the central-western part of the country. Starting with the interlocutors' nostalgic recollections of the socialist and the immediate post-1989 past in local forestry, it shows how the articulated "post-socialist" nostalgia was grounded in the present-day socio-political context perceived as materially and relationally precarious. However, the narratives also revealed ambivalent attitudes towards (remembered) socialism, which contradicted the perceived radical rupture with all its valued "good" after the regime change. The tacit accommodation of certain socialist values in the present-day negotiation of forestry as "good practice" is explored next. When comparing the "good" practices based on creative self-expression and professionalism with more technically-oriented, plan-based socialist principles, the foresters placed value on the romanticised pre-socialist times as the main template for the "good" forestry. This complicated the sketched socialism/post-socialism temporal distinction from their personal recollections. As a result of a growing tension between foresters and "green" environmentalists, the former have faced public devaluation, while the latter have gained an increased influence over popular public discourse, formulation of forest-related policies, forest management, and access to (mostly EU) funds. Zooming in on the asymmetrical forestry politics of the "now", it is argued that the "zero-intervention", more-than-human form of care the "green" actors advocate for in the name of a pressing environmental situation turns out in practice to be almost identical to the work done by the foresters. The reproduction of mutual difference and forestry's devaluation and revaluation through different notions of care are central here. As a result of these unequal constellations, forestry has tried to improve its negative public image. The last part of this work examines two such efforts: participation in local village festivities and the production of "traditional" gastronomic products. In doing so, it is concluded that forestry has actively contested its devaluation and, simultaneously, the hegemonic capitalist primacy of economic value, by positioning itself as a valued "traditional" actor, preserving natural-cultural heritage in the region, nationally and beyond.

6.2 Abstract German

Diese Masterarbeit untersucht die Aushandlung der Forstwirtschaft und ihres Wertes in der Slowakei. Sie basiert auf ethnographischer Feldforschung mit Förstern in Topoľčianky, einem Dorf im zentral-westlichen Teil des Landes. Die Arbeit beginnt mit den nostalgischen Erinnerungen der Förstern an die sozialistische und die unmittelbar nach 1989 folgende Zeit in der lokalen Forstwirtschaft. Es wird gezeigt, wie die “post-sozialistische” Nostalgie in den gegenwärtigen sozio-politischen Kontexten verankert ist, die als materiell und relational prekär wahrgenommen werden. Die Erzählungen zeigen jedoch auch ambivalente Einstellungen gegenüber Sozialismus, die dem radikalen Bruch nach dem Regimewechsel mit allem “Guten” widersprechen. Die Aneignung bestimmter sozialistischer Werte in der heutigen Aushandlung der Forstwirtschaft als “guter” Praxis wird als nächstes diskutiert. Durch den Vergleich der “guten” Praktiken, die auf Kreativität und Professionalität basieren, mit den technisch orientierten sozialistischen Prinzipien, legen die Förster Wert auf die romantiserten presozialistischen Zeiten. Dies dient als Vorlage für die “guten” Praktiken, obwohl keine persönlichen Verbindungen zu der Periode vorhanden sind. Infolge der wachsenden Spannung zwischen Förstern und “grünen” Aktivisten sehen sich die ersten Akteure einer öffentlichen Abwertung ausgesetzt, während letztere über einen zunehmenden Einfluss auf den populären Diskurs, Formulierung der Politiken und den Zugang zu EU-Mitteln verfügen. Mit dem Fokus auf die aktuelle asymmetrische Forstpolitik wird argumentiert, dass “more-than-human” Care, plädiert für von den “grünen” Akteuren im Namen der dringenden Umweltsituation, sich in Praxis als nahezu identisch mit der Arbeit der Förster erweist. Die Reproduktion gegenseitiger Differenzen durch unterschiedlich ausgehandelte Visionen von Care zwischen beiden Akteursgruppen steht hierbei im Mittelpunkt. Aufgrund der ungleichen Konstellationen versucht die Forstwirtschaft, ihr negatives öffentliches Image zu verbessern. Der letzte Teil dieser Arbeit beleuchtet zwei solcher Ambitionen: die Teilnahme an lokalen Festivitäten und die Produktion von “traditionellen” gastronomischen Produkten. Damit wird abschließend argumentiert, dass die Forstwirtschaft ihre abgewertete Position und gleichzeitig die hegemoniale kapitalistische Position des ökonomischen Wertes anfechtet, in dem sie sich als “traditioneller” Akteur positioniert, der “natural-cultural” Heritage in der Region, im Lande und darüber hinaus bewahrt.