

**M A S A R Y K O V A
U N I V E R Z I T A**

FAKULTA SOCIÁLNÍCH STUDIÍ

Forest Defenders in Romania: Challenges, Obstacles, and Threats

Bakalářská práce

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Katedra environmentálních studií
Program Environmentální studia

Brno 2022

MUNI
FSS

Bibliografický záznam

Autor:	Adéla Pokorná Fakulta sociálních studií Masarykova univerzita Katedra environmentálních studií
Název práce:	Obránci lesa v Rumunsku a jejich výzvy, překážky a hrozby
Studijní program:	Environmentální studia
Vedoucí práce:	Miriam Matejova, Ph.D
Rok:	2022
Počet stran:	100
Klíčová slova:	Obránci lesa; Environmentální aktivismus; Rumunsko; Nelegální těžba dřeva; Dřevařská mafie, Trojúhelník násilí

Bibliographic record

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Title of Thesis: Forest Defenders in Romania: Challenges,
Obstacles, and Threats

Degree Programme: Environmental Studies

Supervisor: Miriam Matejova, Ph.D

Year: 2022

Number of Pages: 100

Keywords: Forest Defenders; Environmental Activism;
Romania; Illegal Logging; Timber Mafia; Violence
Triangle

Anotace

Rumunští environmentální aktivisté se při ochraně místních lesů před nelegální těžbou stávají terčem násilných útoků. Cílem této práce je zjistit příčiny konfliktu v Rumunsku, který je případovou studií v demokratickém státě a člena EU. K ověření hypotéz vycházející z trojúhelníku násilí sociologa J. Galtunga jsou použity polostrukturované rozhovory s aktivisty a analýza mediálního obsahu. Výsledky ukazují, že strukturální násilí motivované ziskem z těžby dřeva převažuje nad ideologickým zdůvodněním konfliktu.

Abstract

Romanian environmental activists are subjects of violent attacks while protecting local forests from illegal logging. This thesis aims to determine the causes of the conflict in Romania, which serves as a case study of a conflict in a democratic state and a member of the EU. To test hypotheses based on J. Galtung's violence triangle, semi-structured interviews with the activists and analysis of media content are used. The results show that structural violence driven by profit from the logging prevail over ideological justifications of the conflict.

FOREST DEFENDERS IN ROMANIA: CHALLENGES, OBSTACLES, AND
THREATS

Declaration

Prohlašuji, že jsem na téma **Forest Defenders in Romania: Challenges, Obstacles, and Threats** zpracovala sama. Veškeré prameny a zdroje informací, které jsem použila k sepsání této práce, byly citovány v textu a jsou uvedeny v seznamu použitých pramenů a literatury.

Brno May 4, 2021

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Adéla Pokorná

Acknowledgements

First and foremost, I would like to thank my supervisor, Miriam Matejova, Ph.D., for her detailed feedback and helpful guidance throughout my bachelor thesis writing process. For this, I am very grateful.

I would like to express a great gratitude to my interviewees and thank them for their interest in participating in this research.

I would like to thank my friends for giving me the initial idea and for their encouraging words.

Lastly, I would like to thank my parents for their sympathetic ear and loving support.

Thank you. Mulțumesc mult. Děkuji Vám.

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Glossary

CEE	– Central and eastern Europe
CEO	– Chief executive officer
EIA	– Environmental Investigation Agency
EU	– European Union
EUTR	– The European Union Timber Regulation
FLEGT	– The European Union Forest Law Enforcement, Governance and Trade Action Plan
FSC	– Forest Stewardship Council
NGO	– Non-governmental organisation
SUMAL	– Sistemul de Urmărire a Materialului Lemnos (The Timber Tracking System)

1 Introduction

Romania, a democratic country and a member state of the European Union (EU), has become a dangerous place for environmental activists and people who are trying to defend forest ecosystems. Many of them have been violently attacked, harassed, or endangered in other ways. These people are risking their lives to prevent illegal logging in forests.

Along with its neighbouring country Bulgaria, Romania suffers the most among the countries in the EU from illegal logging practices. The Carpathians are the most afflicted Romanian mountain area, including virgin forests in national parks and Natura 2000 protected areas (Stanciu and Tabără Amânar, 2011). However, Romanian forest defenders are the only ones in Europe who face violent attacks on a larger scale (Global Witness, 2020), even though the country has been a member of the EU for fifteen years, and other European countries have significant investments at stake there, including in the forest sector. On the contrary, since Romania joined the EU, the phenomenon of illegal logging has reached its record highs (Peptenatu, 2020), and the violent conflicts connected with illegal timber logging are also on the rise.

1.1 The Aim of the Thesis

This research examines the drivers of violence against Romanian forest defenders in the puzzling setting of these actions in a democratic state. The research question that guides the thesis research is, therefore:

Why do Romanian forest defenders face harassment and violence while defending forests to tackle illegal logging in Romania, a democratic state and member of the European Union?

To answer this research question, I develop a theoretical framework based on Johan Galtung's triangle (Galtung 1969; 1990), supplemented with studies which focus globally on the topic of environmental defenders and activists in environmental conflicts in general or environmental conflicts in the forest sector in particular. From this theoretical framework, I derive working hypotheses (WH1–4) which focus on structural and cultural violence as described by Galtung, resulting in direct violence. By direct violence, I mean the actual instances of violence, such as murders and various kinds of physical or psychological harassment, so in most cases, there is visible proof of violent actions against a person.

As sources of evidence for this case study research, I conduct online interviews with environmental activists in Romania and triangulate them with audio-visual and text news media.

1.2 Significance of the Research

There is a considerable number of studies on environmental and human rights issues and environmental conflicts globally (e.g., Camacho-Garza et al., 2022; Grant and Billon, 2021; Scheidel et al., 2020; Navas et al., 2018; Riethof, 2017; Escobar, 2006; Niemelä et al., 2005). However, the coverage of human rights violations connected with illegal logging or illegal timber trade is limited. Previous research focused primarily on illegal logging and the connected violence in the Global South countries.

Hence, academic research has so far paid little attention to countries in Europe or even in the EU.

Research of the environmental movement in Romania is not very extended and is relatively dated, all the more so research aimed specifically on forest activism or public actions against illegal timber in general. Since its establishment in the 1960s or 1970s, the environmental movement has been primarily studied in developed countries with a long tradition of democratic regimes, such as the United States, Canada, and western European countries (Burns and LeMoyné 2001, p. 26). Central and eastern European countries are still considered new democracies (Gerli et al., 2018), where the environmental movement is young and also generally understudied. Although more than thirty years have passed since the transition to democracy in some of these countries and most of them, including Romania, joined the EU, there remains a lack of awareness and knowledge of the issue.

On the other hand, such cases of violence towards forest defenders in Romania have been broadly medialised, as the violence is still occurring. Most recently, a major case of a violent attack on and humiliation of an environmental activist made headlines in September of 2021 (e.g., Bizot, 2021). With this study, I hope to take the first step towards filling this gap of academic research, expanding our knowledge with an examination and analysis of forest defenders' human rights infringement present in a democratic country in the EU.

In this thesis, I first discuss the key terms relevant for the background of the case study: illegal logging and forest defenders. I define the terms in the global as well as Romanian context and describe the pivotal moments in the history of these phenomena. Further on, I outline the methodological basis for this thesis. I use Johan Galtung's

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triangle as a theoretical framework for the analysis of societal conflicts and a single case study of Romanian environmental activists, specifically, the forest defenders. In the methodological chapter, I formulate my hypotheses and evaluate them in the analytical part. Finally, I discuss the results in the context of the existing body of literature and note my research limitations.

2 Illegal Logging

Before focusing on the case study itself, in the following paragraphs I briefly outline the general issues of illegal logging. Illegal logging is a major environmental and socio-economic problem, which not only causes a significant environmental degradation of forest ecosystems and harms arboreal animals and species living in or dependent on the forest but also poses a threat to human rights in the form of illegal loggers connected to criminal structures.

Therefore, in this chapter, I first present how illegal logging is conceptualised in literature and then discuss more broadly its consequences and how it impacts the global and local environment and the human society.

2.1 Defining Illegal Logging and its Worldwide Incidence

Illegal logging has no internationally recognised definition, and those that have already been introduced differ slightly from one another. Some scholars define this term as a *“set of activities connected only to the explicit harvesting of illegally felled wood, which comprises solely the illicit activity of the loggers in the forest”* (Goncalves et al., 2012, p.9).

The term “illegal logging” was first introduced to the international audience in the G8 Action Programme on Forest in 1998 (Humphreys, 2006). Probably the most universal definition was presented by the EU Forest Law Enforcement, Governance and Trade in 2019. It defines the term illegal logging as: *“The harvesting, processing, transporting, buying or selling of timber in contravention of national and international laws”* (EU FLEGT, 2020).

Although the activities included under the umbrella of illegal logging and the related trade slightly differ in literature, we can broadly summarise and name these examples: logging in the woods without necessary licences and permits, bribing an authorised official to gain these logging permits, logging in protected areas, logging a protected species, logging in prohibited areas, exceeding permits in the level of concession boundary and the level of allowed harvest and its transport, and transporting logged wood without paying customs or fees (Hoare, 2015, p. 2; Goncalves et al., 2012; Casson and Obidzinski, 2002, p. 2134). These activities are widespread techniques of illegal loggers.

Illegal logging is present worldwide, but scholars systematically study this issue mainly in Latin America, Africa, and Asia (Reboredo, 2013). The most worldwide-popularised case of deforestation and illegal logging is the Amazon rainforest, the lungs of the Earth (e.g., Lawson and MacFault, 2010; Gutierrez-Velez and MacDicken, 2008).

In Africa, the literature covers, for instance, research on illegal logging in Ghana (Hansen and Treue, 2008) or the Democratic Republic of Congo (Lawson, 2014). In Asia, for example, it is the Philippines (van der Ploeg et al., 2011) or Indonesia (Linkie et al., 2014).

In Europe, illegal logging is a problem mainly in countries with communist heritage and comparatively poor countries with weak governance, such as Ukraine (Kuemmerle et al., 2009) or Romania as is discussed in the next chapter.

2.2 Consequences of Illegal Logging

Illegal logging causes incalculable environmental and socio-economic loss. It is estimated that legal and illegal deforestation is the

second-largest anthropogenic source of CO₂ after fossil fuel combustion and, therefore, a significant contribution to climate change (Putz et al., 2012; van der Welf et al., 2009, p. 737). For that reason, illegal logging is not only a matter of national environmental security but also an issue with a global impact.

Forests are essential because of their protective function in preventing natural disasters, such as floods, erosion, and landslides. Forests are also indispensable for supplying water and cooling the air (Golcaves et col., 2012). When logging takes place in protected areas, it may involve recurring exploitation that threatens the survival of endangered species, which is caused mainly by illegal loggers who circumvent the law when felling wood in protected areas (Reboredo, 2013; Goncalves et al., 2012).

Apart from causing major environmental destruction, the criminal activity of illegal logging also has negative socio-economic impacts. From the economic perspective, illegal logging represents a significant financial loss for the state due to coercion, money laundering, tax evasion, corruption, falsification, and forgery that accompany the loggers' illicit activities (Reboredo, 2013).

Furthermore, the key issue in my thesis is that illegal timber often becomes a source of conflict. The conflicts driven by illicit wood felling have led to violence, harassment, abuse, destruction of personal property, and even reported murders of local community members or other civilians, such as agents of environmental NGOs or rangers. These persons were harmed because they were trying to prevent the forest from damage or were fighting for the source of their livelihood, as is the case of aboriginal rural communities (Boekhout van Solinge, 2014; Reboredo, 2013; Hiemstra van der Horst, 2011). As Boekhout van

Solinge (2014, p. 38) noted, *“There is nothing soft about deforestation”*, meaning that mainly human rights violations occurring during these illicit operations are worth public and academic attention.

For all the above-mentioned reasons, these organised crime groups involved in illegal logging are usually described in local media as *“timber mafia”* (Boekhout van Solinge, 2013, p. 86). According to scholars (Vasile 2020a; 2020b), the timber mafia has become a significant problem, especially in Romania, where illegal logging is causing major environmental and social problems.

3 Setting the Scene: Illegal Logging in Romania

In this chapter, I take a closer look at the situation regarding illegal logging in Romania as the setting of the case study. Therefore, I introduce the “crime scene”, that is, the Romanian Carpathians forests as a place plagued by illegal logging and as the site where forest defenders are primarily attacked. I also focus on the socio-economic aspects of these illegal activities and their specific causes particular to this country.

The Carpathian Mountains stretch from the Czech Republic to Romania. The Romanian Carpathians are known for the wide range of their biodiversity and significant ecological value (Oszlányi et col., 2004). The forest covers 6.9 million hectares (Vasile 2020a), which accounts for 28 per cent of the Romanian Carpathians territory (Vasile, 2020b). Out of the total forest area, more than half a million hectares are primarily virgin forests, and therefore Romania is a place with the largest area of undisturbed forests in Europe. Romanian forests are a habitat for a large population of brown bears (*Ursus arctos*), grey wolves (*Canis lupus*), Eurasian lynxes (*Lynx lynx*), and European bison (*Bison bonasus*). In terms of tree species, we can primarily mention species of beech, spruce, oak, and fir (Knorn et col., 2012). By virtue of the rich and unique fauna and flora that these forest ecosystems support, the Romanian Carpathians are known as the “Lungs of Europe” (Limb, 2021), the “European Amazon” (Lehermayr et al., 2022), and the southern part as the “European Yellowstone” (Iordăchescu, 2021), which underlines and emphasises their unique ecological value. Sadly, the analogy with the

Amazon rainforest holds not only in terms of biodiversity but also in terms of the illegal logging consequences, as will be discussed below.

There are several types of forest management practices in Romania. We can distinguish between public forest management and private-owned forests and forests commons. Public forests are under the National Forest Administration Romsilva, founded in 1996 as a state-owned institution strongly linked to the government. Currently, 48 per cent of the total forestland is state-owned, the rest of the forest coverage of Romania is privately owned or forests commons (Vasile, 2020b; Bouriard and Marzano, 2012; Lawrence, 2009).

However, Romanian forests are the subject of heavy illegal logging, resulting in large-scale clear-cuts in some areas. Timber thefts and illegal logging occur both in state and individually owned forests, including the forests in highly protected areas and forests belonging to Natura 2000. Therefore, significant amount of this illegally logged wood is hundreds of years old, harvested from a primaeval forest with almost no prior human interventions, which only increases the ecological damage (Ioja, 2010). EIA (2015) estimates that 48 per cent of timber harvested in Romania between the years 2008 and 2014 is logged illegally. In general, for one legally cut tree, another one is cut illegally.

Most afflicted counties in terms of illegal logging are Alba, Cluj, Maramureş, Suceava, Arges, and Vrancea (Niţă, 2015b). The consequences of long-term and mostly illegal massive deforestation and exploitation of the Romanian landscape are erosion, landslides, salt lands, and floods (Stanciu and Tăbăra Amânar, 2011). Finally, illegal logging is a major threat to Romanian forest biodiversity, affecting endangered and endemic species (Ioja, 2010).

The issue of systematic illegal logging emerged immediately after the democratic transition following the fall of the communist regime in 1989. Before then and during the 1990s, the main driver of illegal logging was small-scale timber theft committed by impoverished local communities, who used the timber as fuelwood or sold it on the black market tax-free (Dorondel, 2016; Bouriard, 2005). Small-scale timber theft is still present; however, it is not the most significant issue.

When Romania transformed its economic system from socialist planned economy to capitalist free trade, it entered the global market, where it encountered high competition and started to suffer from exploitative behaviour of domestic and international investors in this valuable commodity (Vasile, 2020a). Among them, an Austrian timber enterprise called HS Timber, formerly known as Holzindustrie Schweighofer, came to Romania in 2003. This company opened several mills in Romania and started exporting beams and other raw timber materials primarily to the western market (Jenkyns, 2018). HS Timber completely dominated the timber industry in Romania, and forest exploitation began on the largest industrial scale. Another key subject in Romanian timber industry is a company called Kronospan and Egger, also based in Austria (Lehermayr et al., 2019). They produce chipboard, wood-based panels, and other raw timber products in Romania.

Thus, when Romania joined the EU in 2007, it led to a double-edged situation in the matter of nature protection and conservation. On the one hand, membership in the EU entails higher nature conservation standards, and closer compliance monitoring. Twenty per cent of Romania's valuable forest ecosystems have become part of Natura 2000, a network of highly protected areas in the EU territory (Popa et al., 2019; Knorn et al., 2012).

On the other hand, by entering the European market, Romania opened even more to foreign investors, who brought capital into the country, but at the same time, this triggered an unprecedented depredation of forests. According to some estimates, more than 60 per cent of Romania's most valuable virgin forests were lost after the country's accession to the EU (Sammon, 2022). It is estimated that after the arrival of the "Austrians", as some of the Romanian activists call these monopoly enterprises, approximately 260 million Romanian trees were felled in the woods (Lehermayr et al., 2019). Romanian law enforcement is more tolerant of these illicit activities in practice than it might be on paper. The fines are relatively small, and the risk of punishment is very low. There is a lack of forest guards, finances, and other resources in forestry for illegal logging mitigation, coupled with a lack of will and the temptation of corruption (Popa et al., 2019; Boureard and Marzano, 2012; Stanciu and Tabără Amânar, 2011). The price of wood is also very low, while the quality is excellent, which creates favourable conditions for the investors. This issue leads to the paradoxical situation when the Romanian forest ecosystem is disrupted by companies operating within the EU, although the EU presents itself as a leader in sustainability (Vasile, 2019; Niță 2015a).

Foreign investors in the Romanian forest sector were accused by non-governmental organisations of operating with illegally logged wood, even supporting illegal logging and profiting from it while being connected with organised criminal gangs trading with illegally felled timber. They were also accused of tax fraud and unfair commercial practices (Ellis, 2020; Lehermayr et al., 2019; EIA, 2015, Chirac, 2015). One of the biggest customers of the Austrian timber companies was IKEA. This largest consumer of wood globally is also the second-biggest

forestland owner in Romania, after Romsilva (Sammon, 2022). After the illegal logging scandal of Schweighofer in 2015, their FSC certificate was suspended, and the following year, IKEA decided to sever ties with the company (Earthsight, n.d.).

4 Forest Defenders

In this chapter I specify the subjects of the research analysis of this thesis, which are defenders of the forest. First, I derive a definition from literature to identify which actors can be classified as forest defenders and what their distinctive characteristics are. In the second part, I present a brief history of the environmental movement and discuss more specifically the case of forest defenders in Romania. I also briefly describe the most prominent cases of violence against Romanian forest defenders and what strategies the defenders use.

4.1 Defining Forest Defenders

Although the thesis focuses on forest defenders, there is no generally accepted definition of this phenomenon. However, we can use an adapted version of the already introduced concept of environmental defenders. According to Global Witness, an NGO focusing on environmental justice, environmental defenders are *“people who take peaceful action to protect land or environmental rights, whether in their own personal capacity or professionally”* (Global Witness, 2017, p. 10).

As this definition implies, environmental defenders can comprise a broad group of individuals or organisations, starting with local people who protect the environment in their own personal interest or as a community because environmental degradation and destruction threaten their lives, homes, and livelihoods (Butt et al., 2019). Thus, under the term environmental defenders, we can include peasants, bailiffs, grassroots, locally or internationally established environmental activist movements, and journalists. These people actively put pressure

on the relevant state institutions or private bodies to fight against unfair and inappropriate use of environmental resources or insufficient environmental protection and its negative social impacts (Scheidel et al., 2020; Butt et al., 2019).

For the purpose of this bachelor thesis, I adapt the above definition (Global Witness, 2017) and expand it with additional considerations (Butt et al., 2019; United Nations Environment Programme, n.d.) for the term “forest defenders”, namely:

“Forest defenders are individuals and groups who protect forests and rainforests from unlawful uses and treatment for environmental and social reasons, in their own personal or professional capacity. They may include local grassroots groups (e.g., local and neighbourhood associations), rangers, foresters, indigenous people, professional environmental activists, advocates, or investigative journalists.”

As has been mentioned earlier, violence against forest defenders is a serious issue, and it constitutes the core of this thesis. The forest defenders face various kinds of violence. According to Global Witness (2021), only in 2020, there were 227 lethal attacks on environmental defenders globally, making 2020 the deadliest reported year in this respect so far.

However, as Butt et al. (2018, p. 742) observe, *“killings are only the tip of the iceberg”*. For each one person killed, there are between twenty and a hundred others who were harassed and criminalised, who faced defamation, violent or sexual assaults, kidnapping, and other kinds of threats and repression (Le Billon and Lujala, 2020; Grant and Le Billon, 2019; Navas et al., 2018; Scheidel et al., 2018). Furthermore, these

numbers are but an estimation because only the most shocking violence and brutal acts are newsworthy enough to be reported in media (Grant and Le Billon, 2021). Worldwide, the highest prevalence of conflicts and attacks towards environmental defenders is in Asian and Latin American countries, such as the Philippines or Brazil, which suffer from illegal logging the most. As has been mentioned earlier, Romanian forest defenders have been facing similar challenges in recent years.

Concretely, the subjects of my case study analysis are Romanian environmental activists representing established environmental NGOs or local associations with the addition of investigative journalists. Environmental NGOs mobilise their members and the public to pursue a various scale of very distinctive strategies and tactics, aiming to shape political discourse and influence environmental policy (Dalton et al., 2003). Meanwhile, local grassroot associations or individual activists pursue actions in the interests of environmental justice or protection their local ecosystems (Martinez-Alier, 1995). I also decided to add Romanian investigative journalists in my analysis because they serve as civic watchdogs, keeping an eye on illegal logging, reporting irregularities, spreading awareness, and in some cases, cooperating with NGOs as well.

Romanian environmental activists and journalists who tackle illegal logging are facing serious intimidation, harassment, and even violent attacks on a scale which is unusual and concerning. The timeframe of this issue is discussed in the following section.

4.2 Forest Defenders and Activism in Romania

In this section, I briefly discuss the history of environmental activism in Romania and describe how illegal logging is being tackled in Romania, stating the positions of the forest defenders in this case, with a focus on environmental activists. It is beyond the scope of this chapter to describe every single instance of violence. For this reason, I have selected the most notable ones that have received the greatest media coverage.

During the communist regime under the dictatorship of Nicolae Ceaușescu, information about the country's environmental degradation was classified, and the public did not have any access to it. Springing from the public frustration with poor living conditions and polluted environment, ecological ideas emerged in the Romanian society during the democratic transition in 1989, similar to some other countries going through the same experience (Czechoslovakia, Hungary, etc.). Nevertheless, the early environmentalists did not capture public attention enough to build a more significant environmental movement or even a political party in Romania. The public did not pay attention to the ecological damage made during the communist regime (O'Brien, 2003).

In the late 2000s, more significant organised environmental pioneers started to emerge. In 2007, the Romanian branches of the World Wildlife Fund and Greenpeace, crucial players in the field of environmental protection and conservation, were established. This was one of the pivotal moments for the Romanian environmental movement, as at this point, professional environmental activism came into existence (Vasile and Iordăchescu, 2022). Two years later, in 2009, Gabriel Paun founded the local environmental organisation Agent Green, whose main

agenda was to tackle illegal logging in the Carpathians. Unlike the other already-mentioned NGOs, Agent Green does not have any international headquarters but cooperates with international partners, such as the EuroNatur Foundation or the Robin Wood NGO, both based in Germany. Other environmental NGOs emerged in that period as well. Some of them joined their forces with investigative journalists. The first report about illegal logging was broadcast in 2011 (Vasile and Iordăchescu, 2022).

The public interest in environmental issues came in the early 2010s. Media and NGOs pointed out illegal logging as a Romanian national ecological crisis and succeeded in drawing public interest, especially when emphasising words like “virgin forests” – a heritage and pride of Romanians. The environmental movement managed its first publicly acknowledged campaigns (Vasile, 2020a, p. 6).

However, since the beginning of the 2010s, there has also been a rising number of cases of forest violence. It is not possible to verify exactly how many conflicts or violent attacks took place in the forest, as only an exceedingly small number of them were media-reported. Romsilva, the national forest management body, kept some statistics, saying that from 2014 to 2021, as many as 185 foresters were physically assaulted, and six were killed (Gauriat, 2020). Therefore, some forest areas are dangerous even for foresters who are trying to protect their districts. We cannot estimate how many activists were attacked, but some of the violent cases caught – even international – media attention.

In 2014 the CEO of Agent Green, Gabriel Paun, was the subject of an attack when investigating illegal logging in the protected area of Raul Alb River, where he was beaten by an employee of a forestry company (Larsson, 2020).

Later, in May and June 2015, demonstrations were held in many Romanian cities, including the capital Bucharest, protesting against illegal logging in Romania and demanding stricter legislation from the government (Roque, 2016; Besliu, 2015). Over three thousand citizens participated in the demonstration in Bucharest, while thousands more demonstrated in Cluj-Napoca, Braşov, and Timișoara (Chiriac, 2012). The protests, organised by local environmental organisations, were mainly prompted by an investigation of EIA, which revealed that the largest forest conglomerate operating in Romania, Schweighofer, was using illegally harvested timber from protected areas in its operations (EIA, 2015), as discussed in the previous chapter.

This protest was also the third significant protest of civic environmental initiatives in the history of the Romanian environmental movement, and it was the first protest strictly focused on the issue of illegal logging. Before that, two protests took place and local civic initiatives were established against the cyanide-based gold and silver mining project in Roşia Montană (Püsök, 2021; Velicu and Kaika, 2017; Mercea, 2014) and fracking in Pungeşti (Comman and Cmeciu, 2014). These initiatives were the big game-changer; they set the cornerstone for further work of the Romanian environmental movement and received significant public support (Vesalon and Cretan, 2013).

However, the trend of violence continued rising in the following years. In 2016, Paun and his co-workers from Agent Green were targets of several physical attacks (McGrath, 2019a), sabotages (Lehermayr et al, 2020), and even a cyberattack. According to Paun, he was also wiretapped (Larsson, 2020). In September 2019, Agent Green, with its international partners, lodged a complaint with the European Commission to take discipline measurements against Romania's

government for its failure to tackle and mitigate illegal logging (Barberá, 2019). Nevertheless, only a few days later, the forester Raducu Gorcioaia was murdered. He was beaten to death with an axe in his forest territory. A month later, media were rocked by the news of another murder of a forester, Liviu Pop, who was allegedly shot with his own gun (McGrath, 2019a). The news sparked public outrage, and NGOs (Greenpeace, Declic, and Agent Green) organised a large protest in Bucharest in November, attended by four thousand people (BBC, 2019).

On February 12, 2020, the European Commission opened infringement proceedings against the Romanian government due to the poor implementation of the EU Timber Regulation. These infringement proceedings followed the official complaint sent by NGOs the previous year (Neal, 2021).

On September 16, 2021, two journalists and an environmental activist were beaten by twenty attackers, stripped naked, humiliated, and threatened with a gun in the forestland of Suceava county when they were in the forest shooting a documentary about illegal logging (Voiculescu, 2021; International Press Institute, 2021).

As mentioned above, cases of violence against forest defenders are numerous. So far, there has been no murder of an environmental activist reported; however, some of them face threats and intimidations daily, which is also affecting their families. Some even choose to stay single and childless to reduce the risk posed to their dear ones (Larsson, 2020); another activist has revealed that his family was forced to emigrate from the country (Digi24.ro, 2021).

The strategies and tools for tackling illegal logging vary among activists and movements. Local initiatives and solitary activists patrol local forests or check trucks with loaded timber in an app co-developed

by environmental NGOs and the Ministry of Environment, Waters and Forests. The app is called SUMAL and serves as a transparency measure in that it makes the transportation data available to the public, and the activists can report suspicious trucks which are not registered in the database (Marica, 2021; Chirac, 2015). Forest activism in Romania also includes non-violent direct actions on the sites of illegal logging, such as the activists blocking trucks with their own bodies (Ion, 2017), taking pictures and making videos in the clear-cut forests with banners (Greenpeace, 2022), but also running public campaigns, participating in political discussions, engaging in political lobbying, and sending petitions and emails to public officials (Vasile and Iordăchescu, 2022).

5 Analysis of Violence: The Galtung's Triangle and the Forest Defenders

In this chapter I outline the key theory which I base my research on. For the analysis of the causes of violence in the empirical part, I primarily draw on Johan Galtung's (1969; 1990) violence triangle, supplemented by other literature (Le Billon and Lujala, 2020; Butt et al., 2019; Navas et al., 2018; Matejova et al., 2018; Knox, 2017; Mireanu, 2014; Cruz, 2011). Galtung's triangle is a recognised theory of peace and conflict studies, which uses the triangle analogy to explain the root causes of violence. It is a comprehensive theoretical framework for understanding conflict in society, and therefore, I believe, it is suitable to use in my analysis of the forest conflicts in Romania. Galtung explains the impacts and causes of violence and their relationship with each other in three elements, which are discussed in the following paragraphs.

The first element of the triangle is "*direct violence*", which refers to the individual instances of violent events limited in time (Galtung, 1969). These actions can take many forms of psychological and physical violence and damage, even murders. Direct violent acts are used towards forest defenders to discourage them, intimidate them, and prevent them from continuing their actions, putting up resistance, or reporting illicit activities, as stated by Navas et al. (2018).

The second element is "*structural violence*". This involves social, political, and economic structures that endanger individual needs and produce social inequality and institutional failures, such as poverty and corrupted decision-makers. A combination of inequality and structural failure might lead into direct conflict (Farmer, 2004). As Galtung (1969)

states, institutional failure in not providing justice for citizens may be exacerbated by intentionally ignoring or not investigating these acts and may lead to direct violence (Butt et al., 2019; Knox, 2017; Galtung, 1990). According to Butt et al. (2019), the working of structural factors (corruption or rule of law) and the context of the country have a significant influence on the occurrence of violence in the shaping of environmental conflicts. Generally, the country's economic development correlates with the safety of local environmental defenders. However, this does not always have to be the case. Therefore, structural violence is a systemic problem, which creates a breeding ground for direct violence, that is, actual violent acts.

The last element of the violence triangle is "*cultural violence*". This refers to features of culture such as narratives, symbols, and stereotypes disseminated in the society through religion, ideology, language, art, and science, for example. Cultural violence focuses on justifying the structural or direct violence in the eyes of the public through these cultural manifestations (Galtung, 1990). Forest defenders can be acknowledged as a disadvantaged group from the perspective of ideological conflict, as they frequently face oppression and social stigma. Forest defenders can be stigmatised by local governments, which can deliberately misrepresent them as agents of foreign influence against national interests, primarily when supported by international or multinational organisations (Matejova et al., 2018). Political authorities can interpret the activities of forest activists as "terroristic" in terms of their narrative, whether the actions are justifiably radical or not. Based on these accusations, the defenders have lately been criminalised or harassed. According to Mireanu (2014), this ideological accusation (for

example, being called green terrorists or Nazis) can also be strongly linked to the corporate interests of extraction (e.g., logging) companies supported or covered by corrupted political actors. However, the corporate sphere uses this narrative because the defenders are “killing” their profits, not because they are dangerous to the public.

Accordingly, we can conclude that a combination of structural and cultural violence results in direct violence. In my thesis, I am going to build working hypotheses testing the factors of structural and cultural violence described above in order to determine which of these factors result in direct violence in the case of Romanian forest defenders, thus arriving at the answer to my research question.

The triangle of violence, as this theoretical framework is also called, has been used multiple times by scholars researching environmental conflicts (e.g., Navas et al., 2018). However, there has been no published research so far to use this approach to violence specifically in connection with illegal logging or in connection with events in Europe.

6 Methodology

6.1 Research Strategy

I have designed a research strategy as an explanatory case study to answer my research question noted in the thesis introduction: *Why do Romanian forest defenders face harassment and violence in democratic Romania, a member of the European Union?*

The case study method is appropriate here since it explores a contemporary set of events or phenomena in context. *"The advantage of the case study is that it can 'close-in' on real-life situations and test views directly in relation to phenomena as they unfold in practice"* (Flyvbjerg, 2006, p. 235).

The issue with the single case study method is that it cannot generalise the findings from the research. *"It is widely believed that case studies are useful in studying human affairs because they are down-to-earth and attention-holding but that they are not a suitable basis for generalization"* (Stake, 1978, p.5). However, this is also an advantageous feature, as it allows me to explore a unique case. My research does not aim to generalise the findings for forest defenders worldwide; rather, the goal is to expand the existing body of research and analyse the unique case of Romania.

Another disadvantage might be the lack of rigour in this research method. On the other hand, the researcher's independence makes it possible to fully analyse the case and provide a holistic view of the issue while using more comprehensive sources than surveys, for example (Yin, 2014, p. 46).

6.2 Working Hypotheses

I use a deductive approach to answer the research question. I have developed my working hypotheses on the basis of literature review, as explanatory research is linked to hypothesis testing, which requires deductive reasoning (Casula et al., 2020, p. 1705).

As I have stated in the previous chapter, in order to understand why the forest defenders in Romania face forms of direct violence, I use adapted Galtung's triangle to construct the hypotheses. Since direct violence often originates in structural and cultural violence, I draw the hypotheses from each of the two categories of violence, in line with the literature review of drivers of violence towards forest defenders, which has been discussed above.

Therefore, I use the approach of the "working" hypothesis. As Casula et al. (2020, p. 1709) state, working hypotheses are an "*active tool in the ongoing process of inquiry*". The emphasis is on the word "working", meaning that the hypotheses are "provisional and the possibility of finding contradictory evidence is real". Working hypotheses are statements of expectation tested in action to answer the research question.

Hereby, the hypotheses (WH1–4) are as follows:

WH1: The consequences of corrupted public administration in Romania enable violent acts towards forest defenders.

WH2: The consequences of weak law enforcement of environmental crimes enable violent acts towards forest defenders.

WH3: The forest defenders face social stigma in their community, resulting in direct violence.

WH4: The state presents the forest defenders as actors of foreign interests, which makes forest defenders vulnerable to direct violence.

The first set of working hypotheses (WH1–2) tests structural violence as a driver of direct violence. The second set of working hypotheses (WH3–4) tests cultural violence as a driver of direct violence.

6.3 Data Collection

To address the complexity of the phenomenon (i.e., violence connected to illegal logging) in response to the research question, this thesis draws from different data collection techniques, which reduces the possibility of excluding relevant data, as advised by Yin (2014). Furthermore, using multiple sources of evidence, including various primary and secondary sources, enhances the rigour of the study and strengthens the construct validity of this research. This procedure of developing convergent evidence is called data triangulation (Yin, 2014, p. 120).

I have conducted five online semi-structured interviews with forest defenders in Romania as my primary sources. Four forest defenders are environmental activists working or volunteering for established NGOs. One forest defender is an investigative journalist working for a well-respected media platform. He focuses his reports primarily on the topic of illegal logging in Romania and conducts investigations on the sites. Each interviewee is labelled with a code

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which is later used in the text to cite their respective statements. Here is a list of the interviewees:

No.	Sex	Age	Position	Date	Code
1	Female	25-30	Environmental Activist	31.01.2022	A3
2	Male	35-40	Investigative Journalist	07.02.2022	J1
3	Female	20-25	Environmental Activist	09.02.2022	A4
4	Male	40-45	Environmental Activist	15.02.2022	A1
5	Male	30-40	Environmental Activist	21.02.2022	A2

Table 1 List of Interviewees

As complementary evidence, I have analysed video material and reportage from local watchdog media and international media platforms. The local media coverage sparked the interest of international journalists in the Romanian case, especially after the murder of two forest rangers on duty in 2019 and later after the attack on two environmental activists and one journalist in 2021. These were the most medialisised and the most tragic events involving Romanian forest defenders in recent years. These audio-visual materials deliver not only an in-depth description of the enormous scale of illegal logging in the country but also provide first-hand accounts of the actors' experience with violence, which was the focus of my study.

Therefore, supplementary to the interviews, I have analysed a total of sixty online news articles, press releases, and blog posts in the

English, Romanian, and German languages, and additional fifteen videos and podcasts in English. After this process, I reached the limit of new information.

In the secondary resources, I was looking primarily for narratives of the actors, written ones in reports and articles and oral ones in audio-visual content. Narratives are *“stories of events, experiences and the like told by participants, observers or scholars”* (Möller, 2011, p. 75), and they are, therefore, first-hand evidence, like the data from the interviews.

Before starting the data analysis, I transcribed the interviews and the relevant parts of media content featuring the actors' narrations and testimonies, where the transcript was not already available. I selected such details of the material as were relevant to my hypotheses. For example, in the videos, I decided not to transcribe the parts where the actors or narrator commented on the illegal logging techniques in the woods or described the ecosystem. I only marked this information in my notes, as the information was often repeated in multiple materials.

6.4 Data Analysis

As for the analysis techniques, I have chosen a technique of pattern-matching. This technique is suitable for explanatory studies. The pattern is predicted based on theory (in my case, on the hypotheses WH1–4) and is compared to the pattern based on the actual findings of the case study. If the predicted patterns formulated in the hypotheses and the empirical findings are similar, it can help to strengthen the internal validity of the research (Yin, 2014, p. 143).

Since I am using working hypotheses built on an existing theory, I adopted the approach of deductive analysis and deductive coding. The

coding scheme was applied on the interviews and secondary sources in the same way. First, I sorted the oral narratives obtained from the secondary sources and the narratives obtained from the interviews into categories following the working hypotheses (WH1–WH4). To start with, I was looking for key patterns representing each hypothesis, which were: corruption, law enforcement, community and stigmatisation, and politics and propaganda. I noted whether a particular hypothesis could be verified or falsified according to the statement, and then I compared it to the other statements in the category. Later, I manually labelled each statement with a more specific code. The key code which was present in all of the categories is “The System”, which is the key word underlying this case, as will be discussed in more depth in each section.

6.5 Research Ethics

To avoid any harm to the participants, I followed standardised ethical guidelines for research (e.g., the RESPECT Code), and I gave the highest priority to respect for the participants. Each of the participants participated voluntarily.

Informed consent was sent to the participants together with the invitation for interviews. The participants were informed about the purpose of the research, the research process, and data usage. The participant names were anonymised.

The participants were informed that the interviews would be recorded and that their data would be secured. At the same time, they could terminate the interview at any point and refuse to answer any question if it made them uncomfortable in any way. They were also given the option to withdraw from the research without giving any reason by

the date indicated. The participants confirmed their informed consent and were assured of their rights again verbally at the beginning of each interview.

7 Results

In this chapter, I present the results of my interview and media content analysis to interpret the evidence and verify or falsify the proposed hypotheses about structural and cultural violence as a driver for the direct violence in the forest conflicts in Romania.

7.1 WH1: The consequences of corrupted public administration in Romania enable violent acts towards forest defenders

The key breeding ground which enables violent acts towards forest defenders is Romania's actual range of corruption. Many labels describe this phenomenon. The most frequently used is simply "The System" or, as mentioned earlier in this thesis, specifically "Wood or Timber Mafia" (known as "mafia lemnului" in Romanian). In this thesis, I work with the code "The System", referring to forest industry stakeholders, cooperating political officials and other actors who systematically support illegal logging for their benefit. Understanding the meaning of this term is crucial for a complex understanding of this case of violence towards the forest defenders.

The evidence of connections of politicians with the forest industry sphere is palpable. A local environmental activist from Suceava county described the links between timber industry magnates and political authorities as the cause of the assaults committed against him: *"They are protected by politicians. They have a great deal of protection, foresters, economic agents, and all of them, together, form a clan, an organised criminal group that is working to destroy Romania's forests"* (Slemco, 2021). A concerned citizen who had also complained about illegal

logging in Suceava county spoke to media along the same lines: *“Here in Romania the mafia is big, and everyone is connected, all the way up to the state authorities. They all work hand in hand”* (Gauriat, 2020). A similar statement was given by another forest campaigner: *“It is not only me who uses the ‘M-Word’ (Timber Mafia). Because there are simply a lot of illegal corrupted networks of people in different sectors of this industry”* (McGrath, 2021a, 6:16–6:25).

There is evidence that the forest defenders are harassed and criminalised by the local politicians because the latter are working with the timber mafia: *“I could stop this phenomenon too if I had the support of the local authorities. Almost every time I identified an illegal load of timber and reported it to the relevant authorities, it had consequences for me. I was fined for misleading the officers. Despite concrete evidence such as a photo or goods certificate, the authorities punish me on the pretext that I falsely alerted the police,”* said a local forest defender from Suceava (Bayerischer Rundfunk, 2020, 31:36–32:57).

Therefore, there is evidence of the systemic problem of corruption which reaches from local municipality authorities and forest district departments up to the highest spheres of the political establishment. As the evidence shows, it is extremely challenging for the activists and all other forest defenders to disrupt the status quo of the whole political and private business sphere.

“It is very hard to fight with it. It is like a mafia,” said interviewee A3, confirming that the term “mafia” is used in discourse concerning this phenomenon. But she also added another piece of information: *“There are regions where it is better because the people are not so corrupted,”* pointing out the presence of corruption and that there are regional differences in the level of corruption. There are differences in the strategies

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of forest defenders to tackle illegal logging and ensure their own personal safety. *“As a journalist, I feel that I am more in danger in the north part of the forest in Romania than in the south part of the forest in Romania. For sure, I feel like I am more in danger in Maramureş county, which is close to the Ukrainian border, than when entering the forest near Bucharest or near the Danube,”* said J1 during the interview, confirming the issue of regional disparity when it comes to corruption in Romania.

The fact that the north of the country is more corrupted and for that reason, dangerous for the forest defenders, is also supported by the evidence of recorded geographical locations of direct violence committed towards the forest defenders. Although they were not environmental activists but foresters, both Liviu Pop and Raducu Gorcioaia were killed in the north of Romania, namely, in Maramureş and Iaşi counties, respectively (McGrath, 2019a). Forest rangers are victims as well as perpetrators in these forest conflicts, depending on whether they decide to cooperate with “The System” or not.

Disturbing is also the situation in another northern region bordering Ukraine, Suceava county. The forests in this county are also illegally exploited and local forest defenders, two of them already previously mentioned, face various kinds of direct violence towards them while protecting the old-growth forests. A well-known medialised activist from Suceava county said after he had been targeted by attackers: *“It’s not an isolated case. It’s the system which is trying to stamp us out”* (News Bucovina, 2021). It is not just a matter of local public officials but the whole system that they are in complicity with.

Therefore, there is evidence of the systematic problem of corruption with reaches from local municipality authorities and forest district departments up to the highest spheres of the political

establishment. As the evidence shows, it is extremely challenging for the activists and all other forest defenders to disrupt the status quo of “The System”.

Nevertheless, we should also discuss the actual reasons for the actors to be involved in this “*violent circle*”, as A4 stated. That means the reason why the actors get involved with the mafia structures and why they are willing to participate in hindering forest defenders from their activities, even attacking forest defenders, or hiring someone to commit these crimes.

In most cases, the trigger of the conflict is driven strictly by economic profit. “*There is definitely a confrontation of interests at the moment,*” remarked interviewee A2. For these actors, whether they are corrupted foresters, timber industry employees, or politicians who back them up, a forest defender is an intruder. Regarding this situation, A4 stated: “*When you are illegally logging, it is a huge money-making business. When people try to stop them from doing that, they get aggressive. It is because [the forest defenders] are an obstacle between them and their money.*”

Interviewee A2 describes this problem in more detail as “*an outcome from the open conflict we have between the parties. When you are losing the money, influence, and power, in a way, you are probably upset with the ones who are creating the damage to you.*” A journalist who was filming a report about illegal logging and was also attacked by the loggers remarked: “*If it’s worth acting like an organised mob towards journalist and activists, it means you have a lot to lose. There is a lot of money involved*” (McGrath, 2021b).

As stated above, corruption is not only a matter of local politicians who have direct connections with the loggers and timber companies in

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their region or who own one of these companies themselves. Links to the forest industry are present on the highest political levels. And high politicians follow their economic interests in this issue as well:

“Most of [the politicians] are against our work. Actually, for dozens of years, I could say that political campaigns have been financed with the wood from the [illegally logged] trees.” – J1

“The things happening in the forests are also happening to finance the parties and elections, and people in power, and sometimes you buy a seat in the parliament by cutting a forest. You get people to be promoted by the same lawmaker who is profiting from nature destruction.” – A1

As two of the interviewees remarked, there are indications that organised criminal structures are involved in the political process. Politicians work together with the timber mafia and therefore with the trade of illegally harvested timber in exchange for financing their political campaigns. These statements can be supported, for example, by the testimony of a former policeman who argued along the same lines in a foreign magazine after he had filed complaints regarding illegal logging in his district. According to him, the proceeds from the timber also fund a campaign of a *“high-profile politician”* (Jenkyns, 2016). However, I was unable to independently verify this fact.

To summarise, the mechanism of *“The System”* was presented in this section. The existence of *“The system”* is supported by multi-level corruption in Romania. Corruption can be classified as structural violence, as it is a form of violence that causes harm through dysfunctional public structures and institutions (Galtung, 1969).

Corruption leads to social injustice, marginalisation, and vulnerability of the forest defenders, who have no recourse to protect their rights.

In this case study, there is a conflict of the parties involved, but structural failures make it an unequal fight for the forest defenders, who lack the means to defend themselves adequately, as also further described in the next section. On one side, there are the perpetrators who are backed up by the corrupted officials who protect their profits by covering illegally positioned logs and preventing any interventions in the areas where illegal logging is taking place. On the other side, there are the forest defenders who are non-violently protecting the forest ecosystems from these actors. As described in this section, corruption, an example of structural violence, signifies a failure of state structures and defence mechanisms in Romania, and creates favourable conditions for the public officials who cooperate with “The System” against the forest defenders.

Thus, I consider this hypothesis (WH1) verified.

7.2 WH2: The consequences of weak law enforcement of environmental crimes enable violent acts towards forest defenders

In this section, it is first important to acknowledge that the evidence supporting hypothesis WH2 is for the most part connected to hypothesis WH1. As mentioned in the previous section concerning WH1, understanding the presence of the criminal structures, or simply “The system”, is crucial for building the whole case. It affects many institutions working within the state: The judicial system, police, and other institutions involved in law enforcement are no exception in Romania.

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The testimonies of the interviewees and the analysis of media reports covering the law enforcement of criminal cases of violence towards the forest defenders show clear evidence of the failure of law in this matter, as the culprits of the violent acts are not punished:

“Most of the time, illegal loggers and even very violent people who threaten you to stay out of their business don’t get any punishment, unfortunately.”

– A1

“It is a big issue. It is also contributing to the spiral of the situation. The trend of violence is going up also because the culprits are not actually sanctioned as they should, and the acts of violence are not sanctioned as they should. This is becoming a bit of encouragement for violent people to express themselves more.” – A2

As A2 explains, the failure of the state structures in this regard allows the perpetrators to commit crimes that go unpunished. This is significant evidence of structural violence, where the state is responsible for violent actions. Because of its other actions – or rather, in this case, inaction – the state can empower criminal groups in their illegal and inhumane acts.

The CEO of Agent Green described his first-hand experience with direct but also structural violence: *“All this time they were free and I feared for my life”* (McGrath, 2019a). In another interview, he added: *“The perpetrators have been recognised from the video footage and are free. They were never even detained. We’re talking about the company that was committing the illegalities there, the people from the respective Forestry Office and the local town hall. They are free, living their lives”* (Dumitrescu,

2021). *“Romania’s justice system is encouraging violent attacks to keep occurring,”* he summed it up (McGrath, 2021b).

The activist in this statement is describing the aftermath of the violent attack that he suffered in 2014. In his case, the prosecution process had also been prolonged, and the culprits were finally brought to stand court trial in 2019 (McGrath, 2019a). However, in 2022, they still remain free (Sammon, 2022). According to EIA (2016), one of the leading attackers in this case was a member of the local council and at the same time an employee of the company responsible for the construction of a hydroelectric power plant on the site. The same company is allegedly liable for illegal logging connected to the construction. Thus, there is a conflict of interest regarding the person of the assailant and his links with the system that carries out the process of investigation.

There are testimonies claiming this to be exactly the case in other occurrences. *“From the authorities to the private companies, police, judges, prosecutors. They simply work together and allow illegal logging to happen,”* said a local forest campaigner (McGrath, 2021a, 06:16–06:25). There are also testimonies of first-hand experience by other environmental activists. The forest defender from Suceava who had suffered humiliation and threats from the forest ranger and a mob of accomplices, said about the perpetrators in a video report: *“If all [of them] were arrested, I would go carefree, but they are all at work in the forest. How can I feel safe?”* (Recorder, 2021a, 06:26–06:32). Even though this case had not only caused a scandal within the borders of the municipality but also received great media attention in Romania and abroad, no one was put under arrest. A statement had been released by the Minister of Environment and the police, which acknowledged the

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case as one that they would treat with *“the utmost attention”* however, no more than four out of fifteen attackers from the violent mob were sanctioned (Sammon, 2021).

The reason for the cooperation of certain policemen, prosecutors, and other law enforcement representatives with the timber mafia is summed by J1 in the interview: *“My feeling is that the local prosecutors are also connected to this environmental mafia. It is impossible in those areas for so huge amount of money to be there and not touch the prosecutors.”* Therefore, this testimony links the failing law enforcement with the robust corrupted structures of the timber mafia, as has been described in the previous section. Again, this statement demonstrates the large scale of the underlying problem of corruption in the Romanian state.

The term “local prosecutor”, as discussed by J1 in the quotation above, should be emphasised. On this topic, A2 commented: *“It is because law enforcement in general in rural areas in Romania was very much corrupted and then people tend to find solutions for their issues outside of the legislation and the legal framework.”* Therefore, he suggests one of the possible explanations of the problem, especially in rural areas that depend significantly on the timber industry as further explained in the next section.

However, even though there is evidence of the failure of law enforcement regarding the attacks on the forest defenders, it should not be generalised for all cases. Some successfully enforced cases might not be publicised, as demonstrated by interviewee J1, who shared his experience: *“Actually, my attackers were sentenced to prison in 2010. Because they also hit some forestry employees who were with us. They were two employees from the forestry patrol joining us, then. And in Romania,*

hitting a forestry employee is like hitting a policeman. It is a crime. But also, it depends on case to case." So, even though the attackers had been prosecuted, J1 has also mentioned the aggravating circumstances that the judges had to consider. Covering for the culprits or justifying their behaviour were virtually impossible in this case.

Interviewee J1 also mentioned the regional differences in law enforcement efficiency. This is the same problem as in the previous hypothesis, meaning that the greater the degree of corruption of state structures, the greater the degree of their cooperation with the timber mafia. In other words, the greater the involvement of politicians, judges, or police officers with the interests of the timber mafia, the greater the resistance against the actions of the forest defenders, who stand in the way. The historically more corruption-prone regions are, as mentioned, in the north of Romania, while the south has more functional and better-working law enforcement institutions:

"I think in Maramureş (a county in the north bordering Ukraine), it is like a jungle there. The Romanian authorities are completely non-existent in the Romanian communities there, compared to the south, for example, where you can see very strong local police. You see very strong local prosecutors. And a lot of people have been sentenced there through the years. But when you are living in a county like Maramureş, and you don't see anybody being sentenced for their illegal activities, of course, you have more and more courage to act illegally." – J1

This statement again brings us to the testimony of A2 in the beginning of this section, where he describes how the dysfunctional law enforcement structures support and even encourage more violent actors

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to commit more crimes when the latter know that they will not be punished.

Some of the forest defenders decided to take the initiative in solving the situation of weak laws for environmental crime and poor law enforcement. The already-mentioned environmental activist from Suceava sent a petition to the European Parliament, requesting protection for whistle-blowers and journalists who report on illegal logging. However, according to the response document of the Committee of Petitions of the European Parliament, the EU has no competencies to investigate or prosecute criminal matters, such as attacks or murders in the member states. In this case, the EU cannot interfere in the country's internal affairs, and adequate law enforcement and protection of the local forest defenders need to be ensured by the Romanian authorities. However, the document also adds information about the recent proposal for a new directive to "crack down" environmental crime (European Parliament, 2022). This new directive would also stipulate an obligation to protect whistle-blowers and environmental defenders on the territory of the EU (European Commission, 2021).

To summarise these findings, there is evidence verifying the hypothesis regarding the state and judicial failure in ensuring proper law enforcement. This is clear proof of structural violence stemming from social, state, and economic structures and institutions, which has a direct negative impact on the individual and collective wellbeing and rights (Menton, Navas, and Le Billon, 2021). Poor law enforcement can be classified as such because the judicatory structures have direct influence on the protection of the human rights of forest defenders and fair punishment of the violent culprits. As has been discussed, when the perpetrators are not fairly punished, it has negative consequences on the

mental health of the forest defenders and their families and, last but not least, it creates a breeding ground for repeated offences.

Primarily, there is evidence about the connection between the judiciary system and the forest companies that illegally exploit the forest ecosystems in Romania. Therefore, the judiciary and the police are part of “The System” in some regions, as explained in the previous chapter. These conditions create a space for violence committed on vulnerable people who are trying to protect the forest from illegal loggers.

Thus, I consider this hypothesis (WH2) verified.

7.3 WH3: The forest defenders face social stigma in their community, resulting in direct violence

As has been stressed in the previous sections, the whole case revolves around the understanding of “The System” – a mafia network that involves and is interconnected with the political and judicial sphere. However, this phenomenon also has some social consequences present within the local communities and provides a certain justification for the triggers of violence in the form of cultural violence.

It is important to understand the connection of Carpathian rural communities to the mafia system of the timber industry. Many community members are either employed by companies belonging to the timber barons, local magnates who own forest extraction companies, or they supply these companies with illegally cut timber (Vasile, 2020b). This situation leads to forest exploitation as well as social exploitation, creating dependency relationships in the local rural communities in the mountains. *“[The illegal logging] phenomenon has put the community on its knees. By processing wood locally, hundreds of jobs were created, but*

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only trading raw wood led to the disappearance of lots of jobs. That's why we have empty hills and empty houses. Simply said, the whole community just lost its balance," stated an activist from the small village of Moldovița (Bloombeg Quicktack: Now, 2020, 01:58–02:28).

The mountain village communities serve as a cornerstone for "The System", which has complete power over some of these communities. As one activist described: *"It's like this feudal system, where the guy who owns the local forestry company also owns the local shop, the restaurant, the hotel, basically the rest of the businesses in the area"* (Neal, 2020). At the same time, the owners of the forestry companies may be mayors, members of local councils, or even ministers, who have their stakes in these local timber companies. This statement is also supported by J1: *"So, after five or six years of investigation in this field, I am sure there is this kind of connection between the high politicians of Bucharest, who are connected to the poor locals, and the companies who are stealing the wood and who get the wood illegally out of the forest."*

This dependence and connection make the whole communities even more vulnerable and repressed, and they must follow the rules of the timber mafia if they do not want to lose their livelihood. *"In many villages throughout Romania, people are afraid to talk about illegal logging because of the high levels of corruption. It implicates so many people,"* said a forest campaigner (McGrath, 2019b). And when a person is an outsider to "The System", when they fail to cooperate or even actively try to challenge or sabotage the long-established practices maintained by the corruption, they are excluded from the community. This is primarily the case of local activists from the affected regions.

“When you have a small village in the forest, everybody knows everybody. So, the policeman and forester and the logger and the priest even. They all are hand in hand. When somebody starts making a lot of money and employing everybody, it is really hard to speak up because you get ostracised. There is this omerta vow: You cannot speak about stuff like that because it would affect everybody. Something like: ‘How can I employ your mother and your father if you are against me logging in this forest?’ And then the priest comes and says: ‘You are not going to be welcomed in the church anymore if you continue stopping the logging.’ That often happens in many communities, unfortunately.” – A1

Here, interviewee A1 mentions several phenomena. First, he addresses the fact that the people who speak up against the illegal logging business are ostracised, excluded from the community. Second, he mentions “the vow of omerta”, which connects the mafia narrative with the functioning of local communities and illustrates the way relationships and rules are set. Interviewee A2 also supports this evidence: *“In the rural areas, everybody is a friend with everybody, and there are informal structures of power implementing parallel legislation.”* Last, A1 mentions the church involvement and its complicity with the mafia network. Especially the Romanian Orthodox Church is significant for the Romanian population and is an important part of the Romanian culture and history. Many citizens are religious, and therefore ostracism from the Church is both symbolic and strictly personal.

Exclusion from the community and marginalisation provide a certain justification for the violence. *“[The local activists] are very much receiving a lot of threats. In some cases, the community actually excludes*

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them in some way. So, they are becoming outcasts. There are numerous cases of physical violence and abuse against them as well,” said A2.

For instance, activist brothers from Suceava county were warned to stay away or they will lose their jobs. They lost contact with their friends and community members after filing complaints about illegal logging. Some villagers also sabotaged their business, and they were even physically attacked (Walker, 2020).

“People do not want to change their power structures in these small villages. If somebody is challenging the status quo, then you can realise that the answer will be violent, but also from the community, because those people are working in those businesses, so they feel personally threatened by any systemic change.” – A2

Therefore, there is a clear testimony that the timber industry’s social exploitation of the communities can lead to a violent conflict. Anyone who tries to intervene or even stop this system must face violence from the loggers, timber company employees, or the locals themselves, as some communities are dependent on the logging to sustain their livelihood or are directly illegally working for the timber mafia.

“It’s a violent environment because everybody in those communities thinks it is their right to steal. According to them, it is a right, and some of them were born with this right. When a journalist came into their community and started to report, to inform: ‘Look what they are doing, they are doing a bad thing, an illegal thing!’ They feel like someone is trying to stop their right to steal. If they are not stealing, they do not have the money to feed

their children, their families. So, the journalists and environmental activists became the most hated enemies of this business.” – J1

However, the reason of simply being an obstacle between the timber mafia and their profit is mostly enough for the community to exclude the forest defenders from the society. Some cultural violence patterns justify the exclusion or later violence in their narrative. Still, these labels are generally not strongly present in the discourse of the locals, even though we can find some examples of cultural motives with historical origins in the Romanian society.

“Maybe it is also cultural that in Romania, we don’t have really good or positive perspectives on whistle-blowing,” stated A2. He was referring to the period under Ceaușescu’s communist regime. Whistle-blowing was perceived negatively in the Romanian society due to the historical communist experience when whistle-blowers were considered traitors and Securitate (Secret State Police) informants (Transparency International Romania, 2013). And although the general opinion about whistle-blowing is improving, it is very challenging for the forest defenders to shift this perspective, as some parts of the society can still see this connection (Worth and Dyrmishi, 2017, p. 50). Whistle-blowers are represented among the Romanian forest defenders also because several former workers in the timber industry became ones after they were forced to leave when they had refused to cooperate with the system. Some of them became activists and founded local environmental initiatives (Lehermayr et al., 2020).

Another argument pictured the forest defenders as terrorists. However, oppressive actions are seen on the part of the attackers and bullies in the communities. The forest defenders may figure as terrorists

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to those whose illegal profit they report, but otherwise, the actions of all forest defenders in Romania are strictly non-violent, and when violence does take place, they act only in self-defence. However, a local activist from Suceava faced this accusation and even experienced violent conflicts first-hand: *“The boss came with his people directly to the fight! He said we were terrorising Suceava... we are terrorising Suceava with the controls, with notifications all the time, we took pictures in the forests. Which is why... beating straight, with the pole on the head!”* he said (Recorder, 2019, 31:53–32:08).

There is also evidence of racism which the forest defenders have to face. *“[The villagers] came to curse me [saying he is a gypsy], to boo me, asking why I’m checking their vehicles, why I don’t let them enter the forest.”* (Recorder, 2021b, 00:50–01:11). However, this statement comes from a forester who was reporting irregularities in his newly assigned forest district, so we cannot count him among activists, who are the subject of this research. Even so, foresters can be regarded as forest defenders as well. Otherwise, during the research, I did not find other clear evidence of racism, although it is possible that some local activists encounter these insults, but they are not medialised. However, all the people I interviewed during my research are native Romanians.

Last, I should briefly discuss the existing support of the public for the forest defenders. Although in many cases the forest defenders are a target of violence in communities that are heavily affected by logging, the public generally welcomes them and agrees with their activities.

“There are more and more locals who are getting the courage to take a step front and take action. And a lot of locals are contacting us, and they are

giving us information about what the bad locals are doing in the forest. So, they are two sides of the coin, the good side and the bad side.” – J1

“Romanians have lost trust in state authorities [regarding logging], so I end up receiving hundreds of messages every day about illegal logging. As much as possible, I will try and go to the field to document the cases, so that when I call the authorities, they can no longer hide the truth.” – A local activist from Moldovița, Suceava county (Bizot, 2021)

As evident, J1 describes the social empowerment momentum which is currently rising in the Romanian society, even in the rural communities. The social watchdog is on the rise, and the forest defenders are getting more support even directly in the local communities. The above-quoted environmental activist seconds the argument. He talks about the peculiar situation as a proof of the forest defenders' empowerment, where the public trust is given to the forest defenders to compensate the loss of trust to the local politicians.

However, A1 contradicts the statement about community courage. Even when locals decide to fight against “The System”, they are mostly doing it anonymously, so they can avoid repercussions on the part of the community or directly on the part of their employer.

“When we get a tip, most of the time, it is anonymous, and they tell us that we cannot call the police because they are going to announce. They are going to immediately call the forester or somebody who put the finger on it or destroying the forest.” – A1

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The fight against the system and attempts to challenge the status quo are still arduous, but the trend of social empowerment is on the mend. As J1 states below, in recent years, new forest defenders appeared on the public scene to address and tackle the issue locally. Namely, he speaks about the protests in 2019, which took place in Bucharest and other big cities. This was a crucial moment for the environmental movement regarding the public awareness and acknowledgement of this issue.

“So after [my] investigation, there was a huge protest, a street protest in Romania against the wood mafia. And after those protests and after those investigations, a lot of locals became activists. I think that dozens of Romanian environmental activists emerged after that period. Without the involvement of the local people, you cannot stop this mafia.” – J1

Thanks to the media attention, the public awareness about the issue of illegal logging as well as the connected violence is increasing. Therefore, with more informed people, also in the bigger cities with no direct connections to the rural areas, it is possible for the forest activists to develop more significant public pressure on the politicians and eventually to tackle the system.

To summarise this section, some of the forest defenders operating locally in the communities affected by the illegal logging get ostracised by the community members. The driver of the community exclusion is primarily economic, in that the forest defenders figure as an obstacle between the timber mafia and the possibility of illicit felling. The timber mafia is mainly responsible for the social exploitation in the local communities, as most of the community members are employed in the

sector, and the important figures in the communities (such as the mayor, policeman, or priest) are either directly connected with the mafia or are indirectly by various means promoting the interests of the mafia.

There are some aspects of cultural violence present in the narrative of the community members which justify the exclusion (Galtung, 1990) of the forest defenders or even the violence committed on them. One of the pieces of evidence is stigmatising the forest defenders and likening those who engage in whistle-blowing in the forestry system to the Securitate informants. This comparison associates the forest defenders with a very negative sentiment, especially among those members of the communities who experienced the communist regime first-hand and have no tolerance for whistle-blowers. There was also evidence of accusing the forest defenders of being terrorists.

Although the evidence of stigmatisation and labelling of the forest defenders is weaker, I found patterns of cultural violence towards the forest defenders within the communities. Thus, I consider this working hypothesis (WH3) verified.

7.4 WH4: The state presents the forest defenders as actors of foreign interests, which makes forest defenders vulnerable to direct violence

Even in this last section, we should not forget that the whole case revolves around “The System”. This systemic problem is present not only in the lower spheres of politics and local power structures but also on the higher political levels, which are influenced by the connection to the mafia network. For that reason, the state authorities and their allied stakeholders are trying to sway the public opinion against the forest defenders by disseminating various biased claims.

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“There are activists that are getting up this message that foreign companies are stealing local forests, and then you have the industry and the public administrator of the forest, which is Romsilva, in Romania that is saying that foreign NGOs are trying to block us from economic development, and they are just trying to block Romania’s development in general. Yes, this type of discourse is here a lot. It is everywhere. The propaganda is a tool for them. But they don’t have a lot of public trust since the work that we have been doing but also journalists exposing a lot of corruption cases and destruction happening in the forest. Their public credibility is kind of low. So, their stance on the subject and their propaganda is not that strong.” – A2

As A2 states, the key actors that spread the propaganda about the forest defenders are the stakeholders involved in the forest management and industry. Hence, these structures present in the timber industry and forest management, such as the National Forest Administration Romsilva, are trying to fight the forest defenders in the sphere of public discourse. As A1 states, however, they are not very successful, as there is constantly more and more evidence leaking into the media space about their corruption practises, as described in the section for WH1.

“There are some people that consider NGOs as foreign interventions, soft powers that want to take our country from ourselves. This kind of conspiracy that the NGOs are financed from the outside destabilised the Romanian context. You have that kind of people in Romania too, especially those who will get affected by our actions: the ones who exploit nature for living. (...) We are affecting their economic interests, but we are doing it

legitimately because they don't have the right to destroy nature just for their own economic interests and personal agendas. So yes, we are directly fighting this kind of people, and of course, they hate us.” – A1

Interviewee A1 also mentions that some stakeholders present environmental activists as foreign interventions. This narrative is not adopted by the public authorities, as this working hypothesis presumes. In this statement, we again see the pattern of enmity in the community or the forest sector against the forest defenders for economic reasons. They are trying to impose on the public their propaganda based on distorted facts and disinformation. Therefore, we can see evidence of cultural violence; even if, in this case, it is not coming directly from the state. Furthermore, these statements can be supported by other sources. These false accusations are also spread from the highest position, for example, by the director of the National Forest Administration Romsilva. He presents the environmental organisations as boycotters of national interests and interventions sponsored from abroad:

“90% of these[environmentalist] organisations are anti-Romanian! I mean they are funded with external money to hinder the development of the Romanian economy (...) Romania has excellent-quality timber which represents enormous competition. [Other countries, competitors] have millions of cubic meters of timber down from windthrows, storms (...) And then they pay organisations that advertise against Romania to suggest that our timber comes exclusively from illegal logging.” (Balint, 2020).

This demonstrates how the narrative of “foreign interventions” is used in the forest sector, coming from the Romsilva director.

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Nevertheless, the relationship between the forest defenders and the state authorities is very diverse, and we cannot eliminate the cultural violence patterns from the state actors.

First, it is important to distinguish whether the target are individual activists, whistle-blowers, or established international non-profit organisations. Surprisingly, the established environmental organisations – such as the Romanian branch of the international Greenpeace organisation, the World Wildlife Fund, or the local organisation Agent Green, which cooperates with foreign partners – are more successful in negotiating with politicians, even at a higher level. Therefore, they do not face so much pressure as their local counterparts, at least to some extent. *“I think even Romanian politicians became much more moderated and invited us (Greenpeace) to the discussions,”* adds A1.

Naturally, it must be considered which party the political authorities represent and what the current political climate is in the given region. *“I think it depends on the political party. I would say like some political parties are better than others. They are more open, they are younger, and they are more willing to do more things. But some political parties are more corrupted,”* describes interviewee A3 the relationship between the forest defenders and politicians.

A cooperation on the level of knowledge sharing is confirmed by the fact that the CEO of Agent Green, Gabriel Paun, became Honorary Counsellor of the Romanian Prime Minister Florin Cîțu in February 2021 (News.ro, 2021).

However, the attitude towards the forest defenders on the part of the politicians can be very ambivalent. The new narrative and working method brought about by the escalating situation regarding energy prices became very relevant towards the end of 2021. At the time of

writing this chapter (Spring 2022), the prices are still increasing due to the volatile geopolitical situation. Furthermore, several environmental organisations (CEE BankWatch, Eco-Civica, and Agent Green) were being intimidated by political representatives for their fight against the illegal logging in the protected areas where new energy infrastructures should be built. Namely, a parliamentary committee ordered the above-listed environmental organisations to attend a meeting on the rising utility prices in Romania. Attendance was obligatory for the NGOs, and if they failed to attend, they could face a criminal investigation, according to the inviting letter (BankWatch, 2021).

“The fact that NGOs are being asked to explain themselves for doing exactly what watchdog NGOs are supposed to do in a society governed by the rule of law is simply unacceptable. Legislators targeting civil society suggest that Romania is slowly moving in the direction of other illiberal regimes in Europe,” said the executive director of CEE Bankwatch (Bankwatch, 2021).

The NGOs could be singled out as a scapegoat for the rising electricity and gas prices, since their actions disrupt logging in the forestland, hinder the building of new energy infrastructures, and prevent the logs originating from the protected areas to be used as fuelwood. Furthermore, there may be an even greater demand for wood in the future, as Romania is taking advantage of the European Union’s so-called “Carbon Loophole”, and the energy transition will probably rely on burning biomass and transforming Romania’s coal-powered thermal power plants into plants using the wood pellet burning technology (Buchsbaum, 2022). There is a risk that the narrative of the anti-environmental movement is going to grow in the society.

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Generally, however, it is the solitary local activists who are in danger rather than the professionals working for established NGOs.

“I think for us as Greenpeace, it is safer because, in general, when you are working for a big international NGO, which is kind of perceived as an institution in a lot of countries. So, I guess this gives you more safety. But for sure, what I can tell is that when you look at examples from the local rural areas when we have some activists on the field over there, the situation is completely different.” – A2

In the case of Greenpeace, then, the sentiment of their being perceived as an international body protects them and gives them a stronger lobbying mandate. A different sentiment applies to the local activists, who are not sponsored by an international headquarters and do not cooperate with international partners. The work of the local activists might be supported or endorsed by the NGOs; however, these local people act on their own. They cannot be easily misrepresented as foreign interventions, and therefore the reasons which enable the violence against them are different, analysed in the previous sections. The recurring acts of violence were understandably condemned by the country's top politicians. After the attacks and humiliations of the activists and journalists in Suceava, the Environment Minister Tanczos said: *“We cannot accept such reprehensible acts that endanger the integrity and even the lives of those who defend the forests.”* (McGrath, 2021b). However, the politicians mostly do not put their PR proclamations to action, and the trend is rather worsening: *“Looking at the numbers, it is a trend; the phenomenon (the violence towards the forest*

defenders) is actually on the rise. So, this is a bit worrying,” said interviewee A2.

As has been stated above, there is evidence that the stakeholders operating in the forest sector use the narrative of “actors of foreign interests” in the public discourse. NGOs regularly struggle with propaganda on the part of the actors involved in the illegal logging business, and primarily on the part of the private sphere. However, as explained by the activists, this approach is not credible in the eyes of the public. This discourse is therefore not presented primarily by the state actors; although there are some hints that the relatively amicable relationships of the defenders with some of the public authorities might be at stake due to the current energy crisis.

Furthermore, as has been explained in this section, there is evidence that independent solitary activists deal with significantly more violent situations than those who are representing an established NGO, usually based in Bucharest or in other major cities. In the rural areas, the conditions for the solitary forest defenders are more dangerous, since they pose a physical obstacle between the timber mafia and their profit, as has been explained in the previous section.

As discussed, there are some patterns of cultural violence as well, but the primary driver of violence are not the state authorities who frame the forest defenders as “foreign interventions”. In fact, this narrative was adopted by the timber companies instead, which is contradictory to this hypothesis.

For these reasons, I am unable to verify the validity of this working hypothesis (WH4).

8 Discussion

This thesis aimed to identify the causes of violence against Romanian forest defenders. The research findings are based on supported (WH1–WH3) or unproven (WH4) working hypotheses. The data suggest a clear link between structural violence and direct violence in Romania. The aspect of cultural violence in the Romanian society towards forest defenders is not so vital; more critical is rather the interdependence of local communities and the timber mafia. The economic dependence of local people on the mafia results in a conflict between “The System” and the activists and journalists who monitor and defend the forest.

In terms of WH1 and WH2, I have found evidence supporting the presence of these structural failings (corruption and weak law enforcement,) which enable direct violence and also present an obstacle for the forest defenders to perform their activities, since the state structures do not support their work. The key issue is the multilevel corruption present in the political and judicatory spheres, which is the driving force in the systemic issue of illegal logging and, therefore, the main obstacle that the forest defenders have to tackle. To combat these deeply rooted obstacles, the “Forest Corruption Fighters’ Tool Kit” (Tropendos Ghana, 2015) has been developed to be used by activists on the site as a source of good practice, such as raising public awareness or increasing transparency. Although there is still room for improvement in the public understanding of the issue in Romania, the main problem lies in the attitudes of the rural communities that are being exploited by the timber industry.

The results indicate that independent local activists face more danger than forest defenders representing international environmental

NGOs. Solitary defenders face exclusion and stigmatisation, which further results in direct violence. These findings are in accordance with research on the ostracism of environmental defenders in communities that depend on resource depletion (Grand and Le Billon, 2020; Cabrejas, 2012). Some communities depend on the profit from illegal logging, and the forest defenders become outcasts in their communities when they jeopardise the community income from the illegally logged wood and threaten the jobs of the community members employed in the industry. Proposing alternative socio-economic functioning could be seen as a threat and be met with more repression on the part of the community, as noted by Cabrejas (2012).

For this reason, the independent forest defenders in rural areas choose different strategies than those who are employees of an NGO. Independent defenders do not have the means to undertake political lobbying; on the other hand, they can confront illegal loggers directly and serve as citizen watchdogs of illegal logging. Furthermore, some NGOs (such as Agent Green) manage both strategies. However, as Grand and Le Billon (2020) observe, some approaches of the NGOs in some areas might seem patronising to the community and, therefore, inefficient. They add that when the problem with illegal logging is solved in one community, the loggers may move on to exploit other communities. Furthermore, when the community loses its primary source of income and employment with the logging companies, the forest defenders are regarded as the culprits. At the community level, this creates a vicious circle for the forest defenders and a sense of powerlessness. And, when they choose to fight the problem, they are often met with retaliatory violence.

However, the issue of illegal logging and the associated violence in Romania most likely needs to be addressed from the outside; as one rural forest defender remarked: *“We are afraid, of course, and we hope somebody will come to solve this. Maybe from the European Union. Someone from outside. Because here in Romania, the mafia is big, and everyone is connected to the state authorities.”* (Euronews, 2020, 07:30–07:42).

Nevertheless, as has been discussed, the position of the EU is relatively toothless with respect to protecting the forest defenders in the conflict. Notwithstanding, there is a new directive being developed to ensure the protection of the forest defenders. The specific problem in the case of Romania is thus the presence of international EU-based investors who plunder the forests but at the same time do not provide corresponding services to the citizens. A case in point is the logging in the Hambach Forest in Germany, connected with the RWE company, which was undertaken in order to expand the nearby coal mine. As Brock and Dunlap (2017) describe the situation, the argument was the energy security of the region and its development. There are no such patterns in Romania. This is possibly the reason why elements of cultural violence are not so much present in Romania, where it is the structural failure of the state that primarily drives the conflict, and therefore the propaganda is inefficient.

The European Commission has initiated an infringement procedure, but it does not address the root causes of the matter, as its drivers are highly economically motivated. There should also be more extensive pressure from international governance bodies on the timber corporates functioning in Romania to handle the shared responsibility for the illicit actions of their suppliers. They should guarantee that their investments do not cause any human rights violations and do not drive

any conflicts with the forest defenders, as Ghauoul and Kleinschroth (2018) state, all the more so because the timber monopolies operating in Romania are EU-based, and the rate of violence against the forest defenders increased after Romania joined the EU.

For this reason, some NGOs are targeting the “consumption space” and campaign directly in furniture retail shops to increase the awareness of their customers about illegal logging and the related violence (Schirmer, 2015). To name but one, Agent Green is campaigning in IKEA around Europe (Glosszár, 2021; Heute, 2021).

As argued in the section on WH4, the anti-forest defenders propaganda coming from the forest industry has little credibility to the public, mainly because of the various corruption scandals. The forest industry companies and Romsilva representatives campaign against the established environmental organisations in the media discourse. They label these activists as “Anti-Romanian” foreign interventions. However, since the conflict is between the forest defenders and the private investors, the forest defenders cannot be framed as threats to state interests, which contradicts the hypothesised connection (WH4). My research finding is that the state apparatus is not the major player standing directly against the forest defenders, but it is the timber corporates that drive “The System”. The fact that some politicians cooperate with the timber business or have a direct conflict of interest is another matter that is responsible for structural violence. In the Romanian case, therefore, the criminalisation of the forest defenders is not primarily ideological. The WH4 was built on the assumption of cultural violence, which holds, for example, in Polish (Cielemęcka, 2019) or Russian (Evans, 2012) case studies, where the environmental activists were criminalised based on ideological accusations by the state

authorities. This finding probably correlates with the state of democracy in these two states and the extent of civil rights, as the Romanian democracy index is slightly higher in comparison with Poland and significantly higher in comparison with Russia (Freedom House, n.d.).

Thereby, in Romania, the driver of the violence are primarily the economic motives of the timber industry, and the forest defenders cannot be labelled as a security threat to the state (Mireanu, 2014), all the more so because the strategies of the forest defenders are strictly non-violent. Therefore, the rhetoric of the timber business representatives might be untrustworthy because the public cannot identify with it.

To tackle a systemic issue driven by mafia interests might seem as an insurmountable task, as some of the interviewees pointed out, especially when it interferes with the state structures and community functioning. The cause is not, however, a lost one. Scholars (Caggiano and De Rosa, 2015) identify networking and joining forces with other forest defenders and stakeholders as one of the most efficient ways for environmental and social activists to fight mafia structures, both nationally and internationally. Networking at the level of sharing knowledge and political lobbying powers and skills takes place in Romania to some extent. For example, transnational advocacy networks consisting of the Romanian NGO Agent Green, the German EuroNatur foundation, and the international law NGO Client Earth have achieved significant results in Romania in enforcing EUTR (Davidescu and Buzogány, 2021). There is also the cooperation of the local independent activists with the established NGOs. This trend could be strengthened in the course of time. In refuting hypothesis WH4, my research shows that the cooperation of forest defenders with foreign partners is not concerning either for the

state or for the public. On the contrary, when the forest defenders are backed by an international institution, it gives them credibility in the eyes of the public. There is strength in unity.

8.1 Limits of the Research

I would like to address several limitations which need to be considered while interpreting the results of this research. First, the methodological design of the thesis concerns limitations primarily regarding case studies. The most significant limitation is the risk of confirmation bias, a situation when the researcher interprets the data so as to support their own opinion about the matter. Although I have tried to avoid biasing the research by using the triangulation technique with different data sources and by building on previous research, these results must be interpreted with some caution.

Second, there is a possible issue regarding selection bias in the interview method, as four out of five interviewees represent the same NGO. Apart from Greenpeace, I contacted also other four environmental NGOs in Romania; however, some left no response or were unavailable for interviews. Therefore, the results may be biased because the interviewees have similar experience, although they have different levels of expertise with activist work. I tried to balance this issue with a rigorous media content analysis and by including the oral narratives of other forest defenders active in Romania.

Some scholars may also see online interviews as limiting, primarily for the lack of body language observation, possible privacy concerns, and technical difficulties (Gray et al., 2020). I have also dealt with some of these obstacles, nevertheless, given the scope and

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constraints of my thesis research, the interviews had to be conducted online for reasons of easy accessibility to the interviewees, to reduce travel costs and carbon emissions, and to comply with the safety measures during the Covid-19 pandemic.

9 Conclusion

This research aimed to identify the drivers of violence against the forest defenders in Romania and present a case study analysing the challenges, obstacles, and threats of these defenders in the specific context of a democratic country and a member state of the EU. The research was based on the established theoretical framework for exploring conflict developed by J. Galtung and also drew on the findings of previous studies on environmental defenders and activists. Based on a qualitative analysis of media content and interviews with Romanian forest defenders, it can be concluded that structural violence, primarily corruption, has a significantly greater influence on triggering direct violence than cultural violence, represented by symbols and conflict justification.

The capitalist economic motives of profit protection take precedence over ideological justification and lead to a clash between the two opposing parties, that is, the forest defenders and the exploitative timber companies. The structural failings in the form of corruption and weak law enforcement enable the perpetrators of violence to commit these crimes because the state forces cooperate with the culprits, and the culprits therefore know that they will not be punished. The results also indicate that the independent activists in rural areas who are not the employees of any more prominent NGO face more violence because they often come into direct conflict with key members of the local community who are in complicity with the timber mafia. In the discussion chapter, I compared my findings to those presented in the literature and outlined some examples of the efficient fight against the (timber) mafia.

This research is based on an extensive body of literature examining environmental defenders (e.g., Camacho-Garza et al., 2022;

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Grant and Billon, 2021; Schneidel et al., 2020; Navas et al., 2018; Riethof, 2017; Escobar, 2006; Niemelä et al., 2005), even though most of these studies are focused on the Global South's environmental defenders, while this research strived to provide findings on the forest defenders in the context of the EU. There has been previous research conducted on environmental activism in the European forest sector (e.g., Cielemecka, 2019; Bieńkowska et al., 2019; Brock and Dunlap, 2018; Pelikán and Librová, 2015), however, there is no published research so far to focus on the forest defenders challenging illegal logging, which makes this case study unique in the EU environment.

The key challenges, threats, and obstacles for the forest defenders that this research identified and that should be further assessed are the structural failings in the large scope of corruption, which is driven by the economic motives of "The System", ruled by primarily EU-based companies. Hereby, the phenomenon of illegal logging in Romania and the related violence is not only a national issue but very much an issue of the EU.

Further research about this phenomenon could be enriched with in-depth and possibly on-site interviews with local forest defenders in Romania, that is, those who do not represent NGOs. These future studies could observe, analyse, and report on the situation in the local communities and the conditions and experience of the defenders in more detail. I believe there is a gap in the academic knowledge about rural activists and violence, especially in Europe.

Furthermore, it would be beneficial to expand the research on forest defenders to other regions of the Carpathians and provide a comparison of their challenges, while testing the same or similar methodological frame.

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