



Weekly Briefing

Slovakia Social briefing:
The endangered forests of Slovakia
Institute of Asian Studies, Bratislava


China-CEE Institute

Kiadó: Kína-KKE Intézet Nonprofit Kft.

Szerkesztésért felelős személy: Chen Xin

Kiadásért felelős személy: Huang Ping

 1052 Budapest Petőfi Sándor utca 11.

 +36 1 5858 690

 office@china-cee.eu

 china-cee.eu

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Summary

Slovakia is famous for its picturesque mountains and vast forests that cover some 40% of the whole area of the country, putting it in 4th place in Europe. However, the management of these forests has become a controversial issue. On one side, there are environmentalists who decry the uncontrolled logging and development going in the protected areas that are robbing Slovakia of one of its most cherished endowments. On the other side, the foresters play down the seriousness of the problem and argue that their actions actually serve the best interests of the healthy development of forests. The future of the forests is thus full of question marks.

The disappearing forests

The issue of disappearing Slovak forests has come to the spotlight last year when the satellite photos showing vast areas of previously forested areas turned into barren hills made rounds on the Slovak Internet. What more, this has been happening in the national parks which should be enjoying a higher level of protection. This has brought widespread public attention to the issue, which has generally been relegated to the margins. In response to the problem, an initiative called *My sme les* (We are the forest) has been created by a group of environmentalists led by Erik Baláž and gained widespread following on the Internet. The initiative has been calling for the complete stop to logging and hunting in areas of high environmental protection.

Data demonstrate that since 1990s the scope of logging in Slovakia has increased by 75%. Among the OECD countries Slovakia ranks second in the

amount of wood logged per square kilometre.¹ The logging of the forests also impacts the biodiversity and water retaining ability, thus creating long-ranging impact on the environment. Even the ancient and primeval forest of Slovakia inscribed in UNESCO haven't escaped the logging activities. For this reason, UNESCO has repeatedly asked Slovakia to fix the issue, warning that the exceptional forests may be lost forever if nothing is done soon.²

The two sides of the barricade

The debate on the management of Slovakia's forests is, of course, not new. The origin of the current woes can be traced back to the November 2004 catastrophe. A huge windstorm with speeds up to 230 km per hour swept through the Tatra Mountains, leaving some three billion cubic metres of trees uprooted and millions in economic damage. This was the worst windstorm on record, leaving a lasting wound on the forests that will need decades to fully recover. Moreover, more windstorms have followed, with a particularly strong one hitting in 2014.

After the catastrophe, a debate erupted about the best way to deal with its effects and help the forest regenerate. While most of the calamity wood was excavated and new trees planted, fallen trees in the most protected parts of the national park were left untouched, letting nature to deal with the damages by itself. However, this has led to recurrent outbreaks of bark beetles that have started to infest also the forest areas left untouched by the calamity.

The foresters have advocated further logging to stop the spread of the bark beetle infestation. They have criticized the non-intervention for alleged role as a ground zero for deadly infestations. However, the environmentalists have been arguing that forests can deal with the infestation without outside help, pointing to the experience in the protected areas of the Czech Republic. Furthermore,

¹ Juraj Koník, "Slovensko z výšky pár kilometrov: Za 15 rokov zmizol les veľký ako celé Tatry", *Denník N*, 23 November 2017, <<https://dennikn.sk/950298/slovensko-z-vysky-piaticich-kilometrov-za-15-rokov-zmizol-les-velky-ako-cele-tatry-letecke-a-historicke-mapy-odomknute-dennikn/>>.

² --, "UNESCO asks Slovakia to protect the Primeval Beech Forests of the Carpathians", *WWF*, 6 July 2018, <<http://www.wwf.mg/en/wildlife/?uNewsID=330673>>.

they claim that under the guise of trying to solve the bark beetle problem, the foresters are actually seeking to increase the scope of logging in pursuit of economic gains.

One of the main reasons often seen behind the recent upsurge in logging is the burning of wooden biomass. Biomass burning - as an alternative source of energy - has been supported also by the EU and producers have been quick to jump into this business supported by generous state donations. Critics argue that even healthy forests are often cleared only to be burned in energy production. For this reason, they have called for the donations to be scrapped. However, the representatives of the energy sector have denied the accusations, arguing that wooden biomass burning makes up only a small part of the uses of wood from the Slovak forests.

Unsurprisingly, the ministries of agriculture (responsible for the forestry sector) and natural environmental have stood on the opposite sides of the barricades on the issue of forest management and protection. The representatives of both sides regularly engage in public debate, exchanging accusations for creating the current problems. Their conflicting visions stem from very different understandings of the role of forests and their relationship with the people. At the same time, environmentalists from the public sector have criticised all the involved actors for insufficient efforts for the protection of forests.

Insufficient legislation

The crux of the current debate as it stands today is the legal framework for the management and protection of forests. The current legislation doesn't give the environmental protection agencies the tools to manage the logging activities except for in the special non-intervention areas. The situation is complicated by the different kinds of ownership. Some forests are owned by the state, some are in private ownership and some are even owned by the Church.

The directors of all Slovak national parks have issued a common statement on the issue.³ They criticise the current state of legal framework that leaves the administration of national parks as mere bystanders when the important issues relevant to national parks are decided upon. Furthermore, they urged for nature protection to be the absolute priority overriding all other interests.

Currently, new legislation is being drafted that should strengthen the environmental protection.⁴ The Ministry of Natural Environment proposes that the non-intervention areas should be increased to at least 50% of the whole area of national parks by 2025 and to 75% by 2030. Moreover, the state-owned forests in the national parks should from now on be managed by the State Nature Protection Agency under the Ministry. According to the law proposal, also forests outside of non-intervention zones should be managed in accordance with the principles of nature conservation.

The foresters have voiced opposition to the proposed measures. One of the arguments is that turning large areas of forests into non-intervention zones will bring about unemployment for the people involved in the logging business. They argue that instead of prohibiting any interventions, forest should be managed pragmatically with an eye on their diversified roles.

“Development cannot be stopped”

However, logging is not the only issue plaguing the Slovak forests. The protected areas have become very attractive for developers who are trying to capitalise on their tourism potential. In 2017, the decision of the Highest Court stopped the planned development of a ski resort and a cableway in the protected area of High Tatra Mountains at Štrbské pleso. The Court argued that the goals of natural protection and development are contradictory. If more and more exceptions for new investment projects in the protected areas are to be approved,

³ Jana Kubisová, “Cítíme sa v pozícii komparzistov, tvrdia riaditelia národných parkov”, *Aktuality*, 4 October 2018, <<https://www.aktuality.sk/clanok/629353/citime-sa-v-pozicii-komparzistov-tvrδια-riaditelia-narodnych-parkov/>>.

⁴ --, “Envirorezort chce posilniť ochranu prírody v národných parkoch”, *Aktuality*, 2 October 2018, <<https://www.aktuality.sk/clanok/628704/envirorezort-chce-posilnit-ochranu-prirody-v-narodnych-parkoch/>>.

there is no basis for continued protection of the areas. In short, the Court argued that a choice has to be made between having a national park and building an entertainment resort.⁵

The developers claim that they don't want to turn the mountains into an entertainment park, but argue that development cannot be stopped. The existing facilities are said to be inadequate and falling behind what is required by the increasing interest of tourists. The issue is again being complicated by the existing regulations. The new zoning of the Tatras national park should have been originally finished in 2006, but has not been completed until today.

The issue of natural protection is set to become even more important in Slovakia. Currently, Slovakia does not have a strong green party that would build its agenda around the issues of environment protection. However, there are increasing number of environmentalist activists who are engaged in politics. Just recently, Erik Baláž, who stood behind the movement "We are the forest" joined a newly-formed political party Spolu (Together). Another newly formed non-parliamentary party Progressive Slovakia has also put significant attention to issues of environmental protection. In the end, making real changes to how environment is treated in Slovakia necessitates turning activism into political action.

⁵ Veronika Prušová, "Najvyšší súd zabrzdil developerov na Štrbskom Plese: Z Tatier sa stáva lunapark, varoval", *Denník N*, 27 July 2017, <<https://dennikn.sk/835537/najvyssi-sud-zabrzdil-developerov-na-strbskom-plese-z-tatier-sa-stava-lunapark-varoval/>>.