The Illegal Logging and Timber Trade
Between public security threat and organised crime
The Illegal logging and timber trade (ILTT) is a global problem with substantial negative economic, environmental and social impacts. As Europe’s forests have become essential elements of green growth, biodiversity and climate change mitigation strategies, the issue of illegal logging emerged as a point of contention between EU institutions and various member states (Poland, Slovakia, Romania).

Romania stands out as a country where illegal logging seems out of control. Despite attracting unprecedented international political attention, official reports show that timber is being illegally cut and introduced to the EU internal market, threatening valuable old-growth forests and other unique biodiversity hotspots. Journalists, NGOs, politicians and elected representatives started to call ILTT a serious organised crime (2017) and it is a public security threat under Romanian law (2016). These new realities have dramatically affected the forestry sector, created numerous timber shortages and led to an increase in violence and anti-European discourses.

What is ILTT and how does it function?

The illegal logging and timber trade is the harvesting, transporting and selling of timber in contravention to the laws of the country of harvest or the regulations governing the functioning of the common market. The phenomenon of illegal logging appeared in Romania during the post-socialist land reforms, and it was marked by the development of patron-client relations, corruption and various forms of violence.

The state currently owns 48.6% of Romanian forests; local communities own 17.3%; private owners 20.2% and other non-state institutions such as historical associations of forest owners (commons) 13.9%. The state’s forests are administered by the National Forestry Agency (ROMSILVA), an institution that finances all its operations from timber harvesting revenues. Private forest owners in Romania face significant restrictions to access and harvesting rights compared to their counterparts in most other EU Member States. A large part of the Romanian population is dependent on forests for subsistence and firewood, but do not have ownership or access rights.

A report of the Court of Accounts from 2013 uncovered that Romania lost 280 000 hectares to illegal logging between 2002-2011, valued at 5 billion euro. Nevertheless, national inventories show a constant increase in the forest cover since 1990. The Romanian state does not have official figures about the spread and dimensions of illegal logging and timber trade, so the social, environmental and economic impacts of this phenomenon are unclear.
Forest management in Romania is based on a scientific forestry tradition that promotes long harvesting cycles (>100 years), low annual allowable cuts and natural regeneration. Significantly different from the legislation of other EU Member States, Romanian forestry law is an instrument that actively promotes the conservation of biodiversity and resilient natural forests. Illegal logging and mismanagement of the country’s forest fund are considered a threat to national security as of 2016. The government developed wood tracking technologies to comply with the due diligence requirements of the European Union Timber Regulation and involved the public in the monitoring and reporting of potential cases of illegal logging and timber trade. Illegal logging still occurs in different ways which results in fast-paced and sometimes confusing changes in the legislation.

The over-regulation of forest governance, management and timber harvesting creates an unstable business environment while the lack of local capital and investment forces various actors in the forestry sector to operate at the border between licit and illicit activities.

**Is ILTT a form of organised crime?**

Local and regional NGOs and journalists have discussed the Romanian ILTT as a serious organised crime for many years, demanding stricter legislation and enforcement. Despite these calls for change, the state authorities started to refer to mafia-like operations only recently (November 2019).

Although an Environmental Investigation Agency document from 2015 exposed the organised and corrupt supply chain of a large timber processing company, few cases of forest crime have been prosecuted as serious crimes. Research shows that illegal logging involves a variety of actors, sometimes operating independently, opportunistic and most probably at the local level. This grey market survives as both the household and industry’s demand for timber outstrip supply.

**Risks**

**Collapsing industry:** as the ILTT started to be considered a serious organised crime, consumers’ trust in the forestry sector decreased both at the national level and internationally. This framing forced small or local processing firms to run out of business and allowed big international players to dominate the market.

**Firewood shortage:** in Romania, 3.5 million households use timber for heating and cooking, predominantly in rural areas. Official data shows that this need is higher than the allowable yearly timber harvesting quota, thus forcing rural dwellers to procure firewood through informal arrangements. Timber shortages have grown in intensity, putting a vulnerable rural population at risk.

**Devaluing of Rangers work:** the shifts towards serious crime narratives has led to a portrayal of forest rangers as corrupt public enemies, making them the target of various forms of violence including murder.

**Fake news and populism:** political discussions about ILTT are overwhelmed by fake-news and opportunistic populist proposals such as support for blanket bans, criminalisation of forest wrongdoers and militarised enforcement. ILTT as a serious crime is often framed in racist, xenophobic and anti-European discourses.

**Recommendations**

1. While it is essential to encourage the participation of civil society, environmental NGOs and other stakeholders in policy-making, forest-related regulations and strategies should be informed by sound science and democratic decision making.
2. Strict protection and limitation of access rights should be accompanied by adequate and fair compensation mechanisms targeting not only direct owners but also local communities and consumer communities.
3. As high conservation value forests become critical for the EU’s green growth and biodiversity strategies, it is crucial to take into consideration the variety of ownership and access rights, forest governance traditions and the varying degrees of forest-dependency across class, ethnicity and rural-urban divides.
4. It is vital to make sure that policy development does not perpetuate environmental injustice or deepen local inequalities and precarious livelihoods.
About the Author

George Iordăchescu is a Post-Doctoral Research Fellow of the BIOSEC Project at the Department of Politics and International Relations at the University of Sheffield. His work examines illegal logging and timber trade as a security threat. The research that informs this policy brief was conducted between 2019 and 2020 and involved 20 interviews with national authorities, MEPs and various EU institutions, representatives of environmental NGOs, stakeholders from the Romanian forestry sector and the timber industry, rangers and conservation practitioners as well as participation in national and international meetings related to Illegal logging and timber trade. His work has a regional focus on Eastern Europe where he has researched forest governance, the role of the state in biodiversity conservation policy-making, rewilding and the emergence of private protected areas since 2014.

About the BIOSEC Project

The BIOSEC Project is funded by the European Research Council (ERC) 2016-2020. More information on our outputs, our team and our research is on our website.

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