

The Rents of Illegal Logging: The Mechanisms behind the Rush on Forest Resources in Southeast Albania

Johannes Stahl

Independent Scholar, 4696 Rue de Grand Pre, Montreal, QC, H2T 2H7, Canada

E-mail: johastahl@yahoo.de

Abstract

Since the collapse of socialism, Central and Eastern Europe has experienced a massive rush on forest resources. This paper examines the concrete mechanisms through which the postsocialist transformation has spurred this rush through a case study of a forest sector in southeastern Albania, where various kinds of actors collide in a struggle over rent from illegal firewood extraction and trade. I argue that the broader political and economic changes of postsocialism have altered rural resource values, changed the mechanisms through which forest users gain access to productive resources, and shifted the creation and distribution of resource rent among actors. Together, these changes affected forest users' incentives, decision-making and practices. Over the past two decades they have caused this rush and severe forest degradation.

Keywords: rent, forests, illegal logging, firewood, Albania, Central and Eastern Europe

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INTRODUCTION

Central and Eastern Europe's postsocialist transformation has introduced a tremendous amount of uncertainty about the values of rural resources. The transformation period was characterised not only by the privatisation of collective goods and assets, but also by the redistribution of obligations, risks and liabilities (Verdery 2004, Sikor 2006). Together, these changes radically altered existing values. In a kind of 'valuation roulette,' the values of agricultural land, forests, livestock and machinery were thrown up into the air (Verdery 2003:23). In many countries, while agriculture lost significance as a source of value (Macours and Swinnen 2002), forestry underwent a dramatic appreciation (Staddon 2001, Dorondel 2009, Sikor *et al.* 2009).

The changes in the values of rural resources have been juxtaposed by equally dramatic changes in the creation and distribution of rent. Rent is the return from control over access to scarce resources (von Mises 1961, Fetter 1977). Since the collapse of socialism, the creation and distribution of rent among differently positioned social actors changed radically because the broader political and economic changes of postsocialism shifted the distribution of the power to gain, maintain, and control access to rural resources. For example,

the postsocialist land reforms brought about massive changes in property rights (and thus access) to agricultural land and forests (Swinnen 1997, Staddon 2000). At the same time, the shift from centrally planned to market-oriented economies liberalised input and product markets and fundamentally altered rural dwellers' access to other productive resources, such as capital, labour, and technology (Hann 2003, Verdery 2003). Together, these broad changes created previously unavailable rent-seeking opportunities for actors who are able to control access to agricultural land, forests, or other productive resources. Subordinate actors who seek to gain or maintain access to these resources now have to transfer significant amounts of rent to those in control of access.

Perhaps no other rural resource in Central and Eastern Europe has seen more of a struggle for resource rent than forests. In many countries, forests represent one of the few valuable assets remaining in rural areas. For this reason, there has been nothing less than a mad scramble for forest access throughout Central and Eastern Europe (Nijnik and van Kooten 2000, Staddon 2001, Eikeland and Riabova 2002, Bouriaud and Niskanen 2003, Veselić 2004, Gulca 2006, Dorondel 2009). In virtually all Central and Eastern European countries, various kinds of actors have engaged in a rush on forests, attempting to gain, maintain and control access either to forest resources directly

or to the productive resources needed for forest exploitation (e.g., technical equipment, means of transportation, access to markets). While some actors focussed their energy on controlling access through property rights, others concentrated on gaining access to forest rent in other ways. They participated in or controlled timber logging, transport and trade, or took advantage of their state positions to levy rents from forest exploitation (Sikor *et al.* 2009). As these actors struggled for resource rent, they often engaged in forest use practices that were highly unsustainable (e.g., Siry 2003, Kuemmerle *et al.* 2007).

In Albania, the rush on forests has been particularly striking. Since the collapse of socialism, Albania's dense forests decreased from 31% of the total land surface in 1991 to 25% in 2001 (Jansen *et al.* 2006). It has been reported that the legal extraction of timber and firewood in Albania amounts only to 30–40% of the actual extraction (UN-ECE 2001). In some parts of the country, forestry experts estimate that up to 95% of the wood cut annually is felled illegally (Legisi 2001, cited in de Waal 2004). Consequently, Albania leads Central and Eastern European countries in the ratio of illegal to legal logging (Bouriaud 2005). Although Albania may, therefore, not be representative of the conditions commonly found in Central and Eastern European forestry, it is exactly the radical and highly unsustainable nature of its forest exploitation that makes it a suitable place to study the concrete mechanisms by which the broader political and economic changes of postsocialism have caused forest degradation.¹

In this paper, I focus on a case study from the Qafë Panje and Guri Nikes forest sector in southeastern Albania, where different kinds of actors collide in a struggle over rent from illegal firewood extraction and trade.² I use the concept of rent as a lens to describe and explain actors' incentives, decision-making and practices. My argument is that since the collapse of socialism the changes in rent creation and distribution have shifted forest users' incentives, productive decisions, and practices, and, thereby, caused significant forest degradation. The paper is based on eight months of field research in southeastern Albania in 2004 and four weeks of follow-up fieldwork in 2008. Both years I lived in small, forest-dependent villages in and around Qafë Panje and Guri Nikes. The villages were chosen as part of a larger research project that analysed the political and economic drivers of land use change in Albanian agriculture and forestry (Stahl 2010). The case study material that follows stems from direct observation, semi-structured interviews, and countless informal conversations with villagers, woodcutters, transporters, traders, and forest service officials.

The paper proceeds as follows. I begin by outlining the connections between rent-seeking, access, and resource use in Central and Eastern Europe. I then present an overview of the Albanian forestry sector and its development since the collapse of socialism. This prepares the ground for an in-depth examination of the changing dynamics of forest use and rent-seeking in Qafë Panje and Guri Nikes over the postsocialist period. I bring the paper full circle in the conclusion, where

I return to theoretical questions about the conceptualisation of illegal logging in postsocialism and the potential to use rent as a lens to examine social and environmental change in postsocialist countries and beyond.

RESOURCE ACCESS AND RENT-SEEKING IN POSTSOCIALIST CENTRAL AND EASTERN EUROPE

To conceptualise the linkages between broader political economic processes and forest users' productive activities, it is useful to examine the creation and distribution of rent among differently positioned social actors. The concept of rent originates from a branch of classical economics which sought to explain the creation and distribution of surplus profits in agriculture. According to classical rent theory, surplus profits – or 'the rents of land' in the words of David Ricardo – are distinct from regular profit because they do not arise from a contribution of land, labour or capital to the production process. Instead, they are created by spatial variations of production conditions brought about, for example, by differences in soil fertility (Ricardo 1973, originally published in 1817) or transportation costs (von Thünen 1966, originally published in 1826). When land is scarce and privately held, the rents of land may be appropriated by landowners in the form of lease payments from their tenants (Marx 2003, originally published in 1894).³

In contrast to the classical conception of 'land rent,' modern economics suggests that those who control access to any factor of production (not just land) can receive rent due the factor's unique and scarce qualities (von Mises 1961, Fetter 1977). Like 'land rent,' rent in its more general understanding is distinct from regular profit because it does not arise from a contribution to the production process. Instead, it is created by way of controlling others' access to production opportunities. Analogous to the landowner–tenant relationship, rent may be appropriated by all those who control access to anything that is scarce and valuable. Rent, in other words, is created by controlling others' access to production opportunities. It is, thus, 'the benefits levied upon control' (Ribot 1998:314). Using rent as an analytical tool requires an understanding of the mechanisms through which social actors achieve control over access to productive resources. To facilitate such an understanding, I draw on a framework by Jesse Ribot and Nancy Peluso (2003), which defines key concepts for a 'theory of access.' The framework suggests a series of 'means, processes, and relations by which actors are enabled to gain, control, and maintain access to resources' (Ribot and Peluso 2003:160). These means, processes and relations include legal access through property rights, and structural and relational mechanisms that create access to resources through markets, social networks, technology, the institutions of capital and labour flows, etc.⁴

Ribot (1998) provides an illustrative example of how actors apply these mechanisms. He examines the distribution of rent along the charcoal commodity chain in eastern Senegal from

wood extraction and charcoal-making in the Tambacounda region through transport and trade to final use in the capital, Dakar. Along the chain, the charcoal passes through the hands of villagers, migrant woodcutters, merchants, transporters, wholesalers, retailers, and outlet owners. All these actors are able to capture rent from charcoal production and trade, yet the amount of rent they are able to derive and the mechanisms by which they do so differ greatly. Villagers, for example, control access to forest through customary property rights and are, therefore, able to retain a share of the overall rent. Migrant woodcutters, by contrast, derive rent not through direct control over forest but by seeking employment with charcoal merchants. They gain access to these labour opportunities through specialised technical skills, social ties with the merchants, and their social identity in the caste nature of charcoal production. Merchants, in turn, capture a significant share of the overall rent, due to their control over labour opportunities and marketing. Their control stems from 'social ties with other merchants, distributors, retailers and state agents, and through credit, misinformation, licenses, quotas and circulation permits' (Ribot 1998:328).

The example of the Senegalese charcoal commodity chain illustrates the multiple mechanisms that actors employ to benefit from land and other natural resources. It demonstrates that access control is lucrative because it gives certain actors the ability to mediate the access of others, who must then expend significant resources to gain or maintain access. In other words, access control creates rent for those in control, while achieving and maintaining access requires a transfer of rent by those who lack control.

In the social science literature on postsocialist transformation, examples of rent-seeking by those who control access to rural resources abound. Since the collapse of socialism, some actors focused their efforts to control access by claiming property rights (e.g., Verdery 1996, Burawoy and Verdery 1999, Hann 2003), but others have concentrated on structural and relational access mechanisms as a means to capture rent. I explore four types of structural and relational access mechanisms below.

First, one of the most important structural and relational mechanisms has been control over access to markets (Zbierski-Salameh 1999, Giordano and Kostova 2002, Verdery 2003). For example, in Bulgaria commercial intermediaries, locally known as *akuli* (sharks), were able to extract sizeable rents from smallholder farmers. *Akuli* control access to all major Bulgarian markets. Given smallholders' inadequate storage facilities for perishable crops, they were able to acquire agricultural produce at rock bottom prices and sell it to market vendors for a substantial gain (Giordano and Kostova 2002).

Second, like access to markets, access to social networks and authority are other key mechanisms that provide rent-seeking opportunities in Central and Eastern Europe (Lampland 2002, Verdery 2002, Dorondel 2009). In Hungary, for example, many former socialist farm managers were able to retain control over agricultural land by maintaining collective farms as agricultural

associations under the postsocialist legal environment. In this way, the managers were in a position to extract substantial rent from association members. The mechanisms that helped them maintain control were both long-standing paternalist relations with the cooperative workforce and an extensive and dependable network of regional and countywide contacts with authorities in the agrarian sector (Lampland 2002). Access to social networks and authority were, therefore, the means that farm managers relied on for controlling access to agricultural land.

Third, control over access to capital (either in the form of financial resources, technology, knowledge or information) is another important access mechanism which actors use to capture rent (Zbierski-Salameh 1999, Sampson 2002, Verdery 2003). In Romania, for example, the managers of agricultural associations were able to extract substantial amounts of rent from smallholders who lacked the capital necessary to purchase agricultural machinery. Feeling forced to turn their land over to associations (or, later, to 'supertenants'), smallholders compromised their ownership rights and lost control over production strategies and cash revenue (Verdery 2003).

Finally, the creation and distribution of rent from rural resources is also determined by the conditions of access to labour and labour opportunities. In the transition period, the deteriorating economies of many Central and Eastern European countries were often characterised by a surplus of labour, empowering those who controlled labour opportunities (Smith *et al.* 2008). In many rural areas, however, emigration and a general shift away from agriculture as the main source of people's livelihoods often led to serious labour scarcity. In Romania, for example, as young people showed decreasing interest in agriculture and traditional labour exchange arrangements, thus, no longer functioned, smallholders often faced severe labour shortages. As a result, those who controlled access to labour were able to capture higher shares of rent than they had been able to capture in the past. The rents took the form of both higher wages for day labourers and higher harvest shares for sharecroppers (Verdery 2003).

Taken together, what emerges from a review of access relations in postsocialist Central and Eastern Europe is a sense of both the diversity of obstacles actors face and the variety of mechanisms they employ to capture rent from rural resources. Moreover, the literature on access relations suggests that the mechanisms of access control and access maintenance, and the associated dynamics of rent creation and distribution, profoundly affected land users' decision-making and practices. The insights from the social science literature on postsocialist transformation indicate that the distribution of the power to gain, maintain and control access to rural resources determines the creation and distribution of rent and, thus, actors' incentives for resource use. This hypothesis not only suggests a plausible answer to questions about the drivers of forest degradation in Albania and other Central and Eastern European countries, it also frames the analysis in the remainder of this paper in which I focus on the creation and distribution of rent and their effects on forest use.

ALBANIA'S FORESTS: FROM SOCIALIST SWAY TO POSTSOCIALIST LAISSEZ-FAIRE

During the 1980s, Albania was virtually cut off from the world. As a result of ideological quarrels, Albania's political leadership isolated the country from the Soviet Union and China, formerly its two most important political and economic backers. Virtually bereft of trading partners and without economic assistance, Albania grew into an island of poverty and demoralisation with extreme food shortages, a moribund economy and crumbling infrastructure (Vickers and Pettifer 1997). To keep control over its increasingly dissatisfied population, the political leadership operated a reign of surveillance and state terror, which included the persecution of extended families, arbitrary imprisonment, and the widespread use of forced labour camps. In rural areas, its control over citizens extended into the agricultural collectives and state enterprises, which had been founded in the 1960s and 1970s as a measure to eradicate private ownership and nationalise the means of production.

In forests, as in agriculture, the regime's grip was extremely tight. Forests were nationalised in the 1950s and controlled and managed by the Directorate General of Forests (*Drejtoria e Përgjithëshme e Pyjeve*), a branch of the Ministry of Agriculture. The Directorate's responsibilities included all aspects of forestry: forest administration, conservation and resource extraction. It set the targets for the amount of firewood and timber to be harvested, decided on the utilisation of the harvested wood, and made plans for forest improvement and reforestation (de Waal 2004). It also supervised government-run timber harvesting enterprises, sawmills, and paper and fibreboard factories (Meta 1993). To achieve absolute control over the forest sector, it broke down the customary management practices of kinship groups and replaced them with a centrally controlled management apparatus that was badly out of touch with the needs of local people (Welsh 2001). When the regime finally collapsed in 1991, the breakdown was painful and dramatic. For 45 years, the political elites had milked the population for what surpluses it could produce. Now, with the fall of the Berlin Wall and the brutal end of the Ceaușescu dictatorship in Romania still resonating throughout Eastern Europe, Albanians took to the streets, indiscriminately destroying any kind of physical structure associated with the socialist regime, including the buildings of agricultural cooperatives, schools and most of the rail and rural telephone systems (Vickers and Pettifer 1997). Only six years later, in 1997, people across the country went on the rampage again, ransacking banks, town halls, courthouses, land registries, police stations and even military barracks (de Waal 1998). This time, the enraged population vented their frustration with the collapse of bogus, government-backed investment schemes, which had wiped out 60% of Albania's private savings (Jarvis 2000, Abdul-Hamid 2003). The lawlessness came to a head when military depots were looted and arms stolen, including some 600,000 Kalashnikov AK-47s (Biberaj 1998). For months, armed bands of people

controlled roads, villages and towns, causing nothing less than a temporary phase of anarchy. The crisis ended in the summer of 1997 when the European Union sent an international intervention force to Albania to support new elections (Pettifer and Vickers 2007).

For forests, these events had far-reaching consequences. Illegal logging, rampant throughout the postsocialist period, peaked during times of nationwide anarchy and disorder (UN-ECE 2001, Müller and Monroe 2008). Forests around villages were often clear-cut in the immediate aftermath of the collapse of socialism. The rate of forest cover loss peaked, however, during the state of anarchy in 1997 (Müller and Monroe 2008). That year alone, the Directorate General of Forests and Pastures (the successor institution of the socialist Directorate General of Forests) registered 5,494 fines for illegal logging, amounting to 232 million Lek (about 1.5 million Euro) (UN-ECE 2001). Yet, even in the years after 1997, which were characterised by relative stability, the postsocialist state was still unable to control illegal logging. A permanent discrepancy between the postsocialist forest legislation and actual forest practices continued to encumber the forest sector. The Law 'Concerning Forests and the Forest Service Police,' passed by Parliament in 1992, gave police-like powers to the Directorate General of Forests and Pastures (or 'Forest Service' in the following). It regulated the administration, development and treatment of the forest stock, forest exploitation and protection, and enforcement provisions.⁵

The Law was passed against the objections of external forestry experts, who believed that keeping the forest under state control would lead to large-scale abuse by the Forest Service (de Waal 2004). The Law was also contested by local authorities, who proposed a stronger recognition of customary use rights instead of state ownership.⁶

Considering the importance of forests to rural livelihoods, it is not surprising that the forest legislation was also unpopular with rural people. In 2008, more than a quarter of Albanians still lived below the national poverty line (World Bank 2008). In rural areas, where poverty was especially prevalent, virtually everyone was dependent on firewood as the primary source of energy for cooking and heating. Many rural households generated additional benefits from forest resources through forest grazing and the collection of non-wood forest products such as medicinal plants, spices and pine resin. Finally, commercial woodcutting was often the only opportunity for local employment and one of the main factors reducing poverty and emigration.

The forest legislation also remained contested by rural people because, as some had anticipated, the Forest Service became deeply wrapped up in the business of illegal logging. In exchange for shares of the logging rent, Forest Service officials frequently turned a blind eye to loggers who cut trees without licenses, commercial logging companies who cut in excess of their pre-assigned quotas, or traders who transported wood without required permits. In an article in a large Albanian newspaper, Gjon Marku, one of the Service's most outspoken critics, explains:

A battalion of Forest Service officials with luxury cars, salaries and per diems start their mornings with 'Johnny [Walker]', 'Jack [Daniel's]', or 'Gin' in the most luxurious cafes, and could therefore without fear be called guards of expensive alcohol. [...] In the pine, fir and beech forests of Mirdita, but also in Selita and Lura, hundreds of cubic meters of timber and firewood continue to be cut. It hurts your eyes to see the stumps [and] felled pines, a part of which have only been cut to open the way [for logging trucks]. A heavy traffic of vehicles with different number plates transport logs and lumber from these areas to Tirana, Durrës, Lezha, Shkodra, and recently to Kosovo [...]. The inhabitants of these areas are stunned by the speed at which the forests are disappearing. Dozens of wood-working companies and sawmills operate in these areas without being disturbed by anybody, without any license or documentation. As the inhabitants say, a part of them are the property of the forest guards, or the joint stock of the alcohol guards [...]. When will those pashas be stopped who divide their zones of influence [...] and 'protect' the forests from within cafes? (Marku 2008)

Through a case study of the Qafë Panje and Guri Nikes Forest Sector, I demonstrate that the dynamics Marku so pointedly describes are by no means unique to forests in northern Albania. In the following, I will show how forest authorities in southeastern Albania engage in a struggle with other actors over the rents of illegal firewood extraction and trade.

RENT-SEEKING IN THE QAFË PANJE AND GURI NIKES FOREST SECTOR

The district of Pogradec in southeastern Albania encompasses 24,000 hectares of old-growth forests. The Directorate General of Forests and Pastures has divided this vast area into several administrative units, of which the Qafë Panje and Guri Nikes forest sector is the largest. Named after an important mountain pass and a landmark rock, the forest sector is spread across an extensive mountain range, ranging in elevation from approximately 1,000 to 2,370 meters above sea level. The forest sector is covered mainly with beeches and oaks, interspersed with occasional silver firs (*Abies alba*). Located within its boundaries are numerous small villages, whose residents have historically relied on livestock production, forest-related activities, and mountain agriculture for their livelihood. Although the forests surrounding their villages have long served as a source of construction material and firewood for local residents, their significance as a commercial resource did not fully emerge until the advent of socialism, when the state began exploiting forests in an industrial manner. Under socialism, local residents' forest use practices changed radically. Prior to socialism, the state had been virtually absent from Qafë Panje and Guri Nikes, and extended families claimed customary rights to its forests. By the time the socialist nationalisation of forests was completed in the 1950s, the local residents had lost their customary use rights and depended on

the redistributive mechanisms of the state procurement system for their firewood and timber needs. The socialist Directorate General of Forests took over administration and management from customary users. Through its local branch in Pogradec, it tightly controlled forest exploitation and protection. It also founded a state forest enterprise at the Qafë Panje pass which, as part of the state procurement system, sold timber and firewood to the surrounding villages. The enterprise consisted of a sawmill and timber yards, where many local residents worked as woodcutters, drivers or watchmen.

After the collapse of socialism in 1991, the villages in the Qafë Panje and Guri Nikes forest sector experienced a dramatic population decline. With the fall of the socialist restrictions on movement, many villagers permanently left the material poverty of their mountain homes in search of employment and a better life elsewhere. In some villages, more than 70% of households had left by 2004. Those who remained lived on remittances, seasonal labour migration, state assistance and livestock production. When the state's power eroded in the early 1990s, many reasserted their customary claims to the forest. These claims did not meet much opposition in the initial years, but they also went by unheard by the postsocialist Directorate General of Forests and Pastures, which retained the Qafë Panje and Guri Nikes forest sector under formal state ownership.

During the postsocialist period Qafë Panje and Guri Nikes experienced massive amounts of logging. Beginning with the general anarchy of 1997, an ever-growing number of people from the entire region became involved in large-scale, illegal forest exploitation. Every summer, when the dirt roads dried up, large numbers of unlicensed woodcutters would come to the forest sector to cut firewood and timber. As a result, firewood extraction increased in volume from 15,000 cubic meters in 1990 to 30,000 cubic meters in 2008. At the same time, the extraction of high-value timber decreased from 20,000 cubic meters in 1990 to less than 5,000 cubic meters in 2008.⁷ The two reverse trends can be explained both by the rising demand for firewood in the lowland villages, where households' purchasing power gradually improved, and by the increasing scarcity of timber in the ever more degraded forest (Figure 1). In the following sections, I will describe how different conceptions of property rights shaped the forest use practices of four major user groups, explore the conflicts – and solutions to conflicts – that resulted from forest user practices, and detail how the distribution of rent varied along the firewood commodity chain.

Actors, conceptions and practices in illegal logging

From 1997 onward, the unlicensed firewood extraction in Qafë Panje and Guri Nikes exhibited the characteristics of a gold rush. I was living in one of the villages inside the forest sector for several months in 2004 when the rush was still in full swing. The atmosphere at the time was loaded with conflict as several kinds of actors collided in their quest for forest rents. In this collision of actors, rivalling conceptions



Figure 1

The drastic increase in firewood extraction has led to dramatic forest degradation in the Qafë Panje and Guri Nikes forest sector

of property rights to forest resources came to the fore. These conceptions shaped the forest use practices of four groups of actors: local residents, forest authorities, logging companies and unlicensed woodcutters.

Local residents from the villages inside the forest sector regarded the vast forests around their settlements as their village's common property to which they had rights based on historical use. The villagers watched the deterioration of their forest resources with great concern, finding it increasingly difficult to obtain suitable logs for firewood and construction purposes. Although there were a small number of villagers who participated as woodcutters in the commercial firewood trade, the vast majority of local residents used wood and other forest products for subsistence purposes only. Some villages even made collective efforts to protect the forest from overuse, as for example in Bagëtia, a village close to the Qafë Panje pass, where residents marked their claims to the forest by spraying warnings on trees and rocks, saying 'Property of Bagëtia' (*Prona e Bagëties!*) or 'Don't touch Bagëtia's forest!' (*Mos prek pyllin e Bagëties!*).⁸ In their efforts to uphold their claims and protect forest resources, however, local residents had to proceed cautiously, as they risked conflicts with other, more powerful stakeholders.

Forest authorities, by contrast, perceived the Qafë Panje and Guri Nikes forests as state property. The Directorate General of Forests and Pastures in Tirana issued legal concessions to logging companies to harvest the area. It considered all other ongoing logging activities as illegal. To enforce its claim on Qafë Panje and Guri Nikes, it ordered forest guards from the District Forest Service in Pogradec to patrol the forest sector. Yet, as elsewhere in Albania, the chronically under-financed district officials lacked the capacity to enforce that control. In 2004, for example, only nine forest guards were patrolling the entire area. For a monthly salary of 100 Euro, each of them was supposed to control between 2,500 and 3,000 hectares. Moreover, as long-time residents in the Pogradec area, many forest guards were deeply embedded in local society and thus felt the tug of local loyalties. For example, because the entire District Forest

Service commanded only two off-road cars (of which one was permanently used by the director), the forest guards had to hitch rides with legal, or more likely *illegal*, firewood traders to travel to Qafë Panje or Guri Nikes. Under these conditions, it was not surprising that most forest guards showed considerable leeway in deciding when to enforce or to not enforce forest regulations. The third group of actors, logging companies that had obtained concessions from the Directorate General of Forests and Pastures, based their claims to forest resources on the fact that they had followed the legal stipulations for forest exploitation. These locally-based enterprises, with perhaps a dozen employees each, were granted harvesting rights for 6-month periods because they had placed the highest bid in a tendering process overseen by the Directorate General. In theory, they had to follow strict regulations that stipulated where to cut and how much volume to extract. In practice, however, the regulations were handled very loosely. On paper, for example, the Forest Service had to mark the trees the concessionaires were allowed to cut. In reality, however, the logging companies often took unmarked trees and got away with it by bribing Forest Service officials.

Finally, unlicensed woodcutters and firewood transporters saw the forests of Qafë Panje and Guri Nikes as an open-access resource. They countered the claims of local residents, the Forest Service, and the concessionaires by pointing to their natural right to subsistence. Everyone, they reasoned, should have the right to ensure a secure livelihood. As one elderly man yelled at a forest guard who asked him to stop cutting trees:

Okay, fine me if you want! I have five children who cut trees; fine them too, if you want to! Start the prosecution! We will all go to jail and the state will have to feed us. Do you think we came here for fun? We came here because we have to eat!

For the most part, the woodcutters came from the lowland villages around Pogradec and often stayed up in the forest sector for weeks on end. It is difficult to estimate their number, but in 2004 it may have been as high as 500 individuals. Usually operating on their own account, they cut trees with their chainsaws and then transported the logs with horses or mules to places where the wood was chopped and sold to firewood traders passing by with IFA trucks.⁹ The traders paid the woodcutters on the basis of the volume and quality of the firewood cut, between 5.60 Euro and 10 Euro per cubic meter. Although this was extremely hard and dangerous work, none of the woodcutters wore any kind of protection equipment. Because of the danger and hardship involved in their work, the woodcutters often referred to it as 'blood work' (*puna më gjak*) and to their wages as 'blood money' (*para më gjak*) (Figure 2). Besides the individual woodcutters, a large number of loggers working directly for firewood traders came to Qafë Panje and Guri Nikes on the back of traders' IFA trucks. In terms of the volume of extracted wood, these logging crews did by far the most damage. They usually consisted of four to six young men who were typically unable to find other work in their lowland villages of origin (Figure 3).



Figure 2

Because of the danger and hardship involved in their work, woodcutters refer to it as 'blood work' (puna më gjak)



Figure 3

Unlicensed woodcutters are usually men who are unable to find work in their villages of origin

Like the individual woodcutters and logging crews, the firewood traders were operating illegally. Many of them had worked their way up from being woodcutters themselves, having for years saved up their wages and having borrowed additional money from relatives until they were able to buy their own IFA. They provided their crews with all necessary equipment, decided on the trees to fell and often did the cutting themselves with their own chainsaws. Their crew members split the logs into pieces using axes, sledgehammers and wedges. After transporting the chopped wood to the lowland villages, the traders sold it to individual households. The price they obtained varied depending on the final destination. Villages closer to the forest paid less than those further away. Prices were especially high in villages located along the national road where the risk of detection by the police (*policia rrugore*) increased. In a typical village the trader drove his truck to the village centre, parked, and waited for people to come buy firewood. Usually, this happened quickly. The trader would then deliver the firewood to the buyer's house, charging an average price of 16 Euro per cubic meter for the 12 to 13 cubic meters in his truck (in 2004).

From conflicts among forest users to the consolidation of the logging business

The different claims to the forest, and the practices associated with each claim, led to serious conflicts among forest users. In 2004, one fault line ran between unlicensed woodcutters and the District Forest Service. While the Forest Service usually left independent, small-scale woodcutters alone, traders and logging crews – or 'organised contraband' (in the jargon of the officers) – were its preferred targets. In cooperation with the police, the Service had obtained a list of IFA owners in the district (including their names, residences, and license plate numbers). About 100 individuals, mostly from the lowland villages around Pogradec, were listed. Finding it impossible to prosecute so many 'poachers' at once, the District Forest Service decided on a deterrence strategy. For example, on a

day in August 2004, it initiated a concerted action involving all nine forest guards and the director. They fined unlicensed loggers near the Qafë Panje pass, and confiscated their timber and firewood. According to the Forest Service director, the volume of the confiscated wood on that day was so large that military support was needed to transport it to Pogradec (where it was later sold by the Forest Service).

As this story illustrates, deterring illegal traders and logging crews was not easy for Forest Service officials. Sometimes it was even dangerous. A few months earlier, for example, I was told about a violent scuffle that had ensued when a forest guard attempted to fine an IFA driver. The driver believed the guard wanted to hitch a ride to the lowlands and had opened the door only to see the guard filling out the slip for the fine. The furious driver started yelling profanities, jumped out of the truck, beat the guard, and left him in a ditch next to the road. Violent conflicts like this also occurred between logging crews and local residents. In August 2004, a 20-year-old shepherd from Bagëtia had to be transported to the military hospital in Tirana after being beaten by a truck crew. The conflict ensued because the IFA trespassed on the shepherd's pasture. To protect the pasture and to teach the woodcutters a lesson, the shepherd and his father had placed a camouflaged nail board across the IFA's path and waited in a blind until the truck drove across the board. When the driver and his crew got out of the cabin and saw two flat tires, they started cursing and shouting insults that provoked the shepherd to leave his hiding spot. The heavy argument that followed then turned into violence. Fortunately, violence was not always a consequence of forest conflicts. Often a compromise could be reached between actors by either paying a bribe or involving customary authorities as mediators. Gjergji Hoxha, who had been involved in the illegal logging at Qafë Panje and Guri Nikes for a number of years, provided one account of conflict resolution by bribery.¹⁰ In 2003, he had been making fir stanchions and was caught by a forest guard. The noise of the chainsaw had given him away, and he could neither run nor talk himself out of the trouble. Cautiously, therefore, he offered a bribe. 'Come on,' Gjergji

said to the forest guard, 'let's find a common language!' When the guard initially displayed some reluctance to accept the bribe, he insisted: 'Come on, you are not a Serb, you are an Albanian. It *must* be possible to find a common language!' And, indeed, they found it. Instead of a fine of several hundred Euro, the two settled on a bribe of 8 Euro.¹¹ When Gjergji raised doubts about whether the guard would honour their agreement, the guard reassured him: 'Are we men [of honour], or what are we?' (*Jemi burra o ç'farë jemi?*).

Resolution through mediation was another option for solving forest disputes nonviolently. In April 2004, a conflict between the Forest Service and an IFA owner was peacefully resolved through the mediation of Bashkim Zela, an influential elder from one of the lowland villages near Pogradec. In this case, Bashkim told me, a high-ranking Forest Service officer caught a young firewood trader transporting a truck full of poached wood to the lowlands. The officer chased the truck with his off-road car to the village of Kodra, where the trader stopped the truck and ran off on foot. While fleeing, he passed by Bashkim and a group of elders smoking and having coffee in a bar. Bashkim knew both the forest officer and the trader and offered to mediate. When the officer arrived shortly afterwards with several forest guards in tow whom he had called for support, Bashkim tried to convince him to let the young firewood trader go. The matter was resolved over large quantities of *raki* (locally distilled liquor), and the Forest Service officials gave the offender until midnight to sell the firewood. Otherwise, they threatened that the trader would be fined 4,000 Euro (approximately the value of the truck and its load).

When I revisited the Qafë Panje and Guri Nikes forest sector in 2008, the conflicts between actors in forest exploitation had largely disappeared. The Directorate General of Forest and Pastures had stopped giving out concessions (presumably in an attempt to appear serious about forest protection) and the amount of independent woodcutters had dropped to about 100. Forest exploitation, however, had far from stopped. Instead, illegal logging had become institutionalised in the sense that traders now had tacit agreements with the District Forest Service, which benefited substantially. Each trader with an IFA truck now paid a bribe of 400 to 500 Euro per season to the director of the District Forest Service to make sure that the forest guards turned a blind eye to his practices. The deals were usually brokered by mutual 'friends,' who knew both the IFA owner and the director of the Forest Service. The director then internally redistributed the money within the Service, naturally allocating a higher share to himself and smaller portions to simple forest guards. In addition, traders also paid an occasional tip of 1,000 Lek (8 Euro) to forest guards if they happened to meet one in the forest. This, however, did not happen more than twice or three times a season.

Interestingly, not all traders in Qafë Panje and Guri Nikes had made this deal with the Forest Service. A small group of them from Vreshti, a village in the vicinity of Pogradec, did not have to pay the fee for obtaining protection from the Forest Service. It appeared that they had received a 'free pass' from a Deputy

of Albania's National Parliament. Purportedly, the Deputy extended the protection in return for their support during his election campaign in 2007.

Two developments may have facilitated the shift in forest relations between 2004 and 2008. First, the national elections of 2005 brought about a change of government at the national level, which led to radical changes in the staff of all political institutions, including the Directorate General of Forests and Pastures and the local district forest services. Not only were the directors of these institutions replaced, but their staff were fired 'right down to the cleaning lady' (*deri tek pastruesja*). In the District Forest Service of Pogradec, this changeover seems to have brought in a new administration, which was more determined than its predecessor to win back control over the Qafë Panje and Guri Nikes forest sector.

Simultaneously, the practicalities of firewood extraction had become more difficult for traders and logging crews. In 2004, the areas where logging took place were still relatively easy to access. By 2008, in contrast, the logging frontier had moved into very steep areas, which often lacked any kind of road access. In contrast to 2004, logging crews in 2008 often needed winches to get logs out of the non-accessible parts of the forests. At the same time, traders now had to spend significantly more money on diesel to reach the locations where the crews started logging. As a result of these developments, the number of IFAs active in Qafë Panje and Guri Nikes plummeted from about 100 in 2004 to approximately 35 in 2008. For the Forest Service this meant that it was now easier for it to regain control over the forest sector. For the forest ecosystem it meant that degradation continued, although at a slower pace and in the lesser accessible areas.

The distribution of rent along the firewood commodity chain

Together with the consolidation of the illegal firewood trade in Qafë Panje and Guri Nikes, the distribution of forest rents among different actors also consolidated. Unsurprisingly, the distribution of rents was still highly unequal. For example, in 2008, independent woodcutters earned about 80 Euro per truckload of firewood. Cutting and selling two or three truckloads a month, a woodcutter could earn an income of 1,000 Euro over the season (May to October).¹² A smaller share of the overall forest rent accrued to members of logging crews, who were paid 12 Euro a day by the firewood trader. Crew members went logging every second or third day, generating an income of roughly 700 Euro over the season. The traders, on the other hand, made considerably more. Like their crew members, they worked every second or third day. After paying wages to their crews and about 80 Euro roundtrip for diesel, they were left with an income of about 60 Euro per truckload, amounting to some 3,600 Euro for the season (of which 400 to 500 Euro would be used to bribe the District Forest Service).¹³ Finally, the bribes paid by the truck owners to the District Forest Service amounted to about 16,000 Euro. Therefore, the director of the Forest Service most likely gained the largest individual share of forest rent. His personal gain probably

significantly exceeded the 3,100 Euro made annually by the average firewood trader. After all, the former director of the District Forest Service could afford a villa in one of Pogradec's best neighbourhoods and a black Mercedes, something none of the firewood traders could afford.

Considering that there were about 100 independent woodcutters, 200 members of logging crews, and 35 firewood traders active in Qafë Panje and Guri Nikes in 2008, one can estimate the total amount of rent from the illegal firewood trade in the forest sector at more than 365,000 Euro. Of this amount, 100,000 Euro accrued to woodcutters, 140,000 Euro to logging crews, 110,000 Euro to firewood traders, and 16,000 Euro to the Forest Service officials (Figure 4). Compared to these figures, the benefits realised by the local residents were small. In the village of Bagëtia, for example, only two villagers engaged in the illegal firewood trade. Each of them earned an income of less than 1,000 Euro in a year: not even 0.3% of the overall rent from the firewood trade.

CONCLUSIONS

The case of illegal firewood extraction and trade in the Qafë Panje and Guri Nikes forest sector offers a unique opportunity to understand the concrete mechanisms through which broader political and economic forces drove forest degradation in Albania and other postsocialist countries. The case exposes radical shifts in forest governance, tenure and product markets, which facilitated dramatic changes both in the value of forest resources and in access relations. These changes often coincided with broader political and economic reconfigurations, such as the nationwide anarchy of 1997, when lowland woodcutters first came *en masse* to Qafë Panje and Guri Nikes, or the change of government in 2005, which brought about the replacement of the larger part of the Forest Service staff and an end to legal logging concessions.

Unlike agricultural products, which over the postsocialist years gradually lost significance as a source of value in the villages within Qafë Panje and Guri Nikes (Stahl and Sikor 2009), firewood underwent a dramatic appreciation. As it increased in value, the mechanisms by which actors gained, maintained

and controlled access to forest and other productive resources changed significantly. New actors arrived on the scene and soon managed to capture large shares of the rent from forest resources which had formerly accrued to the socialist state. The new actors were able to capture rent because they controlled access to key productive resources such as labour and technical equipment (woodcutters), employment opportunities and means of transportation (traders), and law enforcement and state authority (officials of the District Forest Service).

Yet, the changes in rent dynamics not only shifted the economic benefits actors were able to derive from forest exploitation, they also directly affected actors' use of forest resources. As large shares of rent suddenly became available for capture, capital and labour were drawn into forestry on a massive scale. Qafë Panje and Guri Nikes experienced an unprecedented rush on forest resources, and annual firewood extraction rates were three times higher than at the end of socialism. Consequently, forest users' practices became highly unsustainable and caused dramatic forest degradation.

The case study suggests that the transformation of rural resource values, the drastic changes in access mechanisms, and the associated shifts in rent creation and distribution since the collapse of socialism have changed forest users' incentives and decision-making and ultimately affected their extractive practices. These dynamics are present in Albania and other Central and Eastern European countries (Nijnik and van Kooten 2000, Staddon 2001, Eikeland and Riabova 2002, Bouriaud and Niskanen 2003, Veselić 2004, Gulca 2006, Dorondel 2009). As a result, postsocialist forests embody the legacy of changing resource values, access mechanisms, and rent dynamics in the form of visible patterns of forest degradation.

The dramatic changes in forest use in Central and Eastern Europe, thus, demonstrate the power of rent as an aggregate force shaping society and environment. Using rent as an analytical lens to examine social and environmental change can therefore provide valuable insights for understanding human-nature interaction in forests and other resource fields in and beyond postsocialist countries.

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Notes

1. I use the term 'forest degradation' to refer to the permanent reduction in quality and quantity of forest growth. I treat forest degradation as distinct from 'deforestation,' which usually refers to the permanent *removal* of forest cover. Modest deforestation rates often hide the degeneration of forests in cases where selective logging, rather than clear-cutting, is

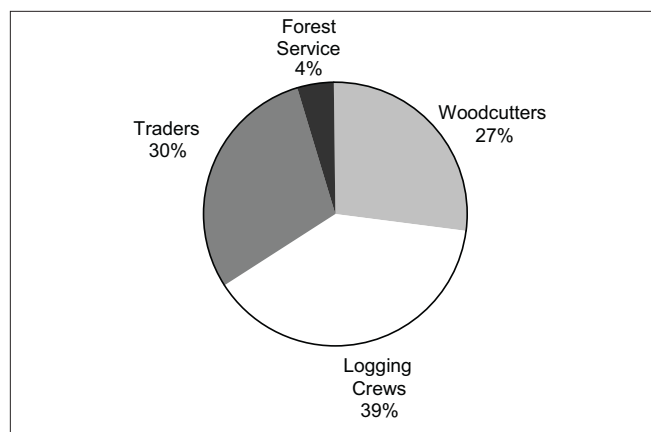


Figure 4

The distribution of rent along the firewood commodity chain in 2008

prevalent.

2. I am aware that the notion of 'illegality' is problematic. It relates to contested notions of legitimacy and criminality, which are always matters of perspective that depend on an actor's relationship to the law and other socially sanctioned rules and practices (cf. Ribot and Peluso 2003). For insightful examples of the social construction of illegality in 'poaching' or 'illegal logging,' see Thompson (1975) and Linebaugh (1976). In this paper, I speak of illegal practices when I refer to operations deemed illegal by statutory legislation.
3. Scholars in the Ricardian and Marxian tradition agree on this point, but see Tribe (1977), Fine (1979:264) and Harvey (1982:353ff) for Marx's modifications of the Ricardian rent concept.
4. The distinction between rights-based and structural and relational access mechanisms is a reaction to the privileged analytic center that legalistic notions of property rights have gained in many environmental studies (e. g., Hardin 1968, Ostrom 1990, Bromley 1991). In contrast to the latter, Ribot and Peluso make the case that property rights may not be sufficient to guarantee that rights holders will benefit from the resources to which they are legally entitled. From their point of view, property rights are just one among many mechanisms by which actors gain control over resources. Rather than being solely about 'rights' to resources, access is about actors' 'ability' to derive benefits from them.
5. I am referring to Law No. 7623 (dated 13.10.1992) 'Concerning Forests and the Forest Service Police.' Stipulations regarding infringement of its provisions are updated in Law No. 7838 (dated 30.6.1994).
6. After the collapse of socialism, the first democratic government legislated the restitution of forests to historical owners. In practice, however, this meant that the state retained ownership of 92% of the country's forests, the per cent under state ownership at the time of collectivisation (de Waal 2004).
7. These figures are based on an interview with a former director of the District Forest Service in Pogradec in 2004 and my own calculations for 2008.
8. Bagëtia is a pseudonym, as are the other village names used in this paper.
9. IFA-trucks are four-wheel drive vehicles which were produced by a conglomerate of companies (*Industrieverband Fahrzeugbau*) in East Germany until the early 1990s. Because they are cheap, lightweight and agile, they are the most popular truck used in Albanian forests.
10. To protect identities, all personal names used in this paper are pseudonyms.
11. According to Law No. 7838 (dated 30 June 1994), infringements of the legal stipulations of Law No. 7623, which are not criminal offences and which have caused a damage of less than 400 Euro, are punished as administrative infringements with an indemnification of the damage and a fine ranging from 40 to 400 Euro. The tools used to carry out the damage and the extracted forest products are to be confiscated and pass into government ownership. If the damage of the infringement is more than 400 Euro the perpetrator will be charged according to the provisions of the Criminal Code of Albania.
12. Although I use the term 'income', I actually refer to gross margins. Gross margins are the difference between sales and purchased inputs. For a complete calculation of income, one would need to calculate the opportunity costs of labor and capital depreciation. In 2008, one Euro was equivalent to roughly 123 Albanian Lek.
13. This calculation does not consider the initial costs of buying a used IFA truck, which was between 4,000 and 6,000 Euro.

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