The national parks in the Carpathian Mountains along the Polish and Slovak border represent encompassing policy agendas that strive to balance biodiversity conservation and social welfare tasks. These countries have, during the last 25 years, undergone rapid transformation from socialist regimes to liberal democracies, and this transformation has affected the political, social and economic spheres. The accession to the European Union (EU) introduced demands for further changes, such as closer integration of conservation and socioeconomic development and inclusive, transparent and accountable decision-making that are based on participatory mechanisms.

This thesis explores key challenges and opportunities for nature conservation policy and practice at the local level in a context of post-socialist legacies and Europeanization. Multi-level governance, Europeanization, and post-socialist studies are used as theoretical vehicles for the analysis of four transboundary national parks: Pieninsky national parks (NP) in both Poland and Slovakia and Bieszczady NP [Poland] and Poloniny NP [Slovakia].

The results of this study show that the early designation of the studied parks as protected areas prevented their exploitation and enabled preservation of important landscapes, which currently are highly valued at the
European level. These nature conservation regimes have created tangible restrictions on the possible economic uses of these areas. However, rural development alternatives depend on a broader set of local, national and global factors such as the structure of the local economy and employment, the prioritization of nature conservation in national policies, investors' interest, and increasing urbanization. Europeanization provided opportunities for local actors to benefit from additional funding made available for nature conservation and rural development. At the same time, demands for participatory decision-making posed significant procedural and conceptual challenges to achieving transparent, inclusive and accountable governance. The prevalence of informal practices in local policy-making and the lack of trust in state authorities pose further challenges to formal participatory processes. The opportunities of local actors to reach out across levels to express their interests remain scarce and are not institutionalized, whereas the multi-level characteristics of modern governance indirectly shape local processes by defining common legal and policy frameworks.


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