

Nature Conservation in the Belarusian Marshland: The Pripiat National Park as Timber Source and Hunting Paradise

Thomas M. Bohn and Aliaksandr Dalhouski

SUMMARY

Between the western tripoint where Poland, Belarus and Ukraine meet and the eastern tripoint of Belarus, Russia and Ukraine, are the forests and swamps of Polesia that extend along the lowlands of the Pripiat River. Since the tsarist era, experts have referred to this landscape as the “Herodotus Sea” (*more Gerodota*). Indeed, despite the deforestation carried out during the Breshnev-era, the area is still today flooded by meltwater every spring, creating an unparalleled spectacle of nature. Recently, the Belarusian media, disregarding the radioactive contamination caused by Chernobyl, has begun marketing this landscape in brochures and magazines as a “Belarusian Amazon” and the “green lung of Europe.” Although the river flows in an east-west direction near to the Ukrainian border, has its source in the northwestern tip of Ukraine and flows into the Dnieper River south of the Ukrainian town of Chernobyl, around three quarters of the 725 kilometers course of the Pripiat is in Belarus.

KEYWORDS: national Park, ecological research, European bison, regional development, timber industry, tourism, hunting, ecological movement, Pripiat river



Fig. 1: The Pripjat in flood, June 2013. Photo: Sergei Plytkевич

The “Pripjatskii” National Park, which today encompasses 88,000 hectares, is located in the middle of Belarusian Polesia between the historic towns of Turau and Petrikau. On its website, the national park is described as a “multi-functional institution offering a wide range of activities” from timber processing to tourism. Since the administrative center was relocated from the small town of Turau to the village of Liaskavychi in 2006, the target audience of its marketing campaigns are people “who cannot imagine life without hunting and fishing.” They are offered a “real jungle,” which, according to Western agencies, is comparable to the USA’s Everglades National Park.¹

The Belarusian national park, which has existed on the Pripjat since 1996, was founded in 1969 as a Soviet “nature reserve” (*zapovednik*) and has since formed an equivalent to the vast forests of the *Belovezhskaia pushcha* on the border to Poland.² In contrast to the American model of the national park, which focuses on the compatibility of wilderness and tourism, the Soviet concept orientated itself according to an ideal of a natural environment untouched by humans but accessible for scientific research. The Soviet “nature reserve”

¹ O natsional’nom parke [About the National Park], in: Natsional’nyi Park Pripjatskii, URL: http://www.npp.by/about_national_park/ (2017-12-08). Cf. also DAR’IA LEPESHKO: Poleskoe more Gerodota [The Polesian Herodotus Sea], in: *Lesnoe i okhotnich’e khoziaistvo* (2013), 11, pp. 35-37.

² Cf. THOMAS M. BOHN, ALIAKSANDR DALHOUSKI, MARKUS KRZOSKA: *Wisent-Wildnis und Welterbe: Geschichte des polnisch-weißrussischen Nationalparks von Białowieża*, Köln et al. 2017.

was thus considered as an open-air laboratory, an idea that has also been tested in the Swiss National Park. While, during the Stalin-era, the forests were still considered to be hydrological buffer-zones, in justification of the plan to transform the natural environment (namely, the redirection of Siberian rivers), during the Khrushchev-era the extensive network of reserves was kept to a minimum for economic reasons. Given the necessity of improving the general standard of living across the country, all superfluous costs were to be avoided. Finding a solution to the housing question took precedence over scientific research. From the end of the 1950s on, the remaining nature reserves faced the problem of having to partly carry the cost of their own upkeep.³

From a historical point of view, under these conditions, questions arise about the conceptional contradictions inherent in the development of the Belarusian nature conservation area on the Pripiat River, which was originally intended as a compensation for Brezhnev's nationwide campaign to drain the swamplands.⁴ The relationship between environmental policy and regional development is hereby problematized. Why was the forest chosen as the location of the reserve rather than the marshland? What did the relationship between forestry and the outdoor research laboratory look like? What were the consequences of transforming a Soviet nature reserve into a Belarusian national park? Which aims were represented by the various interest groups—the municipalities of Turau and Liaskavichy, the management as employer and the local population as employees, the state president and the scientists? Does this human intervention correlate to the noble concern of preserving untouched nature or is this the playground of an authoritarian regime from which, due to the lack of financial power of local tourists, only foreign hunters stand to benefit?

This article aims to clarify how nature conservation and modernization interacted and interact at the periphery and also seeks to lay bare which strategies the actors have implemented, both in the past and present, in the context of a paternalistic system. The thesis is that, though the indigenous population was indifferent towards nature conservation, certain civil society initiatives nevertheless grew from the circle of experts.

Environmental historiography has not yet been able to establish itself in the Republic of Belarus. Since Soviet times, scientific history on the Pripiat has merely taken the form of an accountability report put out by the administration's research department. Nature conservation has only received mention in one chapter of a volume on the regional history of the "Prypiatskae Palesse,"

³ Cf. DOUGLAS R. WEINER: *A Little Corner of Freedom: Russian Nature Protection from Stalin to Gorbachev*, Berkeley 1999; FELIKS SHTILMARK: *The History of the Russian Zapovedniks, 1895-1995*, Edinburgh 2003; BERNHARD GISSIBL, SABINE HÖHLER et al. (eds.): *Civilizing Nature: National Parks in Global Historical Perspective*, New York—Oxford 2012.

⁴ Cf. ARTEM KOUIDA: *Land Melioration in Belarusian Polesia as a Modernization Factor in the Soviet Periphery*, in this issue.

which is overseen by the Academy of Sciences. It describes the various successes of a state institution. Is this because President Aliaksandr Lukashenka has a residence in this idyllic place?

In this regard, the following stages can be distinguished: (1) a nature reserve of Soviet character 1969-1996, (2) the Belarusian national park under the banner of the system transformation 1996-2006 and (3) the Belarusian national park in the age of globalization and socio-economic progress in the new administrative center of Liaskavichy since 2006.

1 A Nature Reserve of Soviet Character

The idea of establishing a nature conservation area was originally sparked by studies of Polesian marshlands that were conducted by Polish botanists Władysław Szafer and Stanisław Kulczyński during the interwar period. In their view, the marshlands of Ol'many along the southern stretches of the Pripiat River—at that time on border with the Soviet Union and a short distance from where the national park is located today—was an obvious choice for a reserve.⁵ After the annexation of the “eastern borderlands” (*kresy wschodnie*) of the Second Polish Republic, which were subsequently declared to be “Western Belarus” (*Zapadnaia Belorussia*), the party and state leaders of the Belarusian Soviet Socialist Republic (BSSR) expressed willingness to follow this initiative immediately after the Second World War. However, representatives of the forestry and fishing industry, together with local authorities, successfully blocked the designation of new nature reserves in 1946 on the grounds that the regulation of state investment, as laid down by Stalin, would have to be compensated by more intensive use of the country's resources. By the time the project made it to the agenda a second time, a turnaround had already taken place in Soviet environmental policy. In 1951, the decision was made for a general reduction of nature reserves set up as research “laboratories” in the Soviet Union. Consequently, a decision by the council of ministers of the BSSR in favor of the Ol'many marshlands project was annulled.⁶ In any case, right from the outset, the uniqueness of the Belarusian marshlands was at least nominally on the BSSR's environmental policy agenda.

⁵ Cf. SŁAWOMIR ŻUREK: Geneza jezior i torfowisk dorzecza Prypeci w świetle polskich badań okresu międzywojennego [The Development of Lakes and Peat Bogs in the Pripiat Lowlands in the Light of Polish Research of the Interwar Period], in: *Acta Geographica Lodziensia* 105 (2016), pp. 153-171.

⁶ S. A. TRATSTSIAK: Krai zapavedny [The Nature Conservation Region], in: A. A. KAVALENIA (ed.): *Belarus' praz pryzmu rehiional'nai historyi Prypiatskaha Palessia: Ad starazhitnasti da suchasnasti. Historiia rehiena Nacyianal'naha parka “Prypiatski”* Minsk 2016, pp. 325-379, here pp. 327-329. Cf. also: *Prypiatskae Palesse: Ad starazhytnasti da suchasnaha parka “Prypiatski”* [Prypiat Polesia: From Ancient Times to the Present-day Prypiat Park], Brėst 2013, pp. 182-216.

According to the official version of events, the director of the Central Botanic Garden of the Academy of Sciences, Nikolai Smol'skii, once again took up the Polish idea of a nature reserve on the Pripiat when he met Szafer and Kulczyński during a trip to Warsaw in 1957/58. Around the same time, Khrushchev had the only remaining Belarusian nature reserve, the *Belovezhskaia pushcha*, converted into a “hunting and game reserve” (*zapovedno-okhotnich'e khoziaistvo*).⁷ Nevertheless, Smol'skij commissioned marshland expert Leonid Petrovich Smoliak with a corresponding project, which was submitted in 1961, but ended up being put on the backburner because of resistance in the forestry industry.⁸

A change of course did not occur until Leonid Brezhnev announced a comprehensive agricultural program in 1965—one year after Krushchev was deposed—which included a vision for drastic changes in the landscapes of Belarusian Polesia. On 27 July 1966, the Commission for Nature Conservation of the BSSR Academy of Sciences, under the chairmanship of Smol'skij, took this opportunity to write a memorandum on the issue of establishing a Polish nature reserve. In terms of its argument, this report was very much based on Soviet party jargon. Thus, it proposed that a nature conservation area would stand as an “indication of the high culture of the current generation of Soviet people” and would therefore contribute to the “history of how socialism and communism were established and built.” It would not only benefit science in general, but also, in particular, the region's economy. In line with other projects, the Ol'many marshlands and the area south of the Pripiat between the Goryn and Stviga Rivers were once again brought into play. The entire area covered some 70,000 hectares and was described as “the only corner of Polesia where the natural environment has remained relatively undisturbed by human activity.” As a nature reserve, it would have importance, not just for the entire Soviet Union, but for also in an international context. It was explicitly stated that the selected territory was the “very best” and that an alternative would be “difficult” to find.⁹ As a result, a proposal made by the Academy of Sciences on 8 August 1966 for the establishment of a “Polesian state hydrological nature reserve” (*Poleskii gosudarstvennyi landshaftno-gidrologicheskii zapovednik*) between the L'va River (a few kilometers east of the Goryn) and the Stviga River on 10 October 1966 was approved by the chairman of the State Committee for Nature Conservation.¹⁰

⁷ Vgl. BOHN/DALHOUSKI/KRZOSKA (as in footnote 2), pp. 271-299.

⁸ TRATSTSIK (as in footnote 6), p. 329.

⁹ Memorandum of the Academy of Sciences on the question of the establishment of a Polesian nature reserve, 1966-07-27, in: Natsional'nyi arkhiv Respubliki Belarus' (NARB) [The National Archive of the Republic of Belarus], Minsk, f[ond] 83: Gosudarstvennyi komitet Soveta Ministrov BSSR po okhrane prirody [State Committee for Nature Conservation of the Council of Ministers], op[is] 1, d[elo] 121, l[ist] 56-61.

¹⁰ Statement issued by the Chairman of the State Committee for Nature Conservation, I. Timchuk, 1966-10-10, in: NARB, f. 83, op. 1, d. 121, l. 46.

But there was a catch. The Ministry of Defence had namely also laid claim to the territory in question. Because of this, the State Committee once again submitted the idealistic proposal that there be common use of the land, i.e. that it serve the dual purpose of nature reserve and, when needed, an airforce training ground. In addition to the “preservation of the unique landscapes of Belarusian Polesia,” the purpose was also achieving scientific forecasts for the “appropriation of the Polesian lowlands.” Due to the imminent land melioration works, it was seen as necessary “for the Republic to have a nature reserve within the Polesian landscape that is untouched by the economic activities of man” and that would be of advantage for “studying changes in connection with the fundamental transformation of Polesia’s natural environment” in order “to avert possible mistakes and their unwanted consequences, such as occur in all great enterprises, to foresee adverse phenomena that all too often prove irreversible, and to devise measures for their liquidation before it is too late.” The area for the reserve was chosen based on the fact that there were “no other expanses of land like it,” either on the Belarusian or on the Ukrainian side, that had “not been affected by human activity, or had only been minimally affected, and where the pristine nature of Polesia was adequately preserved ...”¹¹ Although a commission to the vice chairman of the Council of Ministers of the BSSR approved a renewed application from the Academy of Sciences on 23 May 1968¹², the case was vetoed by the responsible military district and thus failed.

The Council of Ministers of the BSSR therefore had to come up with an alternative solution. They made the pragmatic decision to shift the territory of the reserve from the western bank of the Stsviha river—a tributary of the Pripiat—where it had originally been planned to the eastern bank and chose the Ubort, another of the Pripiat’s tributaries, as the outer boundary. Thus, the reserve came to occupy an area where the districts of Zhitkavichy, Petrikau and Lel’chytsy met. Located immediately to the west is the rather inconspicuous small town of Turau, a princely residence of the Kievan Rus’, and further to the east lies the medium-sized city of Mazyr’, which became a center for petroleum processing and the chemical industry during the Soviet era.

Due to the delay in the decision-making process, the original name “Polesian Nature Reserve” (*Polesskii zapovednik*) had to be dropped because it had already been used in 1968 for a conservation area in Ukraine, which was similar but smaller by one third. In the end, a regulation issued by the Council of Ministers of the BSSR on 3 June 1969 for the establishment of a landscape and hydrology reserve referred only to an area of 61,500 hectares on the right bank of the Pripiat that came under the administration of the Ministry of For-

¹¹ Message sent from the Chairman of the State Committee for Nature Conservation, I. Timchuk, to the Council of Ministers of the BSSR, 1966-10-14, *ibidem*, II. 43-45.

¹² Minutes of a meeting with the Vice-Chairman of the Council of Ministers of the BSSR, 1968-05-23, in: NARB, f. 7: Council of Ministers of the BSSR, op. 5, d. 2330, II. 27-28.

estry and was, at the same time, left under the supervision of the Academy of Sciences. However, the regulation neither specifies a research mission nor is there even mention of an ecological objective. On the contrary, within the context of an exemption clause, it stipulated that, in the interests of existing forestry operations and their local staff, logging be permitted until 1975.¹³ The protected area was officially established on 1 July 1969 and it was not long before the simpler version of its name, “Pripiat Nature Reserve” (*Zapovednik Pripiat'ski*), became widely accepted¹⁴. Because of the town’s favorable transport links, the administrative headquarters were shifted to Turau, where a forestry and timber processing operation had also been running since the Second World War.



Fig. 2: *Glavnoe upravlenie geodezii i kartografii pri Sovete Ministrov SSSR (ed.): Okhraniyaemye ob"ekty prirody Belorusskoi SSR: Turistskaja skhema* [Protected Nature Reserves in the Belarusian SSR: Tourist Map], Moskva 1973

The territory later to be occupied by the nature reserve had been opened up and developed in the last third of the nineteenth century through the so-called “Western Expedition,” during which efforts were made to drain the swamp-land through the building of canals and other such works. Over the course of land melioration measures, which led to the construction of around 300 kilometers of drainage canals and culverts throughout this area, the conditions

¹³ TRATSTSIK (as in footnote 6), pp. 366-367.

¹⁴ Instruction issued by the Ministry of Forestry, 1969-07-18, *ibidem*, pp. 367-368.

were laid for forestation and the creation of pastureland. The liberation of the estate farmers from serfdom and the agrarian reforms carried out under Petr Stolypin from 1906 to 1911 ensured the dissolution of village communes (*obshchina*) and the proliferation of individual farmsteads (*khutor*). At the beginning of the twentieth century, there were nine villages in the area of the future nature reserve. Their names—Mlynok (mill), Buda (smelter) and Rudnia (charcoal works)—tell of the region's bustling economic activity. From 1963 to 1969, Turau's forestry operation milled 821,500 cubic meters of timber. So, despite the fact that, over time, the 220-hectare grid that was drained at the end of the nineteenth century had once again turned into marshland and only 49 kilometers of the original canal network had been preserved, to speak of "untouched nature" in 1969 would have been rather far from the truth. Although up to 70 percent of the land may be under water during spring floods, according to data from 1972, almost 80 percent of the entire area was forested while marshland only accounted for 15 percent. The extinction of wildlife also testifies to the negative impact of human intervention in the region. In the seventeenth century, the aurochs was wiped out, followed, in the eighteenth century, by the bison. In the early nineteenth century, red deer and wild cats disappeared and, by the end of the 1920s, elks, beavers and bears were also gone.¹⁵

The various administrative allocations reflect the tasks and priorities of the nature reserve. Initially, from 1969 until 1981, the Forestry Department was responsible for the Executive Committee of the Homel' region and, from 1982 until 1988 it was followed by the BSSR Ministry of Forestry. Conflicts between nature conservationists and the timber industry were thus unavoidable. While the forestry companies expressed interest in timber in easily accessible areas, the nature conservation administration preferred to allocate less valuable woodlands for deforestation. In the fall of 1971, the Academy of Sciences and the University of Gomel turned to the Council of Ministers of

¹⁵ S. D. DANIL'CHUK, A. S. PALAMARCHUK: Pripiatskii landshaftno-gidrologicheskii zapovednik BSSR [The Pripiat Landscape and Hydrology Reserve], in: Pripiatskii zapovednik: Issledovaniya, Minsk 1976, pp. 3-7; A. V. UGLIANETS: Kratkii istoricheskii ocherk po territorii natsional'nogo parka "Pripiatskii" [Short Historical Overview of the Territory of the Pripiat National Park], in: Biologicheskoe raznoobrazie Natsional'nogo parka "Pripiatskii" i drugich osobo okhraniaemykh prirodnykh territorii. Sbornik nauchnykh trudov, posvjashchennyi 30-letii Pripiatskogo gosudarstvennogo landshaftno-gidrologicheskogo zapovednika (1969-1999)—Natsional'nogo parka "Pripiatskii" (1996-1999), Turou—Mozyr' 1999, pp. 10-27; IDEM: Natsional'nyi park "Pripiatskii": Prirodnye osobennosti territorii, osnovnye vechi istorii, sochranenie i ispol'zovanie prirodnykh resursov [The Pripiat National Park: Natural Features of the Landscape, Key Historical Data, Protection and Use of the Natural Resources], in: Prirodnye resursy Natsional'nogo parka "Pripiatskii" i drugich osobo okhraniaemykh prirodnykh territorii Belarusi: Izuchenie, sochranenie, ustoichivoe ispol'zovanie, Minsk 2009, pp. 12-28; IDEM: Istoriia narodonaseleniia i prirodopol'zovaniia v raione raspolozheniia natsional'nogo parka "Pripiatskii" [History of Settlement and the Use of Natural Resources in the Area Occupied by the Pripiat National Park], *ibidem*, pp. 29-41.

the BSSR to point out that the oak groves (*dubrava*) typical for the region were being endangered due to continued logging.¹⁶ This issue also spurred the Ministry of Forestry to send two letters to the Council of Ministers on 17 November 1971. In the first letter it was pointed out that Turau's wood-processing plant supported three housing estates with 1,220 workers and had built 240 kilometers of railway. For this reason, the letter went on to advise, it should be remembered that putting an end to logging operations in the reserve would lead to mass layoffs without providing re-employment for people in the area.¹⁷ A second letter recommended, in consideration of the current economic plans, that logging operations, which planned to extract 60,000 cubic meters of timber until 1975, be terminated after 1973 (and that the timber industry be instructed to seek alternative supply sources after 1972).¹⁸ However, a solution concerning this matter was blocked at the local level. Therefore, on 10 January 1972, the State Committee for Nature Conservation called once again on the Council of Ministers for the immediate cessation of logging on the grounds that the Turau plant in any case only received a quarter of its timber needs from the nature reserve.¹⁹ In the end, due to the delay of the final decision between 1971 and 1975, the 247,000 cubic meters of timber were nevertheless felled within the territory of the nature reserve, as had been planned in the founding act.²⁰

Apart from this, chemical companies, agricultural collective farms (*kolkhozes*) and private individuals repeatedly expressed interest in exploiting the resources of the forest, both at the margins and in the core areas, be it the removal of peat or tar and pitch production, the extraction of honey, birch sap and medicinal herbs, the gathering of mushrooms and berries or the use of pasture and haymaking, as well as poaching and fishing. Interestingly, the grievances of environmentally conscious journalists and local patriots with regard to the minimal leeway they'd been given in the socialist public sphere—which was otherwise dominated by political censorship—was well debated in the press without causing major repercussions.²¹

¹⁶ Undated copy of a letter sent by the Academy of Sciences in Minsk and the University of Gomel to the first Vice-Chairman of the Council of Ministers of the BSSR, V. E. Lobanov, in: NARB, f. 7, op. 5, d. 3761, ll. 15-17.

¹⁷ Letter from the Deputy Minister of Forestry of the BSSR, A. Mackevich, to the representative of the Chairman of the Council of Ministers of the BSSR, L. I. Chitrun, 1971-11-17, *ibidem*, ll. 38-39.

¹⁸ Letter from the Minister of the Forestry of the BSSR, S. Moiseenko, to the representative of the Chairman of the Council of Ministers of the BSSR, L. I. Chitrun, 1971-11-17, *ibidem*, ll. 20-21.

¹⁹ Letter from the Chairman of the State Committee for Nature Conservation, A. I. Vorontsov, to the Council of Ministers, 1972-10-01, *ibidem*, ll. 35-36.

²⁰ UGLIANETS, Natsional'nyi park "Pripiatskii" (as in footnote 15), p. 18.

²¹ Statement of the Vice-Chairman of the State Committee for Nature Conservation from July 1974, in: NARB, f. 83, op. 1, d. 442, ll. 119-121. Cf. also the memoirs of the journalist ANATOLII KOZLOVICH: Na moei ladoni liniia reki: Povest'-Esse [The Course of

Against the background of resource usage in the forest, the fulfillment of research tasks, which was the real function of a Soviet nature reserve, only gradually gained momentum. The science department was already established in 1970, but due to a lack of offices it did not start work until 1971. Its six scientific staff and five laboratory assistants²² published a first anthology in 1976.²³

Across all departments of the nature reserve, a total of around 180 people were employed during the 1980s.²⁴ Despite this, until the beginning of Mikhail Gorbachev's Perestroika, research was primarily carried out by the Academy of Sciences' Institute of Experimental Botany and Central Botanic Garden, and by the University of Gomel. This work mainly centered around the inventarization of flora and fauna and study of the hydrological system. According to Anatolii Vladimirovich Uglianets, Deputy Director for Research from 1987 to 2014, the financial bottlenecks brought about by Perestroika and the predicament of Chernobyl, which became an increasingly central issue for science from this time on and only had a limited effect on the nature reserve (as it lay outside the immediate danger zone), meant that reserve's scientific department now had to draw on its own resources to continue operating.²⁵

During the period of systemic transformation, the research work took on a new character. The reason for this was that the nature reserve was administratively separated from the Ministry of Forestry on 1 January 1989 and, until 19 November 1991, initially came under the authority of the State Committee of the BSSR's Council of Ministers for Nature Conservation. After state independence had been achieved, responsibility for the reserve was taken over by the administration of the Council of Ministers of the Republic of Belarus from 20 November 1991 until 3 August 1994. Biologist Inessa Zenina (néé Bolotina) worked in the reserve from 1991 until 2002 and was dismissed on the grounds of her critical stance towards the way it was being run. One year after leaving, she wrote an article for the Russian magazine *Zapovestnik* (Nature Conservation Herald) expressing her nostalgic conviction that the Perestroika, with its vision for a "Soviet ecological revolution," brought about

the River on the Palm of My Hand: A Story and an Essay], Minsk 1987. Cf. also UGLIANETS, Natsional'nyi park "Pripiatskii" (as in footnote 15), p. 19.

²² Report of the Pripiat Nature Reserve from 1971, in: Zonal'nyi Gosudarstvennyi arkhiv goroda Mozyr (ZGAM) [State Zone Archive of the City of Mozyr], f. 379: Pripiatskii zapovednik, op. 1, d. 41, ll. 33-34. Every year until 2012, there were three to eight researchers and up to seven laboratory assistants in service. Cf. A. V. UGLIANETS: Nauchnaia deiatel'nost' v Natsional'nom parke "Pripiatskii" (40 let nauchnomu otdelu Natsional'nogo parka „Pripiatskii“) [The Research Work in the Pripiat National Park (40 Years Science Department in the Pripiat National Park)], in: Osobo okhraniaemye prirodnye territorii Belarusi: Issledovaniia. Sbornik nauchnykh statei 7 (2012), pp. 5-38.

²³ Cf. Pripiatskii zapovednik (as in footnote 15).

²⁴ Pripiatskae Palesse (as in footnote 6), p. 191.

²⁵ UGLIANETS, Nauchnaia deiatel'nost' (as in footnote 22), pp. 22-23.

the happiest era for the Pripiat Nature Reserve. According to her account, a timber processing plant was shut down, the protection zone expanded, and the scientific work intensified. In addition, out of the funds the World Bank had allocated for the *Belovezhskaia pushcha* National Park between 1992 and 1995, a portion of the money went to the Pripiat reserve and was used, not only to stabilize the scientists' salaries, but also to improve the research infrastructure, thus stimulating ongoing work.²⁶

Beyond its actual purpose of preserving the natural landscape of the Pripiat lowlands, the nature reserve extended its conservationist function by reintroducing bison to the area. After eight bison were initially transferred from the *Belovezhskaia pushcha* in 1987, a further two were brought in 1992. For the Pripiat Nature reserve, this was a moment of renaturation, which has recently been termed “re-wilding”²⁷ in scientific slang and, in the (post-)Soviet area, has simply been called “reintroduction” (*reintroduktsiia*) or the more imaginative “reacclimatization” (*reakklimatizatsiia*). After the animals had been let out of their enclosure in the forest of Ozerany on the right bank of the Pripiat River, they stayed for a while in the catchment area of their usual feeding station. Gradually, however, they took over a raised area of land 8.5 kilometers long and 1.5 kilometers wide, 90 percent of which is forested, and which resembles an island in the wetlands. Early on, there was still euphoric talk of a “Pripiat population” of bison, reflecting the hope that they would spread out through Polesia. After rather mild breeding successes and reintroduction of other herds in fenced areas on the northern banks of the Pripiat in the 2000s, the free-roaming bison were given the more appropriate name “Ozerany population” according to their habitat. Numbers in this group increased during the 1990s from 14 to 30.²⁸

2 The Belarusian National Park under the Banner of the System Transformation

Following the dissolution of the Soviet Union, the Pripiat Nature Reserve in the Republic of Belarus was reclassified as a “national park” (*Natsional'nyi park "Pripiatskii"*) on 2 October 1996 in accordance with international conventions. Following the American example, this promised not only the protection of the wilderness, but also the development of tourism, which was to

²⁶ INESSA ZENINA: Grimasy zapovednosti sovremennoi Belarusi [The Grimaces of the Nature Reserve in Modern Belarus], in: *Zapovednik* (2003), 1 (82), URL: <http://bp21.org.by/ru/art/a0301.html> (2017-12-08).

²⁷ Cf. HENRIQUE M. PEREIRA, LAETITIA M. NAVARRO (eds.): *Rewilding European Landscapes*, Heidelberg et al. 2015; JAMIE LORIMER: *Wildlife in the Anthropocene: Conservation after Nature*, Minneapolis—London 2015. Cf. *Rewilding Europe*, URL: <https://rewildingeurope.com/> (2017-12-08).

²⁸ Cf. A. V. UGLIANETS: *Reintrodukciia zubra v Pripiatskom Poles'e: Monografija* [The Reintroduction of the Bison in Pripiat Polesia: Monograph], Minsk 2012.

benefit from a first natural history museum in 1998. The crux of this was that, with the transfer of the park to residential administration on 4 August 1994, economic interests also became relevant, which found expression in the incorporation of *kolkhozes* and the establishment of experimental forestry and hunting operations. In 2003, biologist Inessa Bolotina (who had returned to her maiden name by then) retrospectively reported that, with the attainment of state independence, economic activity in the Pripjat National Park began to intensify. The shooting of game in the name of managing animal populations (referred to in German as “Hege mit der Büchse”) served as a pretext for the establishment of hunting tourism. The idea here was to attract foreigners who would bring foreign currency into the country. Bizarrely, the term “ecotourism” emerged from this as a magic word evoking a kind of utopian future. In connection with this, the renewed exploitation of timber as a raw material was based, according to Bolotina, on a generous interpretation of the concept of the “sanitation harvest” (understood in the post-Soviet era as an equivalent for sustainability). She also reported that, in the context of cost-benefit analysis, even market-oriented harvesting of mulberries and mushrooms was reintroduced. Finally, the national park center has changed its character by employing a network of subcontractors who run a bakery, a butchery, a tailor shop, grocery stores, and a café.²⁹ Seen in this light, a whole infrastructure package has been put together. This has made the National Park administration indispensable for Turau as an employer and service provider.³⁰

Under the directorship of two brothers, Nikolai Bambiza (1989-1999) and Stepan Bambiza (since 1999), the National Park, in combination with an agricultural production cooperative, underwent a step-by-step transformation into a paternalistically run, capitalist, profit-oriented enterprise, with the focus of economic activity gradually shifting to the village of Liaskavichy on the northern bank of the Pripjat. In 1994 and 1995, the plots of two *kolkhozes* were taken over. The national park thereby came to benefit from an auxiliary operation, which was part of the agroindustrial complex (*Agropromyshlennyi kompleks*, APK) of the village of Khlupin. The Liaskavichy APK “Khlupin” and land belonging to the former Communal Agricultural Unitary Enterprise (*Kommunal’noe sel’skokhoziaistvennoe unitarnoe predpriiatie*, KSUP) were transformed in 2002 into the Liaskavichy APK, affiliated to the Pripjat National Park, which was later simply renamed the Agricultural Complex (*Sel’skokhoziaistvennyi kompleks*, SKhK).³¹

²⁹ ZENINA (as in footnote 26).

³⁰ Much, however, was improvised. Due to the lack of a hotel, the first hunting tourists had to be accommodated in the administrative building of the Nature Reserve. A sick female bison, which had been let out of the enclosure and released for shooting, was understandably a meager representation of the promised bounty of game for visiting hunters.

³¹ Cf. UGLIANETS, *Kratkii istoricheskii ocherk* (as in footnote 15), pp. 11, 24.

In order to develop tourism, the Bambiza brothers capitalized on hunting and fishing, which happened to be two of their own hobbies. In 1995, the “Liaskavichy” Experimental Forestry and Hunting Operation was set up across neighboring areas of forest with Stepan Bambiza as its director. In 1997, a wood processing plant was established here.³² In 1996, red deer were brought from the *Belovezhskaia pushcha* and reintroduced into the area (having been wiped out in the nineteenth century). Together with the establishment of a game reserve in 1998, this created an infrastructure for hunting tourism that, while not necessarily professional, certainly promised commercial gain.³³

Overall, the growth in economic activity and the expansion of the territory during the 1990s led to an increase in the size of the National Park to 82,461 hectares, however, this was far surpassed by the associated forestry area of 102,644 hectares.³⁴ Critics of this development point out that this shift in focus across all activities within the park ran counter to the interests of the Turau community and was clearly supported by corrupt authorities who tolerated semi-legal and illegal practices. Immediately after taking up his duties in July 1989, Nikolai Bambiza, still very much in a Soviet manner, demanded “a drastic improvement of working and operational discipline” and “the fulfillment of planned tasks.” He made these decrees against the background of the economic “acceleration” (*uskorenie*) propagated by Gorbachev.³⁵ However, there is evidence to suggest that, after the fall of the Soviet Union, the two brothers, as vassals of the state president, turned to nepotism and awarded key positions within their sinecure to relatives.³⁶

³² In addition, lease agreements were concluded with the Petrikov Forestry Administration and the large state-owned agricultural enterprises, which provided for the free use of the forests for the organization of hunting for foreign citizens. In return, regular radiation checks were to be carried out, which of course also attested to the safety of the hunting area. ZGAM, f. 379, op. 1, d. 239, ll. 65-66.

³³ Cf. S. V. POPEL'SKII, A. I. LUCHKOV: Rol' natsional'nogo parka “pripiatskii” v sokhranении i izuchenii prirodnykh kompleksov Poles'ia i sotsial'no-ekonomicheskom razvitiitii regiona [The Role of the Pripiat National Park in the Protection and Research of the Natural Complexes of Polesia and the Socio-economic Development of the Region], in: *Biologicheskoe raznoobrazie* (as in footnote 15), pp. 6-10.

³⁴ Cf. UGLIANETS, *Kratkii istoricheskii ocherk* (as in footnote 15), pp. 11, 24.

³⁵ Regulation from 1989-07-24, in: ZGAM, f. 379, op. 1, d. 225, l. 49.

³⁶ Interview by Aliaksandr Dalhouski with Bolotina at the History Workshop in Minsk on 2016-04-28.



Fig. 3: Timber processing plant at Liaskavichy (2014). Photo: Inessa Bolotina

Against this background, the influence of President Lukashenka made itself felt, with curious consequences for drivers passing through the area and dramatic consequences for the scientific staff who worked there. In March 1999, a toll was imposed for foot and road traffic passing through conservation reserves. Thus, in the Pripiat National Park, where the network of roads and walking tracks had been improved and expanded as part of a wider infrastructure upgrade, a welcome source of income was discovered. However, as it turned out, the necessity of employing guards as toll collectors did not pay off due to a lack of traffic.³⁷ More significant was the President's decree of July 1999, which stated that employment contracts for civil servants only be issued for one year. This decision coincided with the reduction of the staff budget in the Pripiat National Park. Both components favor patron-client relationships. The first redundancies or non-renewals of contracts took place in 2002; those affected were two researchers who had expressed criticism about the developments occurring within the National Park. Bolotina came to the conclusion that this discouraging example led to the decline of professionalism and the valorization of protectionism. Behind this is the sad realization that the transformation of the nature reserve into a national park required the open-air research laboratory to metamorphose into a broad-based business

³⁷ Before the compulsory levy was cancelled at the end of the year, the Directorate of Forestry and Hunting made sure it was not deprived of the possibility of more or less illegally charging a fee for the use of the highway on the northern bank of the Pripiat, i.e. beyond the boundary of the National Park. ZENINA (as in footnote 26).

enterprise. As a flip side of “neutralizing” critics and “liquidating” scientific research, there has now been scope for a quasi-feudal system, based on proto-industrialization, to gain ground.³⁸

From this point on, the bison project proved to be the park’s only remarkable ecological achievement. In 2000 and 2005, in addition to the “founding population,” which had existed since 1987 for breeding purposes, two additional bison herds from the *Belovezhskaia pushcha* were introduced into the park as a “reserve population” for hunting. These herds—initially thirteen animals and followed by another sixteen—were released on the northern bank of the Pripiat, the latter group in the area later occupied by the safari park. According to Belarusian experts, the development of both herds stagnated because the groups that had been released were too small or consisted mainly of young animals. Whether a contributing factor here was the density of the forest, which lacks the clearings of the *Belovezhskaia pushcha*, was not discussed by the specialists. Though the first group increased to 20 bisons in 2005 after being released into the wild, by 2010 their numbers had fallen to 16. In contrast, the number of animals in the second group—also 16—remained stable until 2010. In his monograph on the “reintroduction of bison” in 2012, the vice-director of the National Park, Uglianets, who was responsible for the science department, argued that the breeding costs could be compensated by the potential of hunting (based, that is, on the arbitrary distinction between the founding population and the reserve population). With this system in place, he claimed, the park would be able to guarantee a stable “Pripiat population” of 500-700 animals in Polesia (in 2011 there were 1,095 bisons in the whole of Belarus, while there were only 83 in the Pripiat National Park; by 2017 this number had risen to 94). Minsk zoologist Petr Grigor’evich Kozlo, however, presented a critical epilogue to Uglianets’s address, questioning the park’s undertaking on the grounds of low breeding successes to date.³⁹

³⁸ Ibidem.

³⁹ UGLIANETS, *Reintrodukciia zubra* (as in footnote 27), pp. 207-213, 217-218. Cf. P. G. KOZLO, A. N. BUNEVICH: *Zubr v Belarusi* [The Bison in Belarus], 2. ed., Minsk 2011. A sad fate befell the bear named Kasia, which had been brought from Vitebsk for the amusement of tourists at the beginning of the millennium. First, she had to crouch in the transport cage for a long time because the enclosure was not yet ready. Then she broke out and was never seen again, probably shot during a “wolf hunt.” ZENINA (as in footnote 26).

Year	Total area	Area divided into zones (ha / %)					
	(ha)	Strict protection zone	Protection zone	Farmed protection zone	Regulated use	Economic zone	Recreation zone
1972	60,763	12,580/20.7	48,183/79.3	–	–	–	–
1982	63,166	17,422/27.6	45,744/72.4	–	–	–	–
1989	63,342	30,214/47.7	22,233/35.1	10,895/17.2	–	–	–
1992	64,767	29,310/45.3	24,367/37.6	11,090/17.1	–	–	–
1993-1995	65,050	29,109/44.7	23,539/36.2	12,402/19.1	–	–	–
1997	82,254	–	29,185/35.4	–	43,024/52.3	9,465/11.5	580/0.7
1999	82,461	–	29,185/35.4	–	43,024/52.2	9,672/11.7	580/0.7
2012	88,553	–	30,876/34.9	–	47,809/54.0	8,870/10.0	998/1.1

Table: Total Area and Zoning of the “Pripiatskii” Nature Reserve / National Park. Natsyianal’ny park “Prypiatski”: Obshchie svedeniia [“Pripiatskii” National Park: General Information], in: Hramadskaia kampaniia ŭ abaronu dzikai pryrody natsyianal’naha parka “Prypiatski,” URL: <http://saveprypjatski.by/natsyianalny-park-prypyatski/> (2017-12-15)

3 The Belarusian National Park in the Context of Globalization and Transformation

The transfer of the administrative headquarters from the historical center of Turau to the village of Liaskavichy in 2006 triggered a particularly explosive reaction. While Turau, located 15 kilometers south of the Pripiat, has attracted attention since 1999 as an unofficial but internationally recognized bird-watching station, Liaskavichy, located directly on the northern bank of the river, is the home of the park director. In the tradition of the Soviet privilege system, its idyllic location overlooking the National Park beyond the opposite bank of the river also made it an ideal residence for the president. For the affected population, shifting the administrative center has relevance solely for the simple fact that dozens of jobs were transferred from one municipality to another more than 50 kilometers away. Against this background, the locals do not perceive the national park as a nature conservation area or a research facility, but rather as the domain of the Bambiza clan. Their visits to the park are restricted to pragmatic excursions for the purpose of gathering berries or mushrooms.⁴⁰

⁴⁰ Population consultation by Thomas Bohn and Aliaksandr Dalhouski in Turau in March 2015. Significantly, the title of a photo album under the editorship of National Park Director Stepan Bambiza is “My Polesia.” STEPAN BAMBIZA: Moe Poles’e. My Polesye [My Polesia], Minsk 2015.



Fig. 4: The presidential residence on the Pripiat River opposite the national park (April 2016). Photo: Thomas Bohn

This development did not take place without consequences for regional policy: After flying over the area in a helicopter, Lukashenka became convinced that Belarusian Polesia was suffering from desertification (evidenced not only by the population decline but also by deforestation and expanding areas of scrubland). As a result, in early 2010, he called for a five year program of socio-economic development that would provide for a rise in living standards through the sustainable use of resources.⁴¹ From a critical journalistic view, this whole project was based on the paradoxical intention of designing regional development in the style of a Belarusian national park, i.e. using the natural environment in service of modernization and for stimulating

⁴¹ Gosudarstvennaia programma sotsial'no-ekonomicheskogo razvitiia i kompleksnogo ispol'zovaniia prirodnykh resursov Pripiatskogo Poles'ia na 2010-2015 gody [National Program for the Socio-economic Development and Complex Usage of the Natural Resources of Pripiat Polesia for the Years 2010-2015], in: Ministerstvo ekonomiki Respubliki Belarus, URL: <http://www.economy.gov.by/ru/polesie-ru/> (2017-12-15). Cf. Prirodnye resursy Pripiatskogo Poles'ia s maksimal'noi pol'zoi dolzhny rabotat' na ekonomiku strany: 15 ianvaria 2010 goda [The Natural Resources of Pripiat Polesia Must be Made Maximum Use of in Order to Benefit the Country's Economy: 15 January 2010], in: Prezident Respubliki Belarus', URL: http://president.gov.by/ru/news_ru/view/prirodnye-resursy-pripiatskogo-polesija-s-maksimalnoj-polzoi-dolzhny-rabotat-na-ekonomiku-strany-5089 (2017-12-15).

regional economic growth.⁴² Through the combination of feudal structures and land accumulation, the Pripiat National Park presents itself as a kind of latifundium of an early modern magnate. In 2009, the total area of the National Park on both sides of the Pripiat was an impressive 194,000 ha, of which only 84,000 hectares were protected areas, while 104,000 hectares was given over to forestry and hunting and 6,000 hectares to the “Liaskavichy” agricultural complex.⁴³ The national park administration employed a total of around 2,000 people.⁴⁴

In the model village of Liaskavichy, the National Park has been offering “safari” carriage rides to its game reserve since 2009.⁴⁵ In addition, it has also been hosting the annual folklore festival “The Call of Polesia” (*Zov Poles'ia*), since September 2010. As well as learning about local wildlife, visitors are familiarized with local traditions and thus initiated into the specifics of Belarusian culture. In 2012, a grand administrative center was built together with a luxury hotel and a representative natural history museum. Tourist attractions also include boat trips and excursions to the historic Turau, from where visitors can also reach hiking trails to the Tsar Oak and the Tsar Pine. The reality is, however, that the opulent, postmodern complex, which has been transplanted into the midst of Polesia’s cultural landscape like a kind of Disneyland, stands empty almost all year round, because Belarusian families cannot afford to stay there and hunters from abroad seem to only visit sporadically.

Prerequisites for opening a safari park and setting up a “hunting paradise” were the reintroduction of red deer in 1996 and the establishment of a fellow deer population in 2008. In 2009, it was estimated that the game available in the reserve for hunting included 2,000-2,500 wild boar, 1,200-1,300 deer, 1,000 hares, 800-1,000 moose, 300-400 stags, 300-400 foxes, 100 bisons, 50-80 wolves, as well as 15,000-20,000 ducks, 700-900 black grouse, and 300-

⁴² TAT'IANA BINDA: Nekotorye itogi raboty programma razvitiia Pripjatskogo Poles'ia [Some Results of the Work of the Pripiat-Polesia Development Program], in: Belorusskaia lesnaja gazeta from 2015-08-13, <http://lesgazeta.by/economy/za-strokoj-dokumenta/nekotorye-itogi-raboty-programmy-razvitija-pripjatskogo-polesja> (2017-12-15).

⁴³ Prypiatskae Palesse (as in footnote 6), p. 212.

⁴⁴ V. I. KHMELEVSKII: Rol' Natsional'nogo parka “Pripjatskii” v sotsial'no-ekonomicheskom razvitiu poles'skogo regiona [The Role of the Pripiat National Park in the Socio-economic Development of the Polesia Region], in: A. M. DOROFEEV (ed.): Okhraniaemye prirodnye territorii i ob'ekty Belorusskogo Poozer'ia: Sovremennoe sostoianie, perspektivy razvitiia, Vitebsk 2009, pp. 11-13, here p. 12.

⁴⁵ ALENA JASKO: Safari po-belorusski: Zhelaiushchikh uvidet' dikikh zverei v estestvennykh usloviiakh Natsional'nyi park “Pripjatskii” ne razocharuet [Safari in Belarusian: Those Who Want to See Wildlife in its Natural Environment Will Not be Disappointed by the Pripiat National Park], in: Rodnaia pryroda: Hramadska-palitchny, navukovopuliarny iliustrirovany chasopis (2009), 9, pp. 28-31.



Fig. 5: The administrative center of the Pripjat National Park in Liaskavichy (February 2015). Photo: Inessa Bolotina



Fig. 6: A “safari” on 15 September 2011 in Pripjat National Park. Photo: Sergei Plytkovich

400 wood grouse.⁴⁶ Thus, the wildlife population was many times larger than what was ecologically sensible. In 1980, for example, within an area a third smaller in size, only 422 wild boars, 194 deer, 185 moose and 50 wolves, as well as 452 black grouse, 291 hazel grouse and 92 wood grouse were counted.⁴⁷

The national park regulation of 9 February 2012 led to a readjustment of boundaries and park areas, including the zonal structure, and adapted these to current needs. Although an increase of 1,500 hectares in the absolute protected zone could be accounted for in absolute figures, the percentage share of the absolute protected zone within the total area of the park reduced slightly from 35.4 to 34.9 percent (see table). As a nature conservation organization has since discovered, valuable oak groves (*dubrava*) were thus removed from the zone subject to partial use and opened up for sanitation harvesting.⁴⁸ As a result, members of an emerging ecological movement not only used the internet for raising public awareness of these issues, but also repeatedly made their presence felt on the ground by staging protests.

Due to the construction of gravel roads and logging in the oak groves, the bird protection organization “Protection of the Birds of the Fatherland” (*Akhova ptushak Bats’kaushchyny*), founded in 1998, included the “Pripiatskii” National Park as an eye-catching feature on a map showing the “Top 15 Biodiversity Territories of Belarus,” which they published on their homepage in May 2013.⁴⁹ Wildlife.by confirmed in September 2013 that a 15 kilometer long gravel road would be built that would officially benefit tourism, but would unofficially also allow for the removal of timber.⁵⁰

Significantly, there is no mention on the official national park website of the park’s special rating in accordance with the Ramsar Convention of 1971, which was awarded in February 2014. The prize is awarded to wetlands of

⁴⁶ UGLIANETS, Natsional’nyi park “Pripiatskii” (as in footnote 15), p. 27. The statistics did not distinguish between animals in the wild and game in the enclosure.

⁴⁷ Report on the planned objectives of the biotechnical and hunting measures in the Pripiat Nature Reserve from 1981-01-12, in: ZGAM, f. 379, op. 1, d. 149, l. 15.

⁴⁸ Uvazhaemye chitateli saitа [Dear Readers of this Page] (2014), in: Hramadskaia kampaniia u abaronu dzikai pryrody natsyianal’naha parka “Prypiatski”, URL: <http://saveprypjatski.by> (2017-12-15).

⁴⁹ Top-15 terrytoryi Belarusi dlia biaraznastajnosti [Top-15-Biodiversity Territories of Belarus] (2013-05-22), in: Hramadskaia arhanizatsyia “Akhova ptushak Bats’kaushchyny,” URL: <https://ptushki.org/news/organization/9906.html> (2017-12-15). See also: Natspark “Pripiatskii” chochet sushchestvenno uvelichit’ ob’emy rubok v zapovednykh poimennykh dubravakh [The Pripiat National Park Wants to Noticeably Increase the Amount of Logging in the Protected Oak Groves] (2013-06-09), ibidem, URL: <http://www.ptushki.org/info/press/item/11236.html> (2017-12-15).

⁵⁰ Varvarskoe stroitel’stvo dorogi v natsional’nom park “Pripiatskii” [Barbarian Construction of a Street in the National Park “Pripiatskii”] (2013-09-03), in: Hramadskaia kampaniia (as in footnote 48), URL: <http://saveprypjatski.by/varvarskoe-stroitelstvo-dorogi-v-natsionalnom-park-pripyatskij/> (2019-08-12).

international importance at the level of non-governmental organizations, which serve, in particular, to protect birdlife. Information on this subject can be found on the convention office website or on the homepage of the organization “Save the Pripiat Oak Groves. Social campaign to defend the unspoiled nature of the Pripiat National Park.”⁵¹ Of relevance to the National Park management, on the other hand, is the certification of sustainable forest management from the Forest Stewardship Council (FSC) in September 2016, which is evidenced by the publication of the document on the official website.⁵² Parquet is also offered here as a valuable product.⁵³

In March 2015, in the run-up to the certification, a meeting of the park’s management was held in Pripiat National Park attended by representatives of the public. Following this, in April 2015, a working group with specialists from official institutions met to endorse, in principle, the logging and reforestation of the oak groves. For this reason, the interest group “Swamplands” (*Bahna*) published an interview with Inessa Bolotina on their homepage on 15 May. After being made redundant from her job with the National Park, Bolotina became a committed environmental activist. On 19 May 2015, the interview appeared on the “Save the Pripiat Oak Groves” website. Among other things, Bolotina emphasized the fact that the National Park would be reduced to the level of an ordinary forest through the certification of sustainability.⁵⁴ In the interview, she pointed out that the personnel situation in the science department in 2016 was still being affected by continual budget cuts. Following the dismissal of two researchers in 2013 at the initiative of the director, and the resignation of the deputy director for research, only one young researcher, who was recruited in 2014, remained. At best, research work will continue to be carried out by the Academy of Sciences within the context of collaboration agreements. Symptomatic of this development is that meetings of the Scientific Council have been suspended. Instead of international projects, environmental camps and scientific conferences, it is likely that only company meetings and entertainment events will now be held.⁵⁵

⁵¹ Cf. the Ramsar Convention on Belarus in general: <http://www.ramsar.org/wetland/belarus> (2017-12-15) or for the “Pripiatskii” National Park <https://rsis.ramsar.org/ris/2197?language=en> (2017-12-15). See also: *Uvazhaemye chitatelej sajta* (as in footnote 48).

⁵² *Sertifikatsiia Forest Stewardship Council (Lesnoi Popechitel’skii Sovet)*, in: *Natsyional’ny park “Prypiatski,”* URL: <http://www.npp.by/sertificat/> (2017-12-15).

⁵³ *Choziaistvennaia deiatel’nost’ [Economic Activity]*, *ibidem*, URL: <http://www.npp.by/activity/woodworking/> (2017-12-15).

⁵⁴ *Ekspertnoe mnenie ob audite FSC v Natparke “Pripiatskii”*: Inessa Bolotina [Expert Opinion on the FSC Audit in the National Park “Pripiatskii”]: Inessa Bolotina] (2015-05-19), in: *Hramadskaaia kompaniia* (as in footnote 48), URL: <http://saveprypjatski.by/ekspertnoe-mnenie-ob-audite-fsc-v-natsparke-pripyatskij-inessa-bolotina/> (2017-12-15).

⁵⁵ Interview by Aliaksandr Dalhouski with Inessa Bolotina at the History Workshop in Minsk on 28 April 2016.

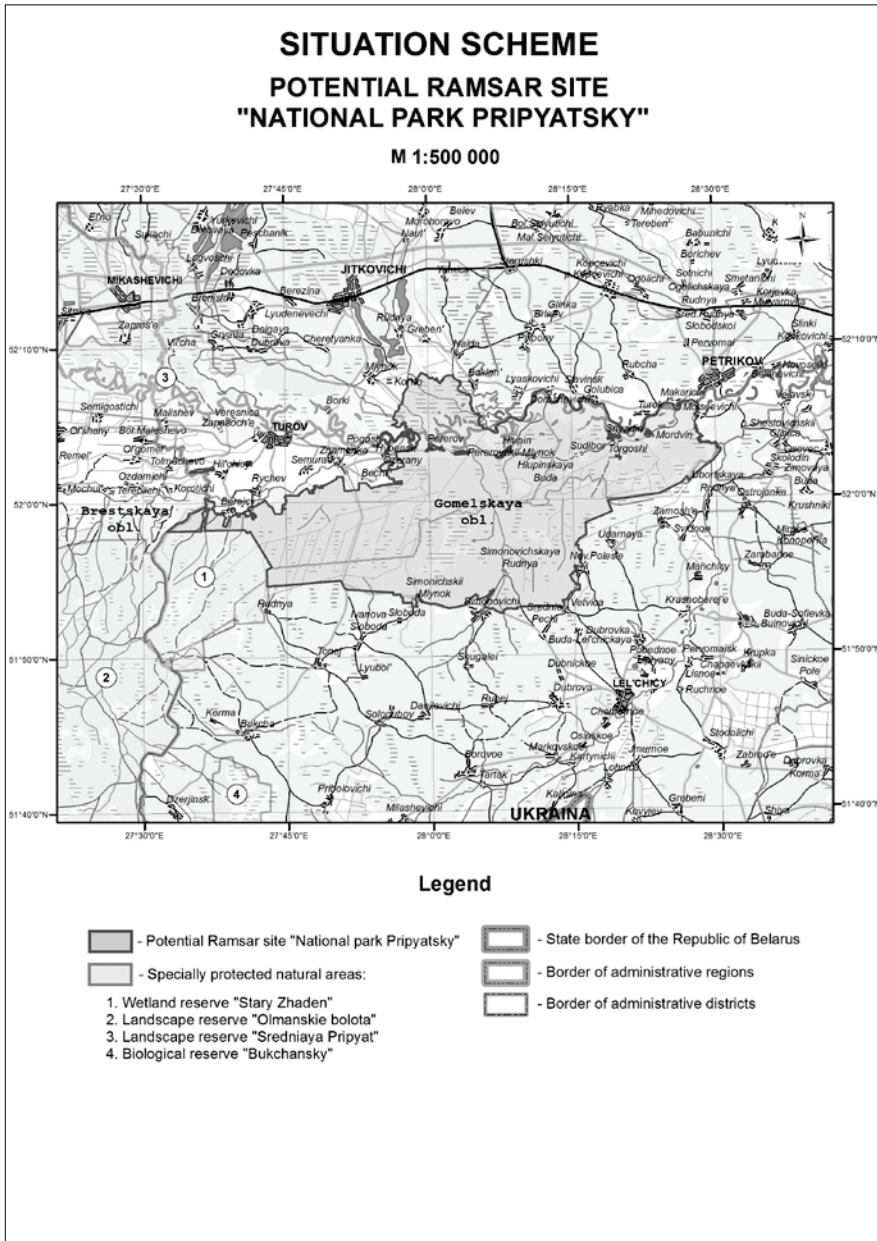


Fig. 7: Map from the application for admission to the Ramsar Convention (2013). Source: Ramsar Sites Information Service: <https://rsis.ramsar.org/RISapp/files/29624932/pictures/BY2197map2013.pdf?language=en>. (2017-01-02)

The latest environmental scandals have centered around plans to exploit potash reserves in the immediate vicinity of the National Park as well as agreements between the governments of the Republic of Poland and the Republic of Belarus on pending river regulations along the E 40 Waterway. On 17 December 2015, the group “Save the Pripiat Oak Groves” criticized the plans of the company Belarus’kali to set up a mining conglomerate near Petrikov on the border of the National Park.⁵⁶ In 2016 and 2017 the “Brest Green Portal” (*Brestski Zjaleny partal*) sparked a debate on river-straightening with the slogan: “The E40 waterway will be the death of Polesia!”⁵⁷ And on 3/4 June 2017, World Environment Day, around 50 people took part in the “Pripiat, high five!” (*Pripiat’, dai piat’!*) campaign, a demonstration of paddlers, who stretched out their open palms to onlookers as they passed by in a gesture of friendship.⁵⁸

Such acts of protest were not unfounded. After all, in July 2016, the “Pripiat-Polesia” (*Pripiatskoe Poles’e*) biosphere reserve had been established. Covering an area of 213,030 ha, including the Pripiat National Park and the protected Ol’many marshlands, the reserve was set up as part of the government’s environmental policy and had gained international prestige. In this region, the protection of natural heritage is now officially to be combined with sustainable use.⁵⁹ Only the future will show how, and in what form, this biosphere reserve proves to be effective. However, at least Belarusian environmentalists are now in a position to insist that government officials fulfill their political obligations.

4 Conclusion

In 1969, as compensation for the land melioration campaign launched under Brezhnev, the BSSR leadership decided to establish a “nature reserve” (*zapovednik*) on the Pripiat River. According to Soviet understanding, this

⁵⁶ A. RAEVSKAIA: Shachty u pripiatskikh dubrav [Mines at the Pripiat Oak Groves] (2015-12-17), in: Hramadskaia kampaniia (as in footnote 48), URL: <http://save-prypjatski.by/shachty-u-pripyatskih-dubrav/#more-1360> (2017-12-15).

⁵⁷ IULIIA BYK: “Vodnyi put’ E 40—eto smert’ dlia Poles’ia!” Kakoi tsenoi oboidetsia Belarusi vykhod k moriu? [“The Waterway E 40 is Death for Polesia!” What Will Cost Belarus Access to the Sea?] (2016-10-10), in: Brestski Zialeny partal: Tavarystva “Zialenaia setka”, URL: <http://brest.greenbelarus.info/articles/10-10-2016/vodnyy-put-e-40-eto-smert-dlya-polesya-kakoy-cenoy-oboydetsya-belarusi-vygod-k> (2017-12-15).

⁵⁸ Bolee 50 baidarochnikov Belarusi vystupili v zashchitu Pripiati [More than 50 Belarusian Paddlers Stepped up in Defense of the Pripiat] (2017-06-06), *ibidem*, URL: <http://brest.greenbelarus.info/articles/06-06-2017/bole-50-baydarochnikov-belarusi-vystupili-v-zashchitu-pripyati> (2017-12-15).

⁵⁹ Biosferyni rezervat “Pripiatskoe Poles’e” [“Pripiat-Polesia” Biosphere Reserve], in: Vechernyi Brest, 2016-08-13, URL: http://vb.by/society/biosfermie_rezervi_v_brestskoi_%20oblosti.html (2017-12-15).

equated to the concept of an open-air research laboratory, which had its administrative headquarters in the small historic town of Turau. However, the authorities did not take the military territory of the Ol'many marshlands into consideration. Rather, the reserve, which was intended to reflect the Polesian landscape, was located in a wooded area on the Pripiat where the river flowed inland of the country's border. In the nineteenth century, canal construction had taken place here and, after the Second World War, the area had served as a source of raw materials for a forestry enterprise, which operated almost unhindered until the mid-1970s due to an exemption clause in the regulations. Among the special features of this area are oak groves. In 1987, the area, which lay within the catchment area of the nuclear fallout from Chernobyl, experienced a moment of renaturation when bison were reintroduced there.

After the dissolution of the Soviet Union, the reserve was converted into a "national park" in 1996 in line with an international concept of nature conservation. Following the American model, this promised not only the protection of the wilderness, but also the development of tourism. The problem was that, with the transfer of the park into presidential administration in 1994, economic interests also became relevant, which found expression in the incorporation of *kolkhozes* and the establishment of experimental hunting and forestry enterprises. In this way, the reclassification of the reserve as a national park significantly increased the anthropogenic impact on its natural environment.

Hunting was now permitted in an area where it had previously not been possible, new roads were laid, causing further changes to the local ecosystems, and timber was felled in areas that had once formed part of the protected core zone. In addition, the promotion of so-called "ecotourism" has since taken on a populist dimension: although the National park attracts the attention of international tourists and appeals, in particular, to bird watchers and big game hunters, little energy is given to nature conservation.

When its administrative center was moved from Turau to Liaskavichy in 2006, the National Park underwent an irreversible metamorphosis from a research laboratory to a commercial enterprise. One consequence of this has been that numbers of game have been allowed to increase to the point of being detrimental for the environment. In terms of (environmental) history, these conditions are reminiscent of the early modern period, when hunting rules and forestry offices were supposed to secure monopolies for the ruling class. Both the president and the park director have residences in Liaskavichy. A feudal system and a paternalistic culture have combined to create a network of despotic structures. On the surface, however, the representative administrative center and the grand museum building, as well as the ethno-festival "The Call of Polesia" and "safari" carriage rides to and from the game reserve have all been set up to represent the preservation of the Belarusian culture and natural heritage.

For Belarus, the term "national park" signifies a regression in terms of nature conservation. On the Pripiat, regional development through zonal divi-

sion is a sign of the times, and means sanitation harvest and hunting tourism. However, out of the community of scientists who have been made redundant, a critical public voice has emerged and is making a name for itself on the internet. In light of this, it is possible to imagine that, reminiscent of the ecological protests of the Perestroika, a second “ecological revolution” could yet take place.

Prof. Dr. Thomas Bohn, Justus-Liebig-Universität Gießen, Historisches Institut /
Osteuropäische Geschichte, Otto-Behaghel-Str. 10, DE – 35394 Gießen,
thomas.bohn@geschichte.uni-giessen.de

Dr. Aliaksandr Dalhouski, Suchaja 25, BY – 220004 Minsk, aliaksandr.dalhouski@ibb.by,
<https://orcid.org/0000-0002-0436-2477>

