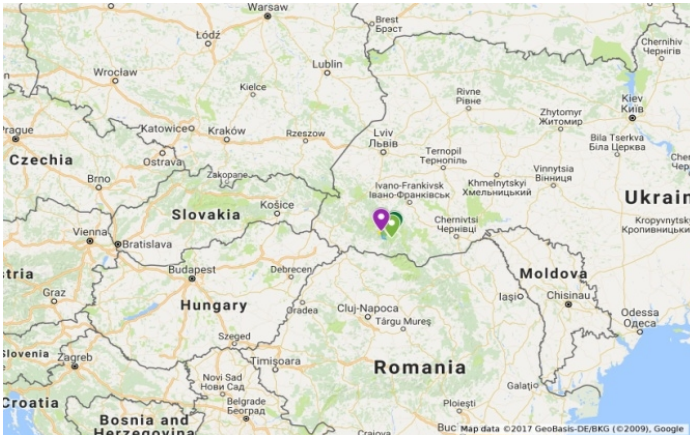


# 14.000 hectares of forest in the Carpathian mountains in Ukraine threatened by a huge tourism project

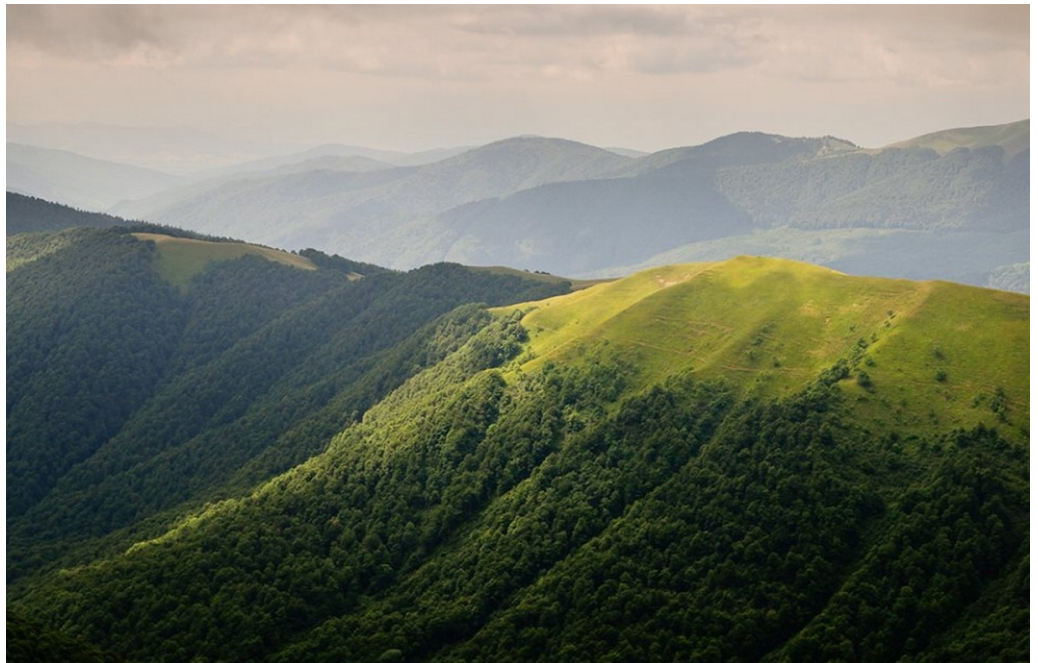
## Defend « Svydovets » !



This scandalous project first came to light in 2016. It would be bigger and more luxurious than the « Bukovel » ski resort, the best known resort in Ukraine. Guenady Moskal claims in the media that 5000 jobs would be created. Finding work close to home of course appeals to many local inhabitants who have to leave the region to seek seasonal work elsewhere. At the beginning of 2017 public hearings were organized by the local authorities of the Tyatchiv and Rakhiv districts with the aim of obtaining agreement for this project in Yassinya, Tchorna Tissa and Lopukhovo, the three villages directly affected.

The « Svydovets » massif forms part of the Carpathian mountains in Transcarpathia, a region in the west of Ukraine. With its magnificent wild spruce and beech forests rich in fauna and flora and its three natural lakes it is one of the most beautiful mountain zones in the country. In the heart of Svydovets lies the source of the river Tisza, one of the region's most important rivers. The massif has one of the highest rainfalls in the region (1400 mm/year).

It is in this massif that Guenady Moskal, the governor of Transcarpathia, intends to establish an immense tourist complex, « Svydovets », with over 60 hotels, 120 restaurants, 33 ski-lifts and 230 km of runs. All of this is to be financed by unknown investors whose identity he refuses to reveal. Several shopping malls, medical and fitness centres, banks, multi-storey parking areas and even a landing strip form part of the plan. The future resort will be able to receive up to 28.000 tourists at the same time.



According to Vassyl Fabritsy, one of the activists from the village of Lopukhovo who is totally against any building projects in the massif, «we learned that the public hearing had been held in Lopukhovo once it was already over. There was an announcement in the newspaper but nothing about the fact that a vote was going to take place for or against the Svydovets project. Only twenty people voted in favor, manipulated by the municipality and local administration. They decided for the whole village.»

Several citizens of Lopukhovo got together and lodged a legal complaint in the administrative court. They are not very numerous, but they are very determined. They all work in the timber and forest sector, in local sawmills or as woodcutters, as do 70% of the inhabitants of these villages. It is not the first time that they have contested the « State system ». For over twenty years they have been regularly protesting against bad forest management and the corruption rife in the State forest service. They in particular denounce woodcuts carried out for false sanitary reasons.



They have called on lawyers, ecological organisations and local and national members of parliament to help them. To begin with, nobody wanted to get involved, but then a young environmental law student decided to take up the struggle. She mobilised several NGOs, including Environment People Law, Zeleny Dossier and the European Cooperative Longo maï. Together we set up the «Free Svydovets Group" which began to contest the project in July 2017.

According to Oksana Stahkevitch-Volosyantchouk, a well-known ecologist in Transcarpathia, : « this massif is the territory where the main tributaries of the Tisza originate. There are lakes, marshlands and streams which play a very important role for the hydrogeology of the Carpathians. These humid zones are fed by water from thawing snow and heavy rainfall. They act as a water reserve throughout the year. This strongly reduces the likelihood of catastrophic flooding. These valleys and humid zones are very fragile ecosystems. An excessive human intervention in this system would have disastrous consequences. All of these

ecosystems are essential for the endemic species of the Carpathians.

The creation of tourist infrastructures in this territory, the destruction of forests, the building of a network of roads and hotels with water catchments and sewage pipes would certainly provoke changes in the hydrological regime. These fragile ecosystems already suffer from chaotic camp sites on the banks of the lakes, the cutting of firewood by campers, the pollution of the water by detergents. The construction of such a huge

holiday resort would certainly increase the climate change that we can already sense. What form will these changes take ? Catastrophic flooding, soil erosion, land-slides, the lowering of the water table, water pollution and drought. It is the inhabitants of the valley and not the tourists who will suffer from this evolution.».

Certain newspapers have begun to point out the negative aspects of this project. An argument has arisen in several articles and on the social media concerning the number of hectares of forest that would have to be cut in order to build such a massive tourist resort. The official figures given by the authorities during the public hearings (14.000 hectares) created a shock wave. The governor's services then retracted and explained that there had been a typing mistake and that in fact only 1400 ha would be affected. As far as the activists from Lopukhovo and the ecologists are concerned, this controversy is ridiculous and is only intended to confuse people. What is certain is that there are no precise architectural plans that would make it possible to understand the extent of the future ski resort. The opponents are convinced that if even a small construction is permitted, the massif will in the end be divided up into several parts and destroyed.

The question of wood cuts is very sensitive in the region, as it is throughout Ukraine. After the Maidan revolution in 2014 many thought that there would be less corruption and over-exploitation of

forests. An activist, Valera Pavlouk, recalls «we already experienced huge floods in 1998 and 2000 with large mud slides which swept away several houses and covered a village. It was already clear at the time that this was the consequence of excessive felling in the forests. The situation has only continued to get worse these last few years. In 2005 in the Lopukhovo state forest they cut 50.000 m<sup>3</sup> of timber and in 2016 this went up to 240.000 m<sup>3</sup> on the same surface. The situation has become catastrophic and hopeless ».

The countless clear cuts encourage soil erosion. To lower costs the wood cuts are often carried out close to the forest roads. In winter lorries cannot go up the steep slopes. This type of wood cut leads to serious erosion, reduces biodiversity and provokes land-slides.

In Ukraine there exists a small movement of activists called « The forest guard » (« Lissova Varta ») that seeks to monitor and denounce illegal wood cuts. Its members take photos and draw up detailed reports. They organise workshops to learn how to recognise illegal wood cuts. The movement is, however, not very active in Transcarpathia. It is also true that denouncing illegal wood cuts generally has no effect and the media have stopped reporting on them as they have become so commonplace.

The opponents also cannot understand the point of such a massive urban development in the heart of Svydovets. Why create such an infrastructure high up in the mountains when nothing exists lower down in the existing villages. There are no proper roads, water and sewage systems, hotels, supermarkets or good restaurants, banks or medical centres.

### **The scourge of illegal wood cuts**

According to Andriy Pliga of the WWF, illegal wood cuts have a huge impact on the ecological, social and economic situation of the country. If you want to understand the present state of the timber industry in Ukraine you have to bear in mind the following elements :

- Almost all of the forests belong to the State. There are some communal and private forests, but on a very minor scale.
- The State Forestry Industry Committee is the central body of the government responsible for the forest sector. This committee manages the majority of forests in Ukraine.
- The average age of Ukrainian forests is 55 years. The old forests and primary forests are preserved in natural reserves and in isolated mountain zones. Access to these forests for timber enterprises is difficult.
- A large part of the forests have been planted and require intensive attention.
- By illegal wood cuts we mean :
  - wood cuts carried out without authorisation ;
  - false declarations of the volume and value of the cut timber ;
  - wood cuts carried out outside the authorised territory ;
  - obtaining authorisations thanks to corrupt procedures ;
  - unjustified sanitary wood cuts ;
  - illegal occupation of forests for construction purposes or for the extraction of raw materials, requiring the cutting of the forest.

**Social causes:** In a region in which there is high unemployment and widespread poverty certain illegal wood cuts are carried out on a modest scale for the needs of local families. The price of firewood is considered to be too high. This kind of wood cut is seen to be a local tradition.

**Economic causes:** the main cause of such wood cuts is personal enrichment. They are generally well organized, involving the fabrication of false documents and covering the whole chain of activity from cutting the trees through to the sale of the timber as trunks, planks, beams etc. It is clear that this activity is protected by the corrupt authorities. The fact that there exists an international demand for illegal felled timber further encourages this practice.

**Legal and administrative causes:** there are many weaknesses and loopholes in the forest legislation. The legal procedures concerning forest management are vague and complicated. The judicial system is weak and inefficient. Governmental bodies suffer from a lack of transparency.

The combat against breaches of the forest legislation is all but non-existent. Infractions very rarely lead to a court decision being executed. The participation of citizens and municipalities in the forest sector is more or less symbolic because there is no efficient system facilitating the spreading of information or the organisation of public consultation processes.



The state forest personnel in Lopukhovo have begun to build a new road across the massif to reach the heart of the future ski resort and to link the districts of Tyatchiv and Rakhiv. We have invited local journalists, television channels and ecologists to come and see on the spot what is planned. This involves five hours of four-wheel driving up difficult tracks. They were strongly impressed by what they saw.

We have lodged a legal complaint against the project. The first court session took place on 14 November. The presidents of the two districts concerned did not deign to show up and their lawyers did not come either. On the other hand, twenty activists attended and a national television channel filmed the event. The judge listened to our ecological arguments and decided that this case would be heard by three judges. This is rare, and generally helps to reduce the risk of corruption. The next session will be held on 4 December.

**It would be a great help if you could send protest letters to the President of Ukraine :**

Mr. Petro Porochenko, President of the Republic of Ukraine, 11 Bankova St., Kiev 01220, Ukraine - [requests@apu.gov.ua](mailto:requests@apu.gov.ua)

**Please send copies to :**

The Cabinet of Ministers of Ukraine, 12/2 Hrushevsky St., Kiev 01008, Ukraine - [prsaenko@kmu.gov.ua](mailto:prsaenko@kmu.gov.ua)

Ministry of Ecology and Natural Resources of Ukraine, 35 Métropolit Vasyl Lipkovsky St., Kiev 03035, Ukraine - [semerak@menr.gov.ua](mailto:semerak@menr.gov.ua)

**And also a copy to us :** [free.svydovets@gmail.com](mailto:free.svydovets@gmail.com)

During a recent meeting in Lillafüred (Hungary) of the Framework Convention on the Protection and Sustainable Development of the Carpathians we denounced the fact that Ukraine is violating its obligations with regard to sustainable tourism. We called for a commission of inquiry by the Ministry of Ecology, but have so far not received any response. Many people have expressed their

support via Facebook – to such an extent that the governor felt obliged to issue an official communiqué calling on people not to give credence to the activists' arguments. The day after they lodged their legal complaint each of the three main leaders of the campaign in Lopukhovo was subjected to controls by work inspectors. They have also regularly received telephone calls threatening them with dire consequences if they do not give up the struggle.

For the moment the movement of opposition remains strong and every day new people join the Free Svydovets Group. It is, however, clear that we are still a minority among the local population. Many agree with us but do not dare go against the authorities or are subjected to the influence of their employers. They also fear the power of the hidden investors. For all of these reasons we call on citizens from all countries, on national and international NGOs to support our campaign for a free and natural Svydovets massif.

Our demands : annul the building permits granted by the two local districts, call on the council of ministers to refuse authorisation for a change in land use, protect the summits and the natural lakes in the massif by extending the neighbouring Natural Reserve, impose a reduction of the maximum yield permitted per hectare for wood cuts, encourage stronger controls of forest exploitation by civic organisations such as The Forest Guard (Lissova Varta).

**Who are we ?**

Activists from the village of Lopukhovo, ecological organisations from Transcarpathia, Lviv and Kiev, lawyers, the European Cooperative Longo maï, lovers of nature – all united in the Free Svydovets Group. Come and join us!

**Contact :** [free.svydovets@gmail.com](mailto:free.svydovets@gmail.com)