

In the hamlet of Deia, nestled in the forested hills of Suceava county in northern Romania, Ilie Bucșă and his brother Dumitru have become pariahs. Recently an angry mob attacked the brothers, leaving Ilie with concussion and wounds all over his body. Old friends cross the road to avoid the brothers, having been warned to stay away or face losing their jobs. One night, someone even poured anti-freeze into the brothers' fish pond, killing half their fish.

Their sin? They have been methodically filing complaints about illegal logging in the area. Timber theft is commonplace in much of rural Romania. The logging business is one of the main sources of income for swathes of the population, and for years authorities have turned a blind eye to illegal trade.

Violence and intimidation against those who oppose it is nothing new. Since 2014, six forest rangers have been killed and 184 cases of violence against rangers have been logged. But over the past year it has become harder to steal, partly owing to a government crackdown. As profits become harder to come by, things have got even nastier.

Two of the six ranger murders were in the past three months, prompting Romania's parliament to pass a law allowing all rangers to carry weapons. Attacks on the few people trying to report illegal activity - such as the Bucșă brothers - have intensified as the trade comes under threat.

In October Crețu Ionuț, a ranger in a privately owned forest in central Romania, was threatened by a group of men logging on a neighbouring plot who thought he was spying on them. "They tried to drag me out of the car and told me they would burn my house down and kill my family," he said.

Since then he has begun carrying a weapon, and he tries to patrol with a partner rather than alone. Many rangers have similar stories.

Beyond the threats, violence and corruption, what is at stake is the sustainability of the forest itself. Romania's forests contain 30% of all large carnivores in Europe, with big populations of bears, wolves and lynx. The ancient pedigree of the forests makes them particularly valuable.

"Large parts are still natural forest, unchanged by human intervention. In most of Europe that's not the case. These are very important in the fight against climate change: natural forests have more resistance than planted monocultures," said Mihai Zotta, of Conservation Carpathia.

While there has been outrage over the attacks on rangers, environmental activists say the story is more complicated than one of brave rangers protecting the trees from evil attackers. "Some of them are heroes who are fighting and dying for the forests, but there

are also those who are buying new houses and cars they couldn't possibly afford on their salaries," said Zotta.

One ranger who asked to remain anonymous laughed when asked if he knew of colleagues complicit in illegal activities. "Absolutely everyone is at it," he said, adding that he had got into trouble in the workplace for reporting suspicious activity among colleagues and superiors.

In Suceava county, Gheorghe Oblezniuc explained the scheme. A burly forester who worked for a number of small, private logging companies in the area, he was open about his participation in illegal activity in the past. He said he was regularly asked to cut more than the papers showed, for which he was given a bonus of around 30 lei (£5.30) per cubic metre. "There was one shipment where we had permission to cut 400 cubic metres, and we actually cut 2,400. The owners were hand in hand with the local authorities and the foresters. Everybody got a cut," said Oblezniuc.

He said he initially began to speak out about the practices because he felt he was not getting his fair share of the profits, and later continued out of a sense of justice. Along with the Bucșă brothers and a handful of others, he is one of a few people trying to shed light on the problem in the area.

Oblezniuc met the Guardian in a side room of a petrol station, and glanced nervously at the cars passing outside the window. "There are spies everywhere here," he said, adding that he had received a number of death threats by phone.

Recently it has become harder to steal the logs. A new app allows any curious onlookers to check the licence plates of trucks carrying timber and see whether they have a permit for the wood they are carrying. The brazen, big illegal cuts of a few years ago are now much harder to pull off.

But still, a report commissioned by the government said 20m cubic metres of timber is disappearing from the forests each year, a number bigger than the total amount of legal logging, signifying both a huge hole in the government budget and a potential climate disaster.

"The situation is out of the control of the central authorities. They don't know what's happening in these forests. They don't use satellite images, they don't use smart tools," said Ciprian Gălușcă, of Greenpeace Romania.

The newly appointed environment minister, Costel Alexe, said he was working on the premise that the 20m figure was correct, after several years of the government dismissing it as fake, and he promised a joined-up approach from all government ministries to save the forest.

"Everybody loses: we are losing the forest, we lose as citizens and the budget loses a huge amount of money," Alexe told the Guardian in an interview in Bucharest. One new policy he is keen to implement, which has long been pushed by green activists, is to sell wood directly as timber, rather than the current antiquated system where companies bid for sections of forest that they can then log in.

But Alexe grimaced and sighed when asked whether he had the tools to make a real difference. After all, stopping illegal logging is not just about identifying a few criminal bosses. The network sustains whole communities, with people on each level taking their own cut, from state forestry bosses to local rangers, right down to impoverished villagers with a horse and cart, who gain cheaper firewood for their homes in winter.

"It is essentially a bribe that is given to the local communities: you go ahead and manage the forest as you wish because you're not receiving enough money from us centrally," said Gălușcă.

He said the recent change of government rhetoric was encouraging, and there were signs that prosecutors were taking logging cases more seriously. Previously, just 2% of cases ended in any kind of sanction.

Last month, Ilie Bucșă was called to Bucharest and asked to give evidence to the prosecutor's office on organised crime, the first time this had happened, he said. On Tuesday, prosecutors in northern Romania announced they were opening a criminal case against a ranger for stealing 2.5m lei (£445,000) worth of timber.

Others remain sceptical that real change is on the way. "More rangers will have to die before politicians put a stop to the illegal and chaotic logging," said Sorin Jiva, a ranger from Arad county in western Romania who was shot by illegal loggers in 2017 and spent a year recovering from the wounds.

"We need tougher laws for thieves and criminals firing weapons. Nobody is thinking about the forest. Nobody is thinking about our air."

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