

Lithuania's border forest. Summer 2026.
PHOTO: JULIJA KEKSTAITE

A glitch in the machine

Contesting militarized futures through the forest

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abstract

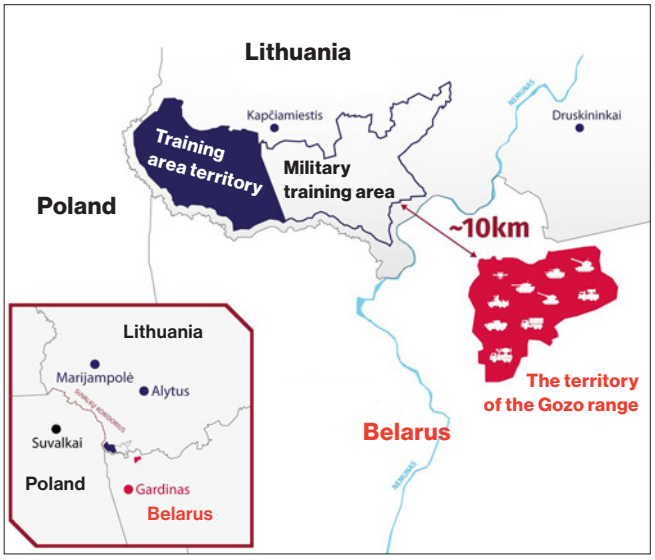
Russia's aggression against Ukraine has contributed to a sense of uncertain sovereignty (Klumbytė 2019, 2022) in Eastern Europe, manifesting in accelerated militarization. This essay invites a more nuanced debate around militarization and borderland futures. Following a series of protests against the construction of a military training ground (*poligonas*) in Kapčiamiestis, Southern Lithuania, we suggest that the forest disrupts the *technē* (Scott 1998) of militarization by creating glitches in its practice, the abstracted logic of territorial legibility and calculation. The forest has become a site from which unexpected alliances between local residents, environmentalists, and neighboring Polish communities have begun to articulate alternative understandings of life, temporality, and security, resisting the reduction of the forest to strategic military terrain.

KEYWORDS: *poligonas*, militarization, forest, Lithuania, borderland.

On December 15, 2025, the residents of Kapciamiestis, a small township of five hundred residents at Lithuania's southernmost border with Poland, learned – in their words – "along with the rest of the nation" – of the government's plans to build a *poligonas* (Lithuanian for military training ground), directly adjacent to their municipality. The news was presented via a post on the Ministry of National Defense's website. The proposed training ground would not only appropriate part of Kapčiamiestis' local forest, displacing 13 farmsteads and annexing approximately 2,000 private land plots, but would ultimately span 146 square miles and encompass five nature reserves. The presence of the *poligonas* (we use the Lithuanian terminology to draw upon socio-historical connotations and indexicality) would ultimately mean the presence of 4,000–5,000 NATO troops conducting military exercises in an area known for its dense forests, mushroom picking, and rivers that attract kayakers from across Lithuania.

DECEMBER'S ANNOUNCEMENT took residents by surprise, even shock. A week later, the crowd of local residents who gathered to meet with government officials packed the meeting space and spilled out onto the street, voicing concerns that families who had lived for generations in the area would be displaced,

The Kapčiamiestis training ground will enhance the security of Lithuania's southern border



Kapčiamiestis poligonas' plan as presented on the Ministry of Defense website.

ecotourism destroyed, and that the presence of the poligonas would inevitably draw military confrontation to Kapčiamiestis itself. Representatives from the Ministry of Defense and accompanying government officials appeared unprepared to address the residents' concerns with anything other than a narrative of the poligonas' essential role in national security. They were booed down and jeered several times.[1]

BY EARLY JANUARY discontent had transformed into organized protest. Local activists circulated a petition against the poligonas which gathered over 13,000 signatures, and a new slogan had been taken up on social media: "Kapčiamiestis for Life – Not a Poligonas!" (Kapčiamiestis gyvenimui – ne poligonui!). A second public meeting that went even more poorly than the first circulated virally on-line, attracting national attention. At the center of these interventions, however, was not simply opposition to military infrastructure. A particular organizing principle and a moral center to their argumentation emerged – the forest. Evoked as a source of livelihood, heritage, and local identity, the Kapčiamiestis forest came to embody all which seemed to be at stake with the construction of the poligonas. With local resistance growing and messages of support coming in from elsewhere in Lithuania, was it possible that the forest was proving a glitch in what otherwise seemed an inevitable escalation in militarization?

The role of the forest in Lithuanian memory

Defense of the forest quickly became a unifying rallying cry that helped solidify not just local opposition to the poligonas, but also drew in support from outside the region, including from allies that otherwise might not politically align with residents in an area which tends to lean conservative. But why?

To begin to address that question, it is important to consider the role of the forest in Lithuanian historical memory and national identity. Once renowned across Europe for its vast wilderness,[2] the Lithuanian forest figures prominently in myth and folklore as the home to mysterious beings, sacred and otherwise, informing Baltic neopagan practices, the celebration of traditional holidays such as Shrove Tuesday, and even contemporary children's literature. It's density has provided sustenance and a source of livelihoods for generations in the form of mushrooms, berries, and space for bee-keeping practices. It has also provided shelter for stories figures such as the 19th century book smugglers that helped keep the Lithuanian language alive under Russian occupation, and the armed partisan resistance against the Soviets. That same density has also figured in more troubling histories, serving as the site of atrocities committed by both the Soviets and the Nazis during WWII, and more recently, as the defining feature of the deadly Green Border between Belarus and the European Union.

Perhaps of more immediate relevance to Kapčiamiestis residents, following Independence in 1991 forests that had been largely forgotten became a profitable resource not just for a burgeoning ecotourism trade, but for lumber, much of which was and continues to be logged by Scandinavian companies. All over the country, the clearing of the forest has become a deeply troubling issue for many, not just as a threat to a shared cultural resource, but in connection to outside, even foreign interests. This history matters for understanding the Kapčiamiestis mobilization: residents are not simply defending a mythical, pristine wilderness, but a forest already shaped by competing practices of extraction, recreation, and livelihood. In addition, environmental claims should not be understood as inherently emancipatory. Scholarship on "ecobordering"[3] draws attention to the ways in which environmental narratives can themselves become folded into projects of bordering and exclusion, including by casting migration from the Global South as an environmental threat while obscuring the political and economic processes that produce ecological crises.

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Protests continue: "Hands off the Forest"

By January, the Kapčiamiestis Community Forest Association (Kapčiamiesčio Miško Bendruomenė) had been formed, and was raising funds. Publics concerned with the protection of for-



Driving through Lithuania's borderlands one sees an increasingly securitized border infrastructure. PHOTO: JULIJA KEKSTAITE

ests countrywide, some of which had already been organizing for several years and documenting the impact of the poligonai established in Pabradė and Rūdininkai, took up the cause and circulated discussions of the topic on-line. Members of Girių Inspekcija [Forest Inspection] and Apginkime Miškus! [Let's Defend the Forests] began offering legal and tactical advice, and in a very symbolic move, protesters came together January 24, to form a 3 km long human chain of about 1,000 people from Kapčiamiestis to the border with Belarus, a reference to the 1989 Baltic Way protest against Soviet occupation. When protests moved from Kapčiamiestis to Vilnius during Parliamentary discussions of the poligonas, signs read, "Hands off the Forest" (Šalin Rankas nuo Miško); another read, "nature rejects political violence – she is our shared responsibility." The historical and potential future significance of the forest to national security was also emphasized. One attendee of the first public meeting reminded government officials of the celebrated history of the decade-long guerilla resistance against the Soviets which operated in forests across the country, including near Kapčiamiestis, commenting, "Partisans went to us for food; when you cut the forest, where will you go," and posts on-line emphasized the role of forests as natural barriers and places of shelter in (anticipated) wartime.

Debates about economic and national security – ostensibly settled with the assurance of government payouts to landowners and an undeniable geopolitical risk – could not be extricated from debates about the forest itself. As discussion and voting favorable to the poligonas moved forward in parliament, with a request for an environmental and noise impact assessment having failed to slow down the process, the Community Forest Association decided to raise the issue internationally. In coalition with nearby communities in Lithuania and across the border in Poland, it lodged a complaint with the United Nations Economic Commission for Europe, arguing that construction of the Kapčiamiestis poligonas without environmental review violated the Espoo Convention, which requires the evaluation of the environmental impacts of major projects with potentially significant cross border effects. Although the construction of the Kapčiamiestis poligonas received final approval from the Seimas (parliament) on April 23, at the time of our writing (September), the complaint is being discussed at the meeting of the Implementation Committee of the UNECE.

From the limits of democracy to the glitch

Why did the concerns of Kapčiamiestis and other nearby communities seem to fall on deaf ears not only of the government, but also most of the country outside of a highly localized region? How is it that environmental concerns deemed significant enough to warrant international review drew in support only from highly specific local and environmentally minded publics?

As scholars have noted, Russia's protracted war against Ukraine and the international community's tepid response, as well as Russia's increasingly provocative rhetoric and hybrid at-



Attendees exhibiting national symbols during the border hike on the National Day February 16, 2026.

PHOTO: JULIJA KEKSTAITE

tacks against the Baltics[4] have exacerbated a sense of uncertain sovereignty in Lithuania,[5] provoking increasingly radical assertions.[6] The joint Russian-Belarusian ZAPAD military exercises, which hosted representatives from 20 countries and took place at a training site approximately 10 kilometers from the Lithuanian and Polish border earlier in September, appear to have only further heightened the sense of vulnerability. The space for nuanced political discussion seems increasingly limited, and those who would question militarization, let alone securitization of the borders, risk their loyalty to the nation being questioned, or worse, being characterized as a *vatnikas*, or a mouthpiece and supporter of the Russian government and its propaganda. Indeed, despite legitimate concerns, Kapčiamiestis residents felt compelled to qualify their statements when speaking in public and/or to the press, such as when the city chairwoman explained:

> **We're not against a poligonas, we're not vatniks, and we're not against the security of Lithuania [...] it's just that Kapčiamiestis is not the place to build a poligonas.**[7]

Despite such clarifications, opposition to the poligonas has been widely dismissed as part of Russian disinformation campaigns.[8] The question, then, is not simply why these residents failed to stop the poligonas. It is also what their mobilization makes visible about the limits of the political space in which such questions can be raised. On the EU's eastern border, forested borderlands have become politically significant through competing projects of military defense, environmental conservation, and security governance.

The limits of democracy and the contours of the political

In their analysis of intersecting conflicts in Poland's Bialowieza Forest, the primeval woodland stretching across the Polish-Belarusian border, Blavascunas and Cope[9] describe the forest as "a site of, participant in, and provoker of a series of protests". These include environmental mobilizations against logging and in support of bark beetle rewilding, local opposition to conservation measures grounded in concerns over livelihoods dependent on logging, and competing nationalist and activist mobilizations against and in support of migrating people from the Global South crossing the forest during the so-called EU-Belarus border crisis.[10] Bringing these struggles together as an emerging "ecology of protest," Blavascunas and Cope expose the limits of democratic politics by raising the question of what, and who, is allowed to count as a political subject.

BUILDING ON THIS INSIGHT, we see how the mobilization of environmental claims by border residents and their allies regarding the Kapčiamiestis forested borderlands points to another possibility: that of an expansion of who and what happens to count as a political subject, as well as a disruption of technocratic categories of governance and its legibility.

The mobilization around the planned military infrastructure brought together actors who do not necessarily share a political project: local residents on both sides of the border, summer house owners, environmental activists, and politicians whose broader political commitments may and do differ considerably.

"WHAT ARE WE PROTECTING, AND WHAT FORMS OF LIFE GET TO BE SACRIFICED IN THE PROCESS?"

On February 16, the national holiday "Day of the Restoration of the State", the Kapčiamiestis community organized an eight-kilometer hike that we travelled to attend. Almost everyone participating was wrapped in Lithuanian flags, as a display of patriotism. Such deployment of national symbols was striking given media representations of local opposition to the planned military training area, in which residents have been portrayed as Russian "trolls" or as anti-state. One of the men we met after the walk wearing a "Ne – poligonui" [No to the military training area] pin told us that he and two friends came from Kybartai [border town in southwestern Lithuania] 1,5 hours' drive, to take part in the march. Thinking back on a skeptic's comment "why are you coming here? Everything has already been decided" he exclaimed:

> **But if we think like that, they'll just continue doing whatever *they* want here. I said, that's exactly why we need to come. I came to show my support.**

While some participate in explicitly nationalist forms of political identification or its expression, others talk of possibilities of peaceful co-existence with the authoritarian neighbor as their satellite antennas catch Belarusian television waves.

THIS POSES A CHALLENGE of where to place the critique of the poligonas that centers the forest across the left-right divide. It seems that the residents of Kapčiamiestis are not protesting against the security imperative altogether. But by speaking from their own situated experiences, they show that there are more elements at stake than simply *the threat* of authoritarian neighbors and the response to it.

This makes the forest analytically significant. Border residents' interventions bring into view questions of the possibility of attaching different meanings to redefine what counts as life, time, and security, expanding the political space for contestation or *the political*. What are we protecting, and what forms of life get to be sacrificed in the process? What are the limits of logic beneath the calculus of expanding military infrastructures?

In other words, it is not only that residents are mobilizing environmental language, but that they unsettle the frame/logic through which it is made governable, showing that not everything can be mapped, measured, and calculated.

In his analysis of large-scale state planning projects that re-

structure nature and society, from 19th century scientific forestry, to Soviet collectivization, to Le Corbusier modernist urban planning, James C. Scott[11] shows how states rely on a logic of *techne*: an attempt to make complex social and material worlds legible through abstraction, measurement and calculation. The border zone makes this logic particularly tangible. Entry into the area requires a permit issued by the State Border Guard Service (VSAT), while movement is monitored through an infrastructure of cameras, listening, and thermal devices. Kapčiamiestis poligonas plan is also subjected to such logic of top-down decisions of territorial zoning and calculations. The coalitions around questions of the forest show how techne's vision fails to capture multiple valences of meaning that forest affords.

We understand this as a glitch in techne of militarization.

Glitches of techne

First glitch. Forest as a living ecosystem, not a resource to be contained

In the infamous meeting with government representatives and the military, which was also streamed live, residents confronted what was presented as a consultation over the planned military training ground. The meeting was heated: residents were subjected to standing up for the national anthem (some remained seated), followed by a presentation in which the military and government representatives showed some maps and tried to assure the residents that their land and forest would be compensated at market value, or even more favorably and those whose houses were not in the poligonas territory but next to it would be able to stay. Some residents rose to challenge the logic underpinning this valuation. For them, the forest could not simply be assigned a price tag "in euros": it was an ecosystem, a site of attachment and memory.

HERE WE SEE a clash of different logics of valuation. From the perspective of state officials, the forest is rendered as a resource that can be measured, valued and transformed. What we observe here suggests that Foucauldian accounts of the governing of life and death through biopolitics in the borderlands are insufficient on their own. Instead, Povinelli's concept of *geontopower*[12] draws our attention to the ways in which late liberal tactics and discourses govern not only life in the borderlands, but also, and perhaps most importantly here, the political boundary between what counts as Life and Nonlife. Residents and environmental activists challenge this boundary by insisting that the forest carries emotional, cultural and affective value, while also drawing attention to the ecosystems and animals that inhabit it. In doing so, they unsettle the assumption that the forest can be reduced to a resource or an interchangeable object.

Security beyond military infrastructure: Forest as shelter and an ally

Another glitch that we observe concerns the notion of security. If the State frames security primarily in terms of military power and territorial defense, residents themselves understand the forest as a potential source of safety. This is evident, for instance, in references to the forest as a site of WWII partisan resistance. Here, the forest is remembered not simply as territory to be controlled or defended, but as an ally, shelter and source of protection. Security, in this account, does not necessarily require the transformation of the forest into military infrastructure; the forest itself can be part of what makes life secure. This also exposes some contradictions in relation to other security and militarization projects planned in Lithuania, such as reswamping or rewildering of territories into a natural border of defense,[13] where nature itself is strategically mobilized in the service of "defense", revealing how techne can manipulate and reorganize the boundary between life, value and security.

Time beyond the urgency of now: forest temporality

Lastly the limits of techne become apparent in how time is imagined, experienced and valued. While the State frames the future through the inevitability and urgency of war, this temporal horizon comes into friction with multilayered temporalities of border residents and activists. Border residents in their protest communication repeatedly refer to the forest as something to be enjoyed and experienced by the future generations – a long-term temporality that stands in conflict with that of military urgency. Environmental activists on their part invoke an even more expansive post-human temporality. Mindaugas Docaitis, director of Girių Inspekcija, a grassroots environmental organization opposing forest exploitation in Lithuania, reflected on how some of the border residents, after sustained efforts to protest the military training ground, may eventually burn out:

> **Maybe it's not worth it to burn oneself out over this. Nature will grow back; we just won't see it.**

His reflection offers us a different temporal horizon altogether. It acknowledges the possibility of political failure in protesting the military training ground while placing hope beyond the human temporal scale. In this sense, the forest also unsettles techne through the temporality that exceeds the state's urgent calculative horizon.

As we keep pondering these glitches, the conclusion we draw is that the forest cannot be fully contained, nor can it be fully computed as it glitches the techne data set. It is a lived environment, entangled with human and more-than-human relations, histories, and futures. Whether or not the glitch is permanent remains to be seen.

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