

BIAŁOWIEŻA FOREST AS A TOURIST PRODUCT OF THE AREA ON THE POLISH-BELARUSIAN BORDERLAND

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Białowieża Forest as a tourist product of the area on the Polish-Belarusian borderland

The Białowieża Forest is a unique area in Europe, being the only remaining part of primeval deciduous and mixed forests in the region. Favourable relations between Poland and Belarus after the collapse of the USSR opened up the previously closed border, resulting in new challenges and opportunities for the tourism product development in the Białowieża Forest. This article explores the historical and geopolitical factors that have influenced changes in tourist traffic dynamics. It examines the impact of various factors at different levels, scales and dimensions, including natural and cultural values, environmental protection, accessibility, and border and visa-related matters. The study suggests that factors at the national and international levels have a more significant impact on the tourist product than those at the local and regional levels. One of the primary barriers to the development of a joint cross-border tourist product is the lack of free border crossings, although the relaxation period of the border regime in 2015 – 2019 established a border visa-free zone in Belarus.

Key words: Białowieża Forest, border, national park, tourist product, tourist traffic, Belarus, Poland

INTRODUCTION

The Białowieża Forest is an exceptionally interesting region of Central and Eastern Europe for various reasons. The natural values of this area on the Polish-Belarusian border are outstanding. Nevertheless, this area is known in the world's mass opinion as the place where the Belavezha Accords was signed and the USSR ceased to exist. This event opened the closed border between the countries of the West and the East and became a symbol of easing relations, building the “new bridges” of cooperation, as well as development of tourism. The process of changing the functions of borders, started in the 1990s, has gone through several phases and continues to the present day. Therefore, the border tourist area of the Białowieża Forest is constantly faced with new and most serious challenges, both local, regional and global.

The sustained activity of this entity, having at times the features of cross-border tourism space, depends on many factors, including: natural and cultural values, aspects related to the accessibility of the area and the specificity of borders and crossing them, as well as historical and political relations between bordering countries and political alliances (Więckowski 2010 and Szymańska et al. 2021). It is also worth paying attention to the “symbolic” nature of the Białowieża Primeval Forest.

The Białowieża Forest is the last fragment of primeval deciduous and mixed forests in Europe, which used to continuously cover the area from the Atlantic

Ocean to the Ural Mountains. Furthermore, many species of plants and animals in these wilderness have been preserved in their elemental state, as well as unique specimens that are nowhere to be found in the world. This area is the one and only example in the world of effective nature protection over the course of 500 years – from the Jagiellonian dynasty's times in the Late Medieval Period to the outbreak of World War I (Gutowski et al. 2000). The Białowieża Primeval Forest is located at the meeting point of different cultures of various nations, as well as this, in various historical stages it belonged both to many folk and state organisms. That is why these wildlands belong to the heritage not only of Poland or Belarus, but of the whole world, which is confirmed by their inclusion on the UNESCO Heritage List.

The tourist area of the Białowieża Forest is a spectacular reflection of the constantly changing cross-border socio-economic and political processes, which are both integration and disintegration. These processes have shown a significant impact on the accessibility of the area depending on the changes of the border. It begins in the epoch of the Grand Duchy of Lithuania and the Polish – Lithuanian Commonwealth, goes respectively through the periods of the Russian Empire, the Second Polish Republic, and the USSR and the Poland People's Republic to the present times of the post-socialist political transformation (Sienkiewicz and Olczak 2016). After Poland joined the European Union and NATO, the area of the Białowieża Primeval Forest was situated on the eastern outer border with Belarus and simultaneously with the Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS) and the Collective Security Treaty Organization (CSTO), which entailed many different geopolitical dilemmas.

The primary objective of this article is to examine the historical and geopolitical elements operating at various levels (such as local, national, and international) that impact the transformation of tourist movement within the tourism product in the Polish-Belarusian border region of the Białowieża Forest.

CONCEPTUAL BACKGROUND

This article is an attempt to analyze the area of the Białowieża Forest from the perspective of a tourist product on the borderland including four components: tourist product, change of borders, Multi-level (scalar) governance (MLG) and Tourism area life cycle (TALC) – Fig.1.

Tourist product

From the point of view of a potential client, a tourist product can be defined as a package of tangible and intangible components, based on the possibilities of spending time in the destination (Middleton 1996). The concept of a tourist product of an area (region) is very complex and has many dimensions and planes (Marczak and Borzyszkowski 2009 and Stec 2015). In addition, the components and definitions of an area's tourism product in the scientific literature often correlate and overlap with such concepts as a tourist region (area or space), tourist attraction as well as tourist destination and reception area etc (Kruczek 2011, pp. 7 – 19 and Więckowski 2014).

Many authors draw attention to the different levels of tourism products, local, regional, national and international, and focus on researching the tourism products of the Podlaskie Voivodeship and the Białowieża Forest area (Gralak 2007,

Michałowski and Łagowska 2007 and Powęska 2007). Moreover, the tourist product of the Białowieża Forest is an excellent opportunity for the development and promotion of silvanus tourism, including health tourism and ecotourism (Rutkiewicz 2013, Jalinik 2016, Kiryluk 2016 and Jalinik 2017a). There are also studies examining this tourist area as a product in terms of nature protection (National Park), emphasizing the negative aspects of anthropogenic pressure on nature caused by tourist traffic (Kazulka 2002, Gierasimiuk et al. 2005, Adamowicz 2007, Chojnacka-Ożga and Ożga 2007 and Koziel 2010).

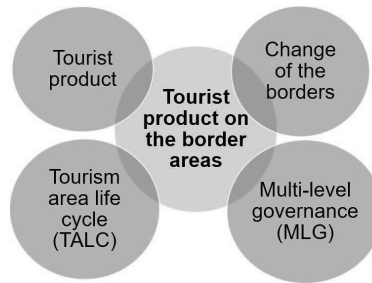


Fig. 1. Conceptual background

Source: Author's own elaboration.

This study will utilize a definition of a tourist product of the area as a composite set of smaller components linked by an overarching idea, which comprises simple elements such as things, services, objects, and places, as well as more intricate elements like events, trails, and places, to provide a comprehensive understanding of the tourist product of the area. (Kaczmarek et al. 2005, pp. 74 – 78, 101 – 102).

Change of border(s)

Another important theoretical component is the issue of boundaries and changes in their functions. Practicing tourism always means moving, i. e. crossing borders between administrative units at different sub-national or international levels, which is in itself an attractive experience for the traveler (Timothy 2001). Already several decades ago, attention was drawn to the exceptional importance of the borderland as, on the one hand, a rather desolate, backward and peripheral area, and on the other, an area least susceptible to anthropopressure with high natural and cultural heritage values (Więckowski 2018 and 2020). National borders hold symbolic significance, serving as a valuable asset in shaping cross-border regional identity and image development. Borders also can be leveraged to distinguish destinations as unique and distinct, offering various advantages such as economic differentials, intriguing physical border elements, cultural peculiarities, and distinctive legal and regulatory differences (Sohn 2022). Four types of borderland attractiveness were identified as key categories that contribute to the appeal of borders for tourism: peripherality (highlighting potential natural and cultural resources), differences (emphasizing economic and cultural contrasts), the borderline (referring to border markers or infrastructures), and cross-border spaces (encompassing specific areas and products) – Więckowski (2023).

The border can have a significant influence on the functioning of the economic system (including tourism), depending on whether it is closed or open and whether

there are any ongoing bordering, re-bordering, or de-bordering processes taking place (Sendhardt 2013 and Brańka et al. 2020). When a border is closed or highly restrictive, it can make it difficult or even impossible for tourists to cross into a particular region. This can have a negative impact on the development of tourist products, as it can limit the number of potential visitors and reduce the overall demand for tourism services. For example, a region that is undergoing a process of de-bordering may become more open and accessible to tourists, leading to the development of new tourist products and experiences. On the other hand, a region that is undergoing a process of re-bordering may become more closed off and difficult to access, which could have a negative impact on tourism (Więckowski and Timothy 2021). Overall, bordering, re-bordering and de-bordering processes are interrelated and dynamic, constantly shaping and reshaping the ways in which borders are constructed and understood in the contemporary world (Sassen 2007).

Tourism Area Life Cycle (TALC)

The article will partially utilize the TALC framework to describe the evolutionary stages of tourism destinations. The model proposes that tourism destinations go through a cycle of development stages, including exploration, involvement, development, consolidation, stagnation, and decline (Butler 1980 and 2009). Tourist traffic, or the number of tourists visiting a destination, is one of the main indicators used to determine the stage of development of a tourism destination within the TALC model.

Multi-level Governance (MLG)

Some related aspects will be taken into account in the discussion of MLG (Piattoni 2010). MLG in tourism on the borderland areas between Poland and Belarus involves decision-making and coordination at the local, regional, and international levels (Otto et al. 2011). This includes promoting sustainable and inclusive tourism development that benefits both sides of the border and addresses geopolitical tensions that can affect tourism.

The tourist product on the border areas refers to the various tourism-related offerings available to travellers in regions situated near national borders. On the one hand, such tourist products depend on whether the border is open or closed. On the other hand, a tourist product located near a national border can affect the border crossing regime since national, regional, and local authorities (MLG model) are interested in creating the best possible image of the tourist product. One of the essential indicators of the functioning of the tourist product on the border areas is both domestic (without crossing the border) and transborder (with crossing) tourist traffic, which allows for identifying the phases and factors influencing the development of the area (TALC approach). Additionally, a tourist product in a border area can differ. It might be cross-border or not, existing only on one side of the border or exist on both sides independently.

Nevertheless, the literature on the subject lacks a holistic treatment of the tourist product of the Białowieża Forest area, a comparison of tourist traffic to both the Belarusian and Polish parts of the National Park, as well as data related to the cross-border nature of tourism.

METHODS AND AIM

Firstly, the study used a literature review method related to tourist products and border issues. Secondly, it provided an analysis of legal documents related to border and visa issues in both Poland and Belarus. Finally, this study attempted a comprehensive analysis of statistical data on tourist attendance from the Belarusian and Polish Statistical Offices, National Parks, and the Polish Border Guard from the 1990s to the present.

The first recorded data on tourist traffic in the Polish part of the Białowieża Forest appeared in the interwar period and were recorded in scientific studies during the existence of the Polish People's Republic (Karpiński 1947, p. 68, Falińska 1968, pp. 351 – 356, Kawecki 1968, pp. 357 – 360 and Bajko 2001, p. 179). In the case of the Białowieża National Park, data on tourist traffic, both past and present, are generally calculated based on tickets sold for museums, the European bison enclosure, and the nature reserve (Okołów 1991, pp. 341 and 346 and Miazek 2020). There are also studies related to tourist traffic in the area of the Białowieża Forest in the last dozen or so years, which are related to problems of accessibility, motivation, and traveler structure (Partyka 2010a and 2010b, Ziółkowski and Szpilko 2014, Jalinik 2017b, Miazek 2020, Szymańska et al. 2021 and Szymanska 2022).

The study also used statistical data containing information on tourist traffic in the Belarusian Belovezhskaya Pushcha National Park (Krawczuk 2016, 2017 and 2018). However, data on tourist traffic in the Belarusian part of the National Park had to be supplemented with information from the media, and it is also unclear what method was used to count tourists. Most likely, these data are estimated, so they may not be accurate and even created to artificially increase the value of the tourism product. Therefore, these data were compared with information on tickets sold to the Nature Museum, which unfortunately is sporadic.

The aim of this article is to determine the historical and geopolitical factors at different levels (local, national, international etc.) influencing the change in the structure and dynamics of tourist traffic in the tourist product on the borderland of the Białowieża Forest, based on statistical data from the Białowieża-Piererów border crossing as well as tourist frequency in the National Parks in the period from the beginning of the post-socialist transformation. The following research hypothesis was formulated: factors from the local and regional level (bottom-up approach) show a smaller impact on tourist traffic than factors from the national and international level (top-down approach). The specific objectives are to explain the phases of operation of the tourist product of the Białowieża Forest area, and to determine whether it is or not a cross-border tourist product of the area.

NATURAL AND CULTURAL VALUES

Natural values

The Białowieża Forest (Polish: Puszcza Białowieska, Belarusian: Bielawiežskaja Pušča) is one of the oldest protected primeval forests in Europe, located on the border of Belarus (Brest and Grodno regions) and Poland (Podlaskie Voivodeship) in the east part of the physiographic region Great European Plain. The Białowieża Primeval Forest is a natural ecosystem, that has existed for thousands of years, which underlines its unique value and wild beauty as a continuity of spontaneous natural processes in the backwoods with original features, not disturbed by external

factors (Kossak 2006, pp. 6 – 7). From landscape, ecological and historical viewpoints, both the Belorussian and the Polish Białowieża Forest form one cohesive forest network, belonging together and sharing the same water drainage system (De Bruijn 2002, p. 24).

The average age of the Białowieża Forest is more than 100 years, some parts of the forest are 250 – 350 years old. More than a thousand giant trees have been registered in the primeval forest – “King-oak” and other 400 – 600-year-old oaks, 250 – 350-year-old ash and pine trees, 200 – 250-year-old spruces (Yurgenson and Probald 2017). The Białowieża Primeval Forest has no equal in Europe in terms of the number of plant and animal species. Almost one thousand species (958) of vascular spore and seed plants grow here, 260 species of mosses and bryophytes, more than 290 species of lichens and 1,570 species of fungi are registered (Kazulka 2002, p. 60).

The fauna catalog includes over 11,500 species of animals (including 9,282 species of insects), many rare species, endangered with extinction, especially those associated with dead wood. The last free European bison (zubr) population in Europe survived here until 1919, as well as this the process of their restitution and finally their release (1952) was concentrated exactly in the Białowieża Forest. Today it is the largest free population of this species in the world – 624 individuals at the end of 2002 (Gołębiewska 2003).

The forest is significant for Poles and Belarusians, contributing to their tourism and national identity. It features elements of fauna (like bison) and flora that often appear in state-representing materials, including postage stamps, postcards, money, and national drinks (National Bank 2022).

Cultural values

The Białowieża Forest is located on the border of cultures, so this area possesses all the features of cultural heritage in the social dimension (religion, multiethnicity and multilingualism), material dimension (archaeological artifacts, architecture and folk culture) and spiritual life (art and music) – Kalinowski and Moroz-Keczyńska (2011, pp. 7 – 12). The area of the Białowieża Forest has been inhabited by ancient people since the Neolithic times, as evidenced by artifacts found by archaeologists at least a hundred years ago (Szmit 1923). In that epoch the area of the Białowieża Primeval Forest was inhabited by the Yotvingian (Sudovian) tribe, which belonged to the ethno-linguistic group of Baltic people (Kaminski 1963). The forest for these people was of sacred importance, therefore the nature, especially of animals (bison) and plants (oak) and natural landscapes (giant stones, sources and conifers) was highly valued as essences or places of power (Zamorska 2020). This habit of the Yotvingians as a tradition of indigenous tribal peoples is totemic in nature and encompassed all the societies of the period preceding the development of organized religious systems (Baker 2021). Tourist guides for the Białowieża Primeval Forest still feature many popular “sacred” destinations among visitors on recent maps (Aleksiejuk et al. 2015).

For the first time the Puszcza Region was mentioned in 983 from the Ipatievskaya Chronicles of Kievan Rus’ as an old primeval forest. In the 11th and 12th centuries, the Slavic tribes began to arrive in the Puszcza area, mostly using the Western Bug basin as a transport artery. Consequently, in 1276 the Tower of Kamyenyets was built as a frontier strong point on the northern border of the Principality of Volhynia (Kazulka 2002, p. 57). The first documented royal hunt in the

Forest took place in 1409. Grand Duke of Lithuania and King of Poland Władysław II Jagiełło organized an eight-day hunt to obtain food supplies for the planned war against the Teutonic Order.

Nature protection

There are statements in literature which claim that the Białowieża Forest has been a protected area for over 500 years. The protection of this area at the turn of the 14th and 15th centuries meant that all traces of human activity survived in very good condition, creating a unique cultural landscape, which was usually destroyed in deforested areas (Olczak and Krasnodebski 2022). Nevertheless, it should be emphasized that the authorities of the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth, and later the administration of the Russian Empire, introduced these measures primarily with the aim of safeguarding animals to facilitate hunting for kings and nobles. Therefore, the Białowieża Forest in those times was not covered by environmental protection in the modern sense, because partial and sometimes unorganized economic exploitation of the area continued during this period of time – felling of wood, extraction of wood coal and potash, fishing, etc.

The Białowieża Forest, as a strictly protected area of the natural environment, dates back to 1921, when the authorities of the Second Polish Republic created the Reserve Forest Inspectorate. The Białowieża National Park was officially established in 1932, and was renovated by the authorities of the People's Republic of Poland after World War II in 1947 (Walencik 2006, pp. 8 – 9). The Soviet authorities organized “The State Reserve-Hunting Farm” for the communist elite in the Belarusian part of the area, which was transformed into a Belovezhskaya Pushcha National Park after the overthrow of the USSR in 1991. The key point in the process of deepening the environmental protection of the Białowieża Forest was the inclusion of both, the Polish part of the area (in 1976) and the Belarusian part (in 1992) in the UNESCO World Heritage List. As a result, the Białowieża Forest became one of seven transboundary heritage natural sites in the world and one of three in Europe.

ACCESSIBILITY OF THE TOURIST AREA

The accessibility of the Białowieża Primeval Forest tourism product is a crucial aspect that is closely linked to the transportation system and tourist infrastructure. On the one hand, numerous tourist websites and tourist guides offer various ways of getting to the destination, both by private and collective transport. For example, it is possible to get to the Belovezhskaya Pushcha from Minsk by private car along the Brest – Brest (M 1) highway to the turn to Zhabinka (R 7) or Slonim (R 21) then to the town of Kamenets and further to Kamenyuki (R 83); (“Belovezhskaya Pushcha” National Park 2023). The main transport infrastructure on the Polish side is the national road No. 66, which transits through the area of the Hajnowka district and connects the national road No. 19 with the road border crossing with Belarus (Połowce – Pieszczatka) and four provincial roads No. 685, 687, 693 and 689 (Szymańska and Panfiluk 2022, pp. 143 – 144). On the other hand, there are also railway and bus lines that connect both Minsk (usually via Brest) and Warsaw (usually via Białystok or Siedlce) with the tourist destination (Białowieski Park Narodowy 2023). Nevertheless, the tourist area of the Białowieża Forest in international and national terms is situated on the sideline of the communication axes connecting key metropolitan centers in Poland and Belarus.

From the local perspective, both the Polish and Belarusian areas of the Białowieża Forest have a sufficient and marked network of hiking and cycling routes and tourist paths. What needs to be emphasized is that the Belarusian national park, compared to the Polish one, covers a larger area, has more bicycle paths and accommodation facilities (Fig. 2). Nevertheless, the Białowieża Forest area is absolutely dominated by tourists who travel by private cars rather than by public transport (Szymanska 2022). This results in the need to adapt the local infrastructure to their needs – extending the road network, enlarging car parks, camping sites, and motels. In addition, the integration of transport systems (one common ticket for all means of transport) and the possibility of renting e-bikes, e-scooters, and e-cars via a mobile application would increase the attractiveness of the region and would also contribute to environmental protection and sustainable development of transport (Szymańska et al. 2021 and Szymańska and Panfiluk 2022).



Fig. 2. Arrangement of tourist facilities in Belovezhskaya Pushcha National Park

Source: Photo taken by Marek Więckowski during joint field research in 2019.

BORDER AND VISA ISSUES

Another important factor affecting the functioning of border tourist products is the issue directly related to the course of the border and permeability. In the inter-war period, the Białowieża Forest existed as a unique natural and tourist area within the Second Polish Republic. However, after World War II, the area of the Białowieża Forest was divided between the USSR and the Polish People's Republic. This caused problems related to both establishing the boundary line separating the common natural area and infrastructural problems, e.g. establishing a reserve seat complex on the Soviet (Belarusian) side in Kamieniuki. In 1986, the Białowieża-Piererow Polish-Soviet Simplified Border Checkpoint was opened and functioned until the overthrow of the Socialist Bloc (Dziennik Ustaw 1986a and 1986b.). Crossing the border was allowed for citizens of both countries permanently residing in the border areas on the basis of permits for a period of up to 7 days.

The contemporary period in the functioning of the Białowieża-Piarierów Crossing Point began in 1994 with the opening of the possibility of crossing the border for citizens of Belarus and Poland on foot (on skis) or by private bicycle. (Monitor Polski 1994). From the beginning of 1990s until the middle of 2000s the process of de-bordering on the Polish-Belarusian state border area was thoroughly observed. The visitors of Białowieża Forest on their part were not obligated to possess any visa, only the international pass and permit (voucher). Since 2005, the checkpoint has been open for international tourists from April 1 to September 30 from 8.00 am to 8.00 pm Central European time, and from October 1 to March 31 from 8.00 am to 6.00 pm (Aleksiejuk et al. 2015, p. 104, Monitor Polski 2005a and Monitor Polski 2005b). In addition, from the times of Poland's accession to the EU and then to the Schengen Zone, Belarusians were obliged to have a Polish national visa (i. e. from 2004) or Schengen visa (i. e. from 2007). The Belarusians can apply for visas at the Polish Embassy in Minsk or at the Consular Offices in Grodno or Brest. Visa applications for Polish citizens may be submitted in Warsaw, Białystok and Biała Podlaska.

Another step towards easing the border regime was taken by the Belarusian authorities in 2015 by introducing the so-called visa-free zones inside Belarus along the Polish and part of the Lithuanian border. Visa-free entry was allowed to Poles as citizens of seventy other countries of the world on the basis of a passport, medical insurance and a pass that could be purchased online (Więckowski and Cyar-geenka 2019). Firstly the process was attempted in the area of the National Park in order to improve the trans-border dimensions of tourist product as well as increase the tourist frequentation (Tab. 1). Secondly the visa free zone was expanded to the Brest city and a couple of border districts with additional tourist products like Kamianets Tower and Brest Fortress. Finally, in 2019 the Brest and Belovezhskaya Puszcza tourist area was united with Grodno and Augustów Canal Recreational Park. As a result of the initialized re-bordering process is the appearance of 14 checkpoints and many means by which they can be crossed, not least on foot or by bicycle, or by car or bus, and by airplane or railway and by canoe or kayak (Augustów Canal). For its part, in the period 2015 – 2020, the Polish government also introduced a simplified procedure for Belarusians to obtain the so-called “shopping” visa, which was of course also used for tourist travel.

The process of the border relaxing (de-bordering) ended on March 15, 2020, when the border crossing Białowieża-Piarierów (and many others) were closed and are still not operational. It was influenced by six key factors of an interstate, international and even geopolitical character, which contributed to the ongoing process of re-bordering on the Polish-Belarusian borderland. First of all, it was the outbreak of the pandemic COVID-19 and the limitation of border crossing. Secondly, mass repression in Belarus began following the protests against electoral fraud that started in the summer of 2020 and continues to this day. Poland did not recognize the official election results nor Lukashenko as the president, which effectively led to a gradual reduction and even severing of political and economic ties at various levels. Furthermore, Poland began to assist political migrants from Belarus and immigrant organizations in exile. Thirdly, the Belarusian regime orchestrated the forced landing of a transit Ryanair plane (Athens – Vilnius) in Minsk in May 2021 with opposition activists on board, resulting in the complete suspension of flights between the EU (including Poland) and Belarus, as well as other transportation disruptions. The fourth negative factor in the interstate relations emerged with the

pressure from Belarusian authorities on the Polish minority, arrests of activists, the elimination of Polish-language classes, destruction of Polish cemeteries, and so on.

One can also add the fifth factor of the migration crisis on the Polish-Belarusian border, when Lukashenko's regime organized the trafficking of thousands of people from the Middle East and arranged for their the passage through the border, including through the area of the Białowieża Forest. As a response to this, at the end of 2021, the Polish authorities decided to build a five-meter wall with an arrowhead along the Polish-Belarusian border, which was already completed by the beginning of 2023. The erection of the wall, of course, will have a significant impact on the tourist area of the Białowieża Forest, both from the natural and marketing perspective, because the attractiveness and image of the destination as a cross-border tourist product has been decreased many times.

Furthermore, the most recent factor influencing the border situation relates to the outbreak of a conventional war in Ukraine in February 2022. During this conflict, the Belarusian authorities permitted the passage of the Russian army through their territory, effectively acting as a co-aggressor. Moreover, in February – April 2023, the Belarusian authorities continued to put pressure on the Polish national minority and reported the possibility of deploying Russian nuclear weapons near the Polish border. As a result, only the Terespol – Brest border crossing is open to passenger traffic, although from July 1, 2022, Belarus unilaterally introduced a visa-free entry mode for Polish citizens. Between July 2022 and October 2023, Polish citizens crossed the border in a visa-free regime only around 56,000 times (Belarusian Border Guard 2023). The main reason for this is the limited number of the border checkpoints, and from a political perspective, Belarus is currently experiencing a significant decline in its attractiveness to tourists. The next stages in bordering – de-bordering and re-bordering process are not predictable yet, but it seems, they will be strongly related to the geopolitical situation.

TOURIST TRAFFIC

Białowieża National Park in Poland

The most popular area among tourists visiting the Polish part of Białowieża National Park is the Bison Show Reserve. The number of visitors to the Bison Show Reserve, as reported by Polish statistical authorities and scientists, is considered as the total number of visitors to Białowieża National Park (Miażek 2020). During the observation period, there was a continuous increase in the number of tourists from around 90 – 100 thousand annually in the years 1997 – 2002 to about 140 – 150 thousand in the years 2007 – 2010 (Fig. 3). The peak years were 2016 (163 thousand) and 2019 (173 thousand). A decrease in the number of tourists has been observed since 2020, which is related to the restrictions imposed due to COVID-19. In 2022, the number of tourists dropped to almost the level of the late 1990s (98 thousand), which is linked to the migration crisis on the Polish-Belarusian border, as well as the introduction of a state of emergency by the Polish authorities in the border communities with Belarus in the second half of 2021, which significantly limited tourist traffic and damaged the image of the Białowieża Forest tourism product. The number of foreign tourists between 2003 and 2018 was around 9-12 thousand annually, and in 2020 – 2022, it dropped to as low as 2 – 3 thousand. The highest number of tourists arrives in July and August, while the lowest number is from November to March.

Tab. 1. Transboundary visa-free traffic zones in the Byelorussian part of the Białowieża Forest tourist area in the years 2015 – 2020

Borderland visa-free zone	<i>Belovezhskaya Puszca National Park</i>	<i>Brest tourism and recreation Zone</i>	<i>The Brest – Grodno Visa-Free Zone</i>
Date of opening	12.06.2015	01.01.2018	10.11.2019
Length of stay	Stay of up to 3 days	Stay of up to 10 days	Stay of up to 15 days
Necessary document and requirements	Passport, permit issued by travel agent, individual or group document confirming entry into the Park and medical insurance	Passport, permit issued by travel agent, individual or group document confirming visiting at least two attraction in Brest tourism and recreation Zone, medical insurance	Passport, permit issued by travel agent, individual or group document confirming visit visiting at least two attraction to the Brest – Grodno Visa-Free Zone and medical insurance
Area accessible to visa-free traffic	Parts of the Kamenets and Pruzhany Districts of Brest Region and the Svislach District of Hrodna Region	City of Brest and Districts of Brest, Zhabinka, Kamenets and Pruzhany in Brest Region, as well as Svislach District in Hrodna Region	The city of Brest and Districts of Brest, Zhabinka, Kamyanyets and Pruzhany; the city of Grodno and Districts of Grodno, Bierastavica, Vawkavysk, Voranava, Lida and Svislach
Border Crossings open for visa-free traffic	Białowieża–Pierarova (PL–BY)	In addition: Polowce – Peschatka (PL – BY), Sławatyce – Domachevo (PL–BY), Terespol –Brest (PL –BY) and Brest Airport (BY)	In addition: Rudawka – Lesnava (PL – BY), Kuznica Białostocka–Bruzgi (PL – BY), Privałka – Svendubrė (BY – LT), Privałka – Raigardas (BY –LT), Kuznica Białostocka – Grodno (PL – BY), Grodno Airport (BY), Byenyakoni–Shalchinkai (BY –LT), Bobrowniki–Bierastavica (PL – BY)

Notice: BY – Belarus, LT – Lithuania, PL – Poland.

Source: author's own elaboration.

Another popular destination among tourists is the Nature and Forest Museum, which is visited by around 65 thousand tourists annually (Fig.4). The highest number of tickets sold during the entire observation period was in 2009 – 95 thousand. The lowest number was in 1999 and 2000 – 2 thousand and 25 thousand respectively. According to press materials, this decline was due to the renovation of the building and the change in the museum's exhibition. Foreign tourists between 2000 and 2019 accounted for about 5% of the total number of visitors, ranging from 2.3 to 4.8 thousand people. Since 2020, the number of tourists has decreased by more than 2 times to around 30 thousand annually. The museum is most visited from May to August.

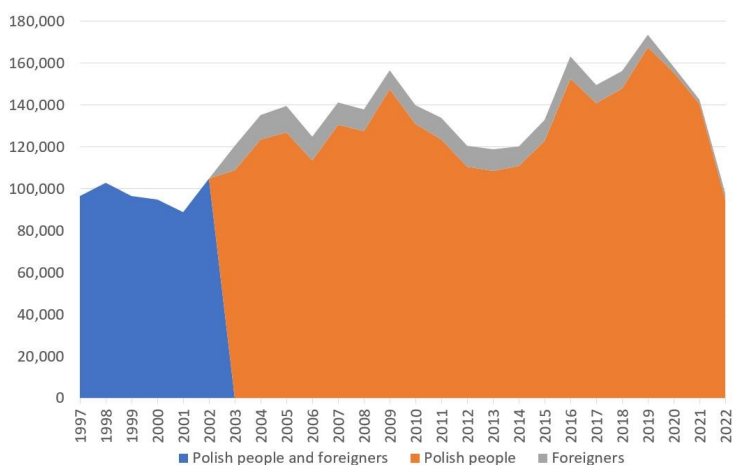


Fig. 3. Numbers of Poles and foreigners visiting the Bison Show Reserve of the Białowieża National Park in Poland in 1997 – 2022

Source: Edited by the author; based on data from the Białowieża National Park.

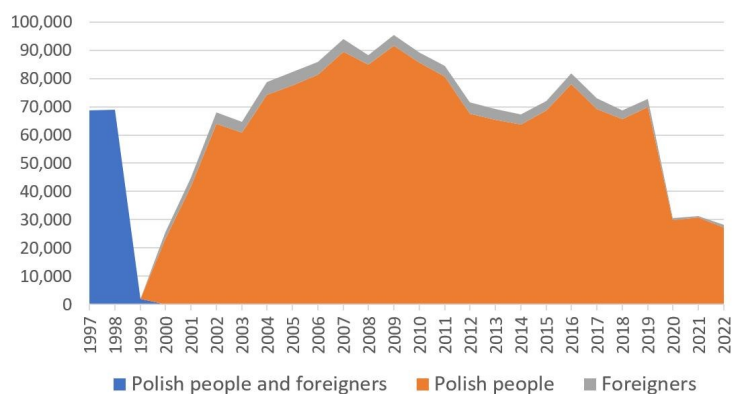


Fig. 4. Numbers of Poles and foreigners visiting the Nature and Forest Museum of the Białowieża National Park in Poland in 1997 – 2022

Source: Edited by the author; based on data from the Białowieża National Park.

The last area for which data was found is the Sierganowo Protective Zone, formerly known as the Strict Reserve. Between 1999 and 2015, this area was visited by approximately 15 – 22 thousand people annually (Fig. 5). From 2016 to 2019, the number of tourists increased to 26 – 28 thousand people. However, as in the previously mentioned cases, there has been a noticeable decline in tourist attendance since 2020, reaching 17 thousand in 2021 and 8.5 thousand in 2022. The highest number of foreign tourists was recorded in 2018 (4.9 thousand) and the lowest in 2021 (0.3 thousand). The seasonality fluctuation of tourist traffic is generally similar to other areas of the national park.

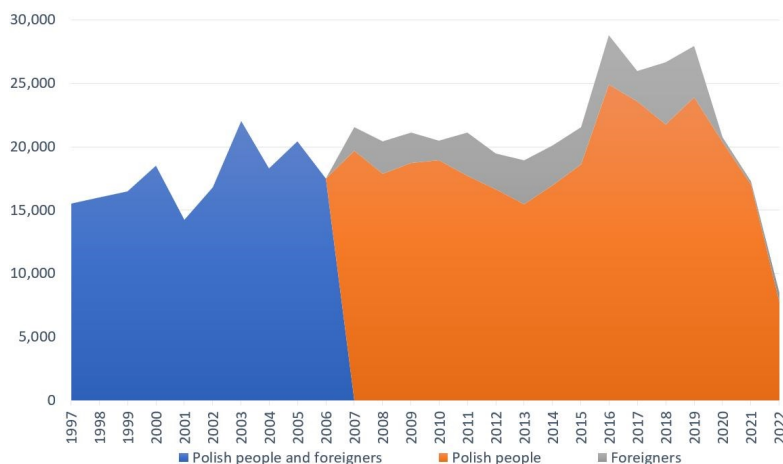


Fig. 5. Numbers of Poles and foreigners visiting the Sierganowo Protective Zone of the Białowieża National Park in Poland in 1997 – 2022

Source: Edited by the author; based on data from the Białowieża National Park.

Belovezhskaya Pushcha National Park in Belarus

Until 2013, a continuous increase in tourist attendance can be observed, with 450 thousand people, including 137 thousand foreigners, visiting the Belovezhskaya Pushcha National Park. However, in 2014 and 2015, the total number of tourists dropped to 428 and 378 thousand, respectively, and the number of foreign tourists also began to slowly decrease. This was most likely due to the decline in overall business activity in the tourism industry in the region, related to the war in Ukraine and sanctions against Russia. According to statistical data, the highest attendance was recorded in 2018 – over 570 thousand, while in 2020, the number of visitors dropped to 346 thousand. In 2021, there was an increase in attendance, and in 2022, the National Park was visited by 518 thousand people, including approximately 50 thousand foreigners. It is worth noting the continuous increase in the number of cyclists, even during the pandemic-related restrictions, from 32.3 thousand in 2019 to 33.5 thousand in 2020, and up to 35 and 43 thousand in 2021 and 2022, respectively (Fig. 6).

More precise data from the Natural History Museum indicates that approximately 18 and 28 thousand tickets respectively were sold in just under a year, between 1998 and 1999 (Fig. 7). The highest number of tickets (116.8 thousand) was

sold in 2011, which is 38% more than the number of tickets sold at the Polish Natural and Forestry Museum. In 2016, 106 thousand tickets were sold, which is 47% more than the number sold in the Polish museum. When making a comparative analysis, it is important to note that an admission ticket to the Natural Museum in Belarus also allows visitors to explore the bison reserve and other strictly protected areas of nature, while in Poland, three separate tickets must be purchased for these areas.

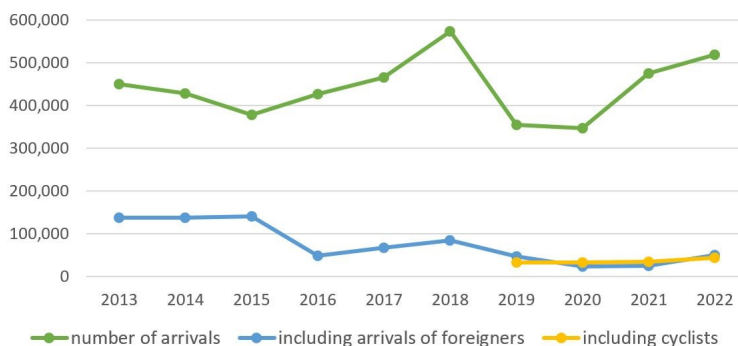


Fig. 6. Numbers of visitors of the Belovezhskaya Pushcha National Park in Belarus in 2013 – 2022

Source: based on data from Belovezhskaya Pushcha National Park.

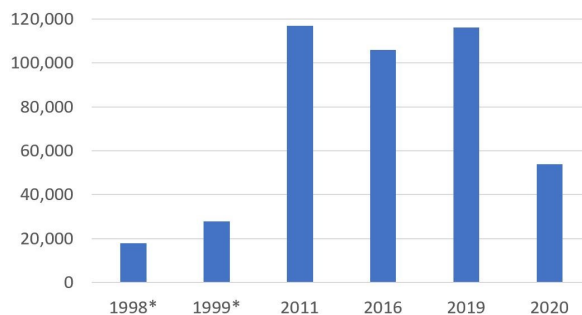


Fig. 7. Number of visitors to the Nature Museum of the Belovezhskaya Pushcha National Park in Belarus

Source: Edited by the author; based on data from open media and the State Statistical Office.

* Data is not for the whole year.

Taking into account that in 2011, 133.9 thousand tickets were sold to the Polish Bison Show Reserve and 21.1 thousand to the Sierganowo Protective Zone, the total number of tickets sold in Poland is estimated to be 240,000, which is twice as many as in Belarus. On the other hand, Belarus's National Park includes the Grandfather Frost's Residence, which was visited by approximately 100 – 150 thousand tourists annually before the pandemic, and in 2021 and 2022, respectively, by 92.5 thousand and 95 thousand visitors. In conclusion, after analyzing and comparing statistical data on tickets sold to specific centers, it can be inferred that the tourist traffic to both National Parks is at a similar level.

Białowieża – Piererów crossing point

When examining the cross-border tourist activity through the Białowieża – Piererów crossing, it is noticeable that there are several distinct time periods (Fig. 8). Initially, from 1994 to 2003, there was a gradual increase in tourist numbers from several hundred to over a thousand annually. In 2004, the crossing was completely closed due to infrastructure modernization. Subsequently, there was another surge in tourist traffic, with over 6 thousand individuals crossing the border in 2007, of which 5,5 thousand were of Belarusian or other origins. After Poland's accession to the Schengen Zone, the number of crossings declined, with only 1 thousand people crossing in 2010. Regarding cross-border tourism products, the most prosperous period was from 2015 to 2019, following the introduction of visa-free entry to the Belarusian border area for Polish citizens and citizens of other countries. In 2019, the number of tourists peaked, increasing by 2.5 times compared to 2014, and a remarkable eightfold compared to 2010, with 16.1 thousand border crossings recorded in both directions (equivalent to around 8 thousand tourists). During this period, the percentage share of tourist traffic increased notably for both Poles (up to 40%) and foreigners (up to 20%). The most frequent foreign visitors to the Białowieża Forest between 2018 and 2019 were from Russia, Lithuania, Latvia, Czechia, the United Kingdom, and the Netherlands, respectively.

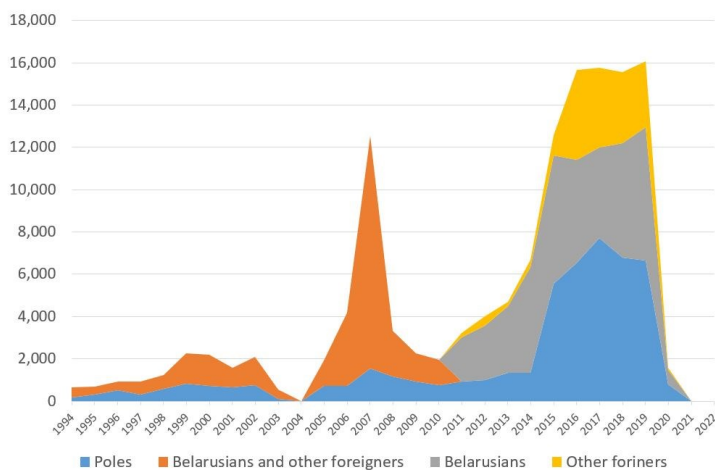


Fig. 8. Numbers of Poles and foreigners traveling in both directions via the Białowieża-Piererowo border crossing in 1994 – 2022

Source: Autor based on data from the Polish Border Guard.

In general, data on cross-border tourist traffic seasonality allow for distinguishing both the high tourist season in July and August, including the May holiday, as well as the low season in December and January (Fig. 9). From March 15th, 2020, tourist traffic through the Białowieża-Piererów crossing was suspended until now. Nonetheless, there remains an opportunity for foreign tourists to visit the Belarusian section of the Białowieża Forest through other open border crossings. Polish citizens, in particular, are granted visa-free entry to Belarus until the end of 2023.



Fig. 9. Seasonality of tourist traffic via the Białowieża-Piererów crossing from 2017 to 2019

Source: Autor based on data from the Polish Border Guard.

DISCUSSION

According to the assumptions of the process of cross-border integration of tourism space, Białowieża Forest area is sometimes a coexisting space (divided by a border-barrier) and sometimes a combined space (divided by a border-filter) (Więckowski 2010, pp. 178 – 182). In the end, the tourist space of the Białowieża Forest has not evolved to the next more progressive form of integration called open space. All of this points to the lack of a joint cross-border tourist product in the Białowieża Forest area, because the possibility of free border crossings is a necessary condition for the functioning of a cross-border tourist product (Gradzińska 2015, p. 40). The exception was the relaxation period of the border regime in 2015-2019 with the establishment of the border visa-free zone in Belarus.

The conducted research aligns with the trend of tourism development and mobility at the external borders of the European Union (Kolosov and Więckowski 2018, Kondrateva and Shlapenko 2021). This is a consequence of the new geopolitics in the Eastern vector of the EU. Russian invasion with Belarusian involvement and the Russo-Ukrainian war (with Belarusian collaboration) in Ukraine since February 2022 has swiftly and fundamentally changed the perception of Russia and Belarus. Simultaneously, it has highlighted that the crucial inquiry in border research may not revolve around whether borders are omnipresent (thus rendering them nonexistent) or mobile but rather focuses on understanding the various ways territorial borders are created, defined, and traversed in different periods and circumstances (Prokkola and Ridanpää 2022).

It is also advantageous to compare the Białowieża Forest with other flagship tourist attractions in the region on the Polish-Belarusian border. As a tourist product of the area, Białowieża Forest has a surface character, the Augustów Canal has a linear character, and Brest (Brest Fortress) has a point character (Kaczmarek et al. 2005). When talking about discrepancies, it is worth noting that over two-thirds of the protected areas of the Białowieża Forest are located on the Belarusian side, but the development and tourist traffic on both sides of the border are at a similar

level. The Augustów Canal is generally located on the Polish side (about 80% of its length), where the tourist infrastructure for water sports is much better developed. Therefore, to improve the image of the Canal, Belarusian authorities are promoting this tourist product together with the city of Grodno (Cyargeenka and Więckowski 2020 and Cyargeenka 2021). On the other hand, Brest is as a tourist attraction located in the vicinity of the border, but it is not real transboundary because the small town of Terespol on the Polish side cannot compete with the Brest regional center and can only be interesting for Belarusians for shopping tourism.

Compared to other Polish National Parks located on the borders, such as the Tatra, Pieniny, Bieszczady, or Magura on the Polish-Slovak border, the Białowieża Forest is located on a lowland area, not in the mountains (Więckowski 2010 and 2020). The Białowieża Forest is crossed by the external, closely guarded border of the EU and the Schengen Zone, with the only possibility of tourist movement being through border crossings. In contrast, the Tatra National Park is located on the internal EU and Schengen border, with free transboundary movement along marked hiking trails and tourist paths. The Białowieża National Park is approximately in the middle of the list of 23 National Parks in terms of tourist numbers, which is difficult to determine because some parks use very advanced visitor monitoring systems with sensors, etc. (e. g., the Tatra National Park), some only consider the number of tickets sold (e. g., Białowieża), and some have no information other than an estimated number of tourists (e. g., Ujście Warty) – Miazek (2020).

Finally, the future of the tourism industry in the Białowieża Forest area is a subject of debate. It will depend largely on systemic changes in Belarus and the geopolitical situation in Eastern Europe. The construction of a wall on the Polish-Belarusian border in 2021 – 2022, on one hand, harms nature conservation, while on the other hand, may open up the possibility for the development of so-called political tourism, as it is a barrier dividing cultures and civilizations. Similar examples of such destinations for mass tourism can be found in Berlin (Berlin Wall, was a barrier in the past), and the Wall between North and South Korea, which is a strictly protected military line today.

CONCLUSIONS

Kolosow and Wieckowski (2018, p. 13) put forward several areas for future research on borders in Central and Eastern Europe. Initially, they propose examining how boundaries impact the everyday lives of border communities, investigating the growth of regular cross-border interactions, and analyzing the consequences of disruptions caused by border security or insecurity. Additionally, they suggest exploring the accessibility of border areas from neighboring countries' central regions and assessing the contemporary functions of these borders as barriers for different actors and at varying scales. Lastly, they emphasize the significance of studying how the migration crisis affects the borderland.

In this paper all hypotheses were confirmed. Factors at the national and international level have more influence on tourist traffic than factors from the local and regional levels. Key factors at the national and international levels were identified, including the collapse of the communist bloc, Poland joining the EU and the Schengen zone, the period of easing Polish-Belarusian relations in 2015 – 2019 (visa-free zone), the period of the COVID-19 epidemic and post-epidemic. It would be worth emphasizing that the factors listed above determined cross-border

tourist traffic to a greater extent than domestic traffic to the areas of National Parks. Nevertheless, there are also local factors that affect tourist traffic, such as repairs or reconstruction of infrastructure and changes to museum exhibitions. For instance, the Forest Museum of the Białowieża National Park in Poland was closed in 1999 for building repairs and a general change of the exhibition. Additionally, the Białowieża-Piererów border crossing point was not operational in 2004 due to infrastructure renovation.

The values of a tourist product on both sides of the Polish-Belarusian border are very similar including natural conditions and local culture. Both National Parks have natural and forest museums, educational and training facilities, demonstrations of European bison and other animals, as well as centres of crafts and local cultures. Of course, there are unique products, such as Grandfather Frost's Residence in Belarus or a narrow-gauge railway in Poland. Nevertheless, mass tourists are able to satisfy their cognitive needs separately on one side or on the other side of the border, resulting in domestic tourist traffic dominating without crossing the state border. The peripheral location of the area has an ambiguous meaning for tourism. On the one hand, the distance from the centers helps to preserve the natural values of the region, and on the other hand, it limits the tourist attendance.

Of course, this study is not a comprehensive test of the assumptions as the influencing factors are multifarious and local, regional and geopolitical specifics take place. Tourist areas on the Polish-Belarusian border starting from 2020 faced global challenges, such as the COVID 19 epidemic, the political crisis after the 2020 elections in Belarus, the outbreak of war in Ukraine in 2022. This study and many further studies are required, not least to rationalize simplistic arguments in a highly emotional socio-economic and political discussion.

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Aliaksandr Cyargeenka

BIELOVEŻSKÝ PRALES AKO PRODUKT CESTOVNÉHO RUCHU V POĽSKO – BIELORUSKOM POHRANIČÍ

Bielovežský prales je významnou oblasťou, v ktorej sa v Európe zachovali pôvodné listnaté a zmiešané lesy v minulosti súvisle pokrývajúce oblasť od Atlantického oceánu po Ural. Tento prales je domovom mnohých rastlinných a živočíšnych druhov, ktoré sa tu zachovali vo svojom pôvodnom stave vrátane endemitov, aké sa nenachádzajú nikde inde na svete. Rozpad ZSSR na prelome 80. a 90. rokov 20. storočia otvoril dovtedy uzavretú hranicu medzi Poľskom a Bieloruskom, čo znamenalo uľahčenie rozvoja cezhraničných väzieb a rozvoj cestovného ruchu.

Postupom času sa funkcie hraníc zmenili, čo viedlo k novým a vážnym výzvam pre cestovný ruch v oblasti Bielovežského pralesa na miestnej, regionálnej a globálnej úrovni. Cieľom tejto štúdie je zistiť, ktoré historické a geopolitické faktory vplývali na zmeny v dynamike návštevnosti Bielovežského pralesa ako produktu cestovného ruchu v pohraničí. Na výskum vplyvu rôznych faktorov v rôznych mierkach a dimenziách boli použité štatistické údaje z hraničného priechodu Białowieża – Piererów, ako aj údaje o návštevnosti v bieloruskom i poľskom národnom parku. Štúdium produktu cestovného ruchu oblasti Bielovežského pralesa zahŕňa okrem toho aj otázky týkajúce sa prírodných a kultúrnych atraktivít, ochrany životného prostredia, dopravnej dostupnosti regiónu a otázky súvisiace s hranicami a vízami.

Výskum vychádzal z hypotézy, že faktory na národnej a medzinárodnej úrovni majú významnejší vplyv na produkt cestovného ruchu v porovnaní s faktormi na miestnej a regionálnej úrovni. Špecifické ciele tejto štúdie zahŕňajú vysvetlenie fáz produktu cestovného ruchu oblasti Bielovežského pralesa a identifikáciu toho, či ide o cezhraničný produkt cestovného ruchu. V štúdiu sme zistili, že sa turistický priestor Bielovežského pralesa nevyvíja

nul do ďalšej progresívnejšej formy integrácie tzv. otvoreného priestoru. Hlavným dôvodom neexistencie spoločného cezhraničného produktu cestovného ruchu je nedostatok hraničných priechodov potrebných na jeho fungovanie. Výnimkou bolo obdobie úľav v hraničnom režime v rokoch 2015 – 2019, v rámci ktorého sa v Bielorusku vytvorila bezvízová zóna.

Produkty cestovného ruchu na oboch stranách poľsko-bieloruskej hranice sú podobné, vrátane prírodných podmienok a miestnej kultúry. Prevláda však domáci turistický ruch bez prekročenia štátnej hranice. Väčšinu zahraničných turistov navštevujúcich Bielovežský prales tvoria Rusi, Litovčania, Lotyši, Nemci, Česi, Briti a Holanďania. Periférna poloha oblasti má pre cestovný ruch nejednoznačný význam. Na jednej strane pomáha zachovať prírodné hodnoty regiónu, ale zároveň obmedzuje turistickú návštevnosť. Záverom táto štúdia poukazuje na dôležitosť zohľadnenia historických a geopolitických faktorov pri skúmaní zmien v dynamike turistickej návštevnosti v oblasti Bielovežského pralesa. Zdôrazňuje potrebu vytvorenia hraničných priechodov na podporu cezhraničného cestovného ruchu, čo by mohlo viesť k vytvoreniu spoločného cezhraničného produktu cestovného ruchu.



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