

Forest Owners Associations in the Central and Eastern European Region

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Abstract The restitution and privatization in Central and Eastern European countries in the early 1990s predisposed a heterogeneous ownership structure, a large number of forest owners and a variety of types of property ownership modes. Furthermore, development of governance in these countries posited a

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new framework for interest representation in the forestry sector, mainly through organised forms of private forest owners, i.e. formation of forest owners' associations (FOAs). In this region, FOAs were one of the opportunities for interest representation in the land restitution processes. Later on these associations gained more competency and importance not only in influencing forest policy-making, but also in offering services to their members. The aim of the paper is to improve the understanding of the origins, evolution and current situation of FOAs in Central and Eastern Europe by describing the factors that influenced the FOAs' creation and development. On the basis of their similar history seven Central Eastern European countries were selected for FOAs analysis: Czech Republic, Estonia, Hungary, Latvia, Lithuania, Romania and Slovakia. The main findings of the study include that FOAs in Eastern and Central Europe, though being the result of the same socio-political changes, differ between countries in terms of their organisational forms. However, they face similar challenges, including the limited motivation of owners to join associations. Also, they undertake similar activities for their successful development, including the provision of information services for their members. Despite not having any legal competence for the direct management of their member's forests, these FOAs do have strong representative and demonstrative effects in their countries.

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Introduction

The Central and Eastern European (CEE) countries¹ have a shared history as socialist countries during the years 1948–1990, when private land (including the forests) was nationalized or used by the state. More than 20 years ago these countries started a transition from communist regimes with centrally planned economies and one-party political systems to democratic regimes and market economies. Nowadays most of them are full members of the European Union meeting all its requirements and conforming to the policy developments. With regards to the forestry sector many EU-wide initiatives apply, e.g. the NATURA 2000² network of protected areas (and its related Directives), and the Common Agricultural Policy with its support measures for rural development (which include some forest management topics as well).

These changes in political regimes also stimulated new phenomena, which brought about change in the forestry sectors of these countries: restitution of forest land, the privatisation of forest industries, the formation of a liberalized timber market; an increased level of timber exports; and new modes of forest management (i.e. private businesses, logging companies). One of the most important factors influencing the current state of the forestry sector and ownership structure in CEE countries was restitution of land rights which were lost during the communist regime. Restitution of forest land is a process of returning property rights to the original (pre-Communist regime) owners. This process started in the 1990s after the fall of the communism and faced many problems. New so-called non-state owners (a term which includes individual owners, commoners, private companies, churches, environmental groups and municipalities) lacked sufficient knowledge about how to manage their forests, and engage in the forestry sector, so as to achieve financial and ecological sustainability. Properties returned to private individuals were often too small for viable independent management and highly fragmented in location. New forest owners also lacked financial capital, technological know-how and the necessary equipment and tools (Weiss et al. 2011).

Forest Owners Associations (FOAs), as an instrument for supporting the sustainable management of private forests, can emerge as an effective option in overcoming new challenges (Ostrom 1990; Glück et al. 2010; Mendes et al. 2011). However in the former communist countries, the main challenge was a lack of experience with interest groups. Notably, before the fall of communist regimes in

¹ Central and Eastern European Countries (CEECs) is an OECD term for the group of countries comprising Albania, Bulgaria, Croatia, the Czech Republic, Hungary, Poland, Romania, the Slovak Republic, Slovenia, and the three Baltic States: Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania. (<http://stats.oecd.org/glossary/detail.asp?ID=303>).

² NATURA 2000 is an ecological network of protected areas in the territory of European Union designed by each EU Member State according to the Habitats Directive (Council Directive 92/43/EEC) and the Birds Directive (Council Directive 2009/147/EC).

CEE countries the formation of any special interest groups was forbidden. Basically all forest and forestry issues were dealt by the government and the national communist party, with the interest groups that existed in that era being limited to non-executive professional engagement. Since 1990, this situation has been amended in CEE countries, but there were some problems involved in the formation of interest groups. New interest groups were established that operate for the benefit of private forest owners as well as for other stakeholders such as environmental groups. In this way, these associations of private forest owners became the most important and essential part of the forestry sector interest groups. Against this background, the main objective of this paper is to improve the understanding of the origins, evolution and current situation of FOAs in selected CEE countries (Czech Republic, Estonia, Hungary, Latvia, Lithuania, Romania and Slovakia) by description of the similarities and differences among FOAs and the factors that influenced their creation and development. The following research questions were investigated:

1. What were the main reasons for the establishment of the forest owner associations?
2. How have the FOAs evolved since 1990?
3. What are the common features of FOAs in the selected countries?

Literature Review

In pluralist, corporatist and network approaches to political theory, interest groups play an important role. Despite differences in other regards, various theoretical strands share the basic premise that interest groups are a vital element of functioning democratic market economies. Interest groups as autonomous actors do not only (politically) represent the shared (economic) interest or attitude of a group of actors, but provide the state also with valuable information for policy making. Depending on the theory in mind, interest groups are included in policy formation and implementation via lobbying, corporatist arrangements or participation in networks (Seebaldt 1997; Graf 2006). Interest groups represent their members' interests in the political system, but unlike political parties, interest groups do not strive for governmental responsibility (Salisbury 1969, 1975). Interest associations are irreplaceable in a developed democratic political system (Glück 1976) because they place policy issues, which benefit the interest of their members, onto the political agenda. For this purpose they apply public relations and other means of raising public awareness to ensure the responsiveness of government when formulating appropriate programs (Glück et al. 2010).

The formation of FOAs faces the challenge of organizing collective action, achieving critical mass (Olson 1971), pressure from institutional and external influences (Gibson et al. 2005; Matta and Alavalapati 2006), gaining mutual understanding (Ostrom 1999), setting appropriate rules, gaining finance and

capacity building (McKean 1998), unclear ownership boundaries and level of social capital (Gibson et al. 2005). Mendes et al. (2006) named production of common goods, group heterogeneity and the coercion of members and financial incentives as the triggering factors for the formation of forest owners' associations. Seen from the forest owners' viewpoint, there exist at least two reasons as to why establishing interest or stakeholder organizations makes sense; firstly, interest groups exist in order to protect and represent the common interests of forest owners in the policy-making process, and second, they help in the improvement of forestry knowledge and forest management, for instance, through the provision of services (Rametsteiner et al. 2005; Glück et al. 2010; Weiss et al. 2011).

Issues related to forest ownership structure and forest owners' interest groups are vital for the formulation and implementation of public policy measures. Currently, research on this issue takes on particular relevance in sustainable forest management, increasing competitiveness and the introduction of innovations in forestry, rural development, climate change, biodiversity and water protection. This trend is seen in the number of realized national projects in the CEE region (e.g. in Latvia, Lithuania, Hungary, Poland and Slovenia) and published scientific papers, and in the work of researcher groups active in IUFRO group 03.08.00 (Small Scale Forestry). The issues of ownership structure, ownership rights, attitudes towards sustainable forest management, use of raw wood, owner's management priorities and the enforcement of their objectives have been addressed in the USA by Kittredge (2005), Butler (2005), Butler et al. (2010) and Gootee et al. (2010). In Western Europe, depending on situation, studies have focused on owners' values and objectives or motives derived from typologies of forest owners (Karpinen 2000; Hogl et al. 2005; Schraml and Memmler 2005). The role of private forest owners and their associations in multifunctional forestry practices has been highlighted by several authors, for example by Slee (2005), Kurttila (2005) and Schmithüsen (2007). Specific forest policy impacts of FOAs were investigated by Valkeapää and Karpinen (2010). Rauch (2007) undertook analysis and proposed strategies for FOAs in Austria. The role of FOAs in rural development in Sweden was described by Lidestav et al. (2010), and innovation impact of FOAs in Switzerland was studied by Seeland et al. (2011). Schraml (2005) argued that FOAs are potentially efficient instruments for the implementation of policy for small-scale forest management. Mendes et al. (2006) stressed the economic benefits of joining FOAs.

To date research into forest associations and cooperatives has rarely been carried out in CEE countries (FAO 2012a, b). However the challenges associated with small-scale forest owners and their cooperation were the topic of research in Lithuania. Pivoriūnas and Lazdinis (2004) and Mizaraite and Mizaras (2005a, b) described the needs of Lithuanian forest owners and conditions for FOA establishment. Põllumäe et al. (2014) explored the differences between members and non-members of FOAs in Estonia. Golos and Geszprych (2005) claimed that the promotion of owners' cooperatives in Poland can lead to efficiency in forest management. Several research studies dealing with property rights in the Romanian private forest sector were carried out by Bouriaud (2006), Ioras and Abrudan (2006) and Nichiforel and Schanz (2009). FOAs are one of the options for improving the contribution of private forest owners in society and securing their property rights.

Medved (2005), Medved et al. (2010), Glück et al. (2010, 2011) and Nonic et al. (2011) underlined the need for FOAs with clear mandates and sufficient capacity to advise private forest owners in managing their forests and lobbying for their interests in Balkan countries. Similar competencies, required by effective FOAs, are described for several other European countries in the research by Schmithüsen and Hirsch (2010), Mendes et al. (2011) and Weiss et al. (2011).

Research Method

Within the framework of the Central-East European Regional Office of the European Forest Institute's research projects, various types of forest owner organisations in CEE countries were investigated. Table 1 outlines parts of the European Forest Institute projects' findings with a description and analysis of FOAs in the Czech Republic, Estonia, Hungary, Latvia, Lithuania, Romania and Slovakia. The countries were chosen based on the geographical scope, common recent history in the post-communist period, and having a significant share of private forest ownership (private, joint ownership, agricultural co-operatives, and church forests) due to restitution process started in 1990s. Poland was excluded because the country has only a small proportion of non-state forests (17 %) and the process of restitution started after year 2000.

To describe FOAs in selected CEE countries two methods for preparing the case study reports were combined: in-depth interviews and expert knowledge. The case study reports describe the general country situation regarding FOAs and the characteristics of FOAs at the national level, characterization of umbrella organizations (if in existence), types of associations, brief descriptions of chronology, key factors influencing their development, main tasks and their challenges for the future.

In the countries where many organizations of the same type existed, one successful and representative example of a FOA has been selected for deeper analysis (Table 2), i.e. the FOA with the longest existence period, largest number of forest owners or largest land area.

Table 1 Background information about the selected countries (data for 2011)

Country	Start year of political changes	Year of EU accession	Total forest cover (1,000 ha) ^a	Non-state forest (% of forest area)	Start year of FOA creation
Czech Republic	1989	2004	2,657 (34 %)	39.9	1991
Estonia	1991	2004	2,217 (52 %)	48.0	1992
Hungary	1989	2004	2,029 (23 %)	42.7	1991
Latvia	1991	2004	3,354 (54 %)	42.0	1991
Lithuania	1990	2004	2,160 (34 %)	38.6	1993
Romania	1990	2007	6,573 (29 %)	32.0	1998
Slovakia	1989	2004	1,933 (40 %)	40.6	1991

^a FAO (2010)

Source: Adapted from Weiss et al. (2011)

Table 2 Description of the data sources for in-depth interviews and expert knowledge used in the characterisation of FOAs

Country	Name of FOA	Interviewees	Secondary sources
Czech Republic (CZ)	Association of Municipal and Private Forest Owners—Sdružení vlastníků obecních a soukromých lesů v ČR (SVOL)	SVOL Secretary	Internet search and interview with other experts (representative of department of forest policy, Ministry of Agriculture)
Estonia (EE)	Estonian Private Forest Union—Eesti Erametsaliit (EEML)	Former Director and current Managing Director	Internet search, available documents of EEML and forestry yearbooks (including private forestry yearbook)
Hungary (HU)	Association of Hungarian Private Forest Owners—Magán Erdtulajdonosok és Gazdálkodók Országos Szövetsége (MEGOSZ)	Executive Director	Strategy documents of MEGOSZ Archives of internet publications
Latvia (LV)	Latvian Forest Owners' Association—Latvijas Meža īpašnieku biedrība (LMIB)	Chairman of the Board	Internet search and interview with Director of Forest Advisory Service Centre
Lithuania (LT)	Private Forest Owners of Lithuania- Lietuvos miško savininkų asociacija (LMSA)	Manager of Administration of LMSA	Internet search and interviews with other experts (Chairman) of Marijampolė Regional Unit of LMSA, Director of FOA Aukštaitijos šilas
Romania (RO)	Forest owner association Marsani—Renasterea Padurii Marsani (RPM)	Presidents and Members of the steering committee	Experts of the public forestry authorities, legal reports of the National Forest Administration on the restoration paces
Slovakia (SK)	Association of Municipal Forests—Združenie obecných lesov (ZOL)	First Chairman, Current Chairman, and Current Executive Secretary	Internet search and interviews with other experts (Director of Forests of town Zvolen Ltd., Director of Municipal forests Brezno)

Based on available documents and qualitative, face-to-face semi-structured in-depth interviews, individual descriptions of each FOA were prepared. All interviewees (purposively selected FOA representatives) shared their experiences and provided extensive empirical data. The interviews addressed the following topics:

- Description of the FOA level and type of cooperation.
- State support for the FOA.
- Creation and development of the FOA.
- Operating system and organizational structure of the FOA.
- Functions and services provided to FOA members.
- Effectiveness of the FOA.
- Outcomes of the FOA.

Presented results were obtained by asking key informants the following questions:

1. How, when and why the forest owners' organizations was founded and further developed?
2. Why do you think the cooperation started? What were the critical aspects for the association?
3. What kind of plans do you have for the future: any mission or strategy?

Aspects which were investigated during the interviews included: start-up period, milestones from the FOA point of view, actors involved, members and their roles, various local capacities within the FOA, important developments and tasks for the organizations, financing issues, challenges for the future, and degree of satisfaction with the position of the FOA.

Results

During the last decades, the selected countries underwent similar developments in their forest sector and in the formation of private forest owners' associations. A common feature found is that no forms of private forest ownership existed under the political influence of national communist parties, and traditional ways of managing private property had been forgotten over the years during which forests were nationalised. After the political changes, the forest land restitution (or re-privatisation) process typically resulted in small, fragmented, scattered properties. Table 3 outlines the basic characteristics about the restitution processes in the selected countries.

Forest interest groups and forms of cooperation are being established, but in all the study countries private forest owners are still reluctant to join associations, mainly due to the legacy of bad experiences with imposed cooperatives in the

Table 3 Description of the restitution process (data for 2013)

Country	Total amount of national forest area restituted (ha/%)	Additional forest area for restitution (1,000 ha)	Outcomes and differences	Average size of individual private forest property (ha)
Czech Republic	1.03 M/40	170	1991 (permanent residents, all area owned after 25.2.1948); in 1996 (also for non-permanent residents); in 2000 as a mitigation for some financial damages caused by the holocaust, all together 1.03 M ha; in 2012 was new act on the church property restitutions	3.0
Estonia	946 K/35	no	946,273 ha restituted and privatised by 2010, process is more or less complete	8.0
Hungary	730 K/40	no	730,000 ha privatized, process is more or less complete	1.5
Latvia	1.75 M/50	no	1.75 M ha restituted and privatised, process is more or less complete	7.5
Lithuania	829 K/38	262	829,400 ha restituted	3.3
Romania	715 K/45	460	First phase 1991 (up to 1 ha)—362,000 ha restituted; 2nd phase 2000 (10 ha of forests)—1.87 M ha restituted; 3rd phase 2005 (all areas owned before 1948)—715,000 ha restituted	0.9
Slovakia	995 K/49	200	1991 (permanent residents, all area owned after 25.2.1948; in 1993 also church property)—994,421 ha restituted	2.9

communist period. Despite this reluctance, however, some owners soon recognized the need for the creation of FOAs (Table 1). The new forest owners discovered they had to express their interests vis-à-vis the state. Policy-makers also view FOAs as important means for having the interests of landowners represented in the policy processes and improving forest management practices.

Main Reasons for the Establishment of FOAs

The changes which took place in CEE countries at the beginning of the 1990s included organisational change in the state forestry sector, the start up of private companies, access to a globalised free market. However reduced productivity and high unemployment were also a feature in many countries. At the same time, right after the fall of communism, the first interest groups were quickly, and in different ways depending on the country, created. Nowadays, each country reports having a range of interest groups related to the forestry sector. The numbers of these groups depends on several factors, because some countries include in the total number of interest groups professional chambers, NGOs, trade organisations and even in some cases state agencies and institutions. The aims of formation for interest groups also vary between countries, but in general the following factors are shared by all of the countries in the study:

- To provide advocacy for the interests of forest owners.
- To provide advocacy for the interests of some particular group who utilise forests, for example hunters.
- To protect the forest resource from illegal timber harvesting.
- To deal with the common problems which arise in the restitution process.
- To enhance environmental protection, in the case of non-governmental organizations and state organizations.

From the examples analysed in this study (Table 2), two main reasons for establishing FOAs can be identified:

Supporting the Restitution/Privatization Process

Many new forest owners organized themselves to improve outcomes from the restitution process (which was obstructed by state forest enterprises), to secure access to management expertise for fragmented and small-sized properties, and to provide advocacy for their own interests vis-à-vis the state. Initially aimed at resolving specific problems relating to the restitution process, most of the FOAs started with a focus on one or other of these issues (based on the interviews: SVOL in the Czech Republic; MEGOSZ in Hungary; RPM in Romania; and ZOL in Slovakia).

Representing Owners' Interests with the Government

These FOAs aim to have a voice in the policy-making process. This aim is usually achieved in two ways:

- Through a top-down approach in which the government initiates (informally or formally) the creation of FOAs to provide a few representatives for many forest owners (Examples are the Council of Non-state Forest Owners in Slovakia or the EEML and some others which act as an umbrella FOA at the national level).
- Through a bottom-up approach in which owners unite themselves to become visible (based on interviews: SVOL in the Czech Republic; LMSA in Lithuania)

Current Situation of FOAs

Over time, the FOAs gathered more private forest owners as members in order to advocate their interests and rights, although in the interviews the representatives report that owners are very hesitant to join cooperatives. Many of these FOAs needed time to establish themselves as interest groups and to develop additional services for their members. Since their establishment, they have expanded the range of services they offer. The most important services are:

- Representing the interest in the higher-level institutions (including international level).
- Providing an information channel from the national level to the local level.
- Advice and education opportunity for members.
- Financial and technical support in forest management.
- Increasing market power through joint marketing.

Even though forest owners' associations in CEE countries may have focused on a limited set of activities (representing their members, and providing support during restitutions) in their initial stages, as they grew, they aspired to expand the scope of their activities. It appears that the strategic approach for these new FOAs' is leading to further structural changes, such as providing expanded services to the members, being in touch with international policy processes, and influencing domestic forestry-related policies, especially on rural development. The typical functions of FOAs are political representation on the national and international levels, information sharing, and training. However, some FOAs also offer management support and consultancy. In general, umbrella organizations (like national organisations of local FOAs) are more likely to be focussed on interest representation, as stakeholders and political actors, while regional and local groups are usually focussed on business cooperation, and also provide technical support and knowledge. Information provision can be through: (1) internal information sharing; (2) public information services, such as awareness raising; and (3) education and knowledge transfer for members, facilitated by the FOAs' own staff or in collaboration with government, academia, and other joint ventures.

The survival of the FOAs in the long-run seems to depend largely on having sustained government support, either through monetary incentives and supportive regulations (as in the Czech Republic), or through government's continuing need to have a single representative for policy negotiations (Slovakia). An example for non-

sustained government support was found in Hungary where FOAs encountered serious financial difficulties when governmental financial support ended. Nowadays the main concerns for FOAs' lie in conceiving and implementing state policies dealing with private forestry (EU and national support measures for private forest owners) and development and revision of existing regulations in terms of private forest owners' interests. With EU accession, FOAs gained the opportunity to draw financial resources from European funds. In the Czech Republic during the years 2004–2006 there was for example a special sub-measure for forest associating owners in the Operational Programme for Rural Development and Multifunctional Agriculture. This sub-measure was designed to support the establishment and equipping of business offices for associations. This included information technology hardware and software, and providing for such items of equipment necessary to facilitate the work of the associations in next 5 years. Unfortunately there were no applications for this support, which perhaps demonstrates that the top down approach alone is unlikely to be successful without interests from the forest owners. Countries in this study have reported no more measures focussing directly on creating associations during the EU RDP planning period (2007–2013), but FOAs are favoured subjects in all forestry measures implemented through national Rural Development Programs (e.g. during the evaluation of eligibility of support from RDP in Slovakia and Czech Republic).

Unification or Diversity of FOAs in Selected Countries

In all of the countries studied small forest properties predominate and hence forest ownership is very fragmented (Table 3). In some countries (Hungary, Slovakia, Romania) the situation is even more complex due to a large amount of forest land in joint ownership. The private forest owners are often unable to manage their forests properly because of a backlog of necessary operations, lack of equipment, weak legislative support and inadequate management skills. In many cases they are unable to provide all of the information required to justify their claims (this being a reason why the restitution process is still continuing). The management of a small forest area is usually less cost-effective and most suitable as complementary activity to farming. Another alternative for small forest owners in the CEE countries is to join a free association with an aim of acquiring the principles for management model, focusing on ordinary management of forests, including trade activities and the use of possible support.

Differences among countries in regard to the main characteristics of FOAs can be traced to many different points (Table 4). Most FOAs were created as NGOs or voluntary organisations and do not own any significant amount of property. In some cases they are founded as non-profit organizations mainly to make them eligible for tax exemptions (Lithuania, Romania). In the Czech Republic or Slovakia FOAs are civil organizations. Larger FOAs (operating at the national level) are able to support their members in different ways (lobbying, services). The most frequent types of services provided by FOAs are education, training and advice. The political representation of members' interests is another major function of FOAs. The involvement of FOAs in policy-making processes often results in some or all of

Table 4 Overview of the main characteristics of FOAs

Country	CZ	EE	HU	LV	LT	RO	SK
Top down support for the creation of FOAs	x	x	x			x	
Nationwide umbrella organization		x				x	x
Representing owners' interests within government	x	x	x	x	x	x	x
International cooperation	x	x			x	x	x
Services provided to members:							
Education, training and advice	x	x	x	x	x	x	x
Marketing of wood and non-wood products	x	x		x	x	x	
Forest certification	x		x				x
Insurance of forests						x	
Support for members to obtain national or EU funds for forest management or design of forest management plans		x	x	x		x	x

their proposals and requests being included in policy texts. Member-only services also provide an incentive for joining an organization and paying membership fees, reducing the number of free-loaders who benefit from those activities. Joint economic activities of members and marketing of wood and non-wood products is also a common function but it is not a clear driving force in FOAs. The importance of these services will probably increase in the future.

Regarding the tasks and aims of FOAs, some examples of bottom-up cooperation towards sharing of information on EU or national support for forest management can be identified. However, there is little evidence of real integrated management, and no examples of equipment sharing or financial cooperation. The involvement in cooperation at national or international levels differs from country to country, depending on local interests and possibilities (e.g. EEML is member of the Confederation of European Forest Owners, the International Family Forestry Alliance and The European Landowners Organization).

Conclusion

Structural changes in the political, social and economic environment are often the catalyst for the emergence of a FOA (Mendes et al. 2011), which proves also to be case in the CEE region. After the fall of the communist regimes and with the start of restitution processes, FOAs as a form of organisation in forestry started to become active. However, FOAs in the CEE counties are still not well developed and not very well organized. In selected countries FOAs still do not represent the majority of forest owners or of forest land, and do not have a direct impact on the management of the members' forests.

Since the creation of the first FOAs in the 1990s, their position has been slowly changing. FOAs are now focused more on interest representation, while only a few examples remain focused on forest management support. These two foci are in

many cases overlapping, as is common in many European countries outside the CEE area. The influence of FOAs on timber sales, and participation in commercial activities, is still less developed in the CEE region, compared to northern European countries (e.g. in Scandinavia; Mendes et al. 2011). In general, beside their main focus, all FOAs are developing a range of services for their members, but the survival of FOAs and their success depends on both: (1) political acceptance and support, and (2) services for members and visible success in influencing policy. Already established FOAs in those CEE countries are oriented towards further development of their activities even though they are still facing challenges. It is clear that they have definitely strong representative and demonstration effect in their countries.

Further research which compares the experiences of CEE nations against other, more established FOAs in Europe would be valuable. However this would require more detailed analysis, which was beyond the scope of this study.

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