



Factors of political power – The example of forest owners associations in Slovakia☆☆☆



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ABSTRACT

The aim of this paper is to analyse the potential of forest owners associations (FOAs) to influence forest policymaking using power theory. Firstly, the paper examines the concept of power and the political power of interest groups. Interest groups seek to be able to use their power through influencing policy outcomes and framing the underlying dimensions that define policy issues. In the next step the paper defines factors of dispositional political power: formal, informal, internal, and external. Formal factors are primarily based constitutionally or legislatively and are ensured through the right to associate and form associations to advocate common interests. Informal factors represent the abilities of interest groups to operate in the political process. Internal factors represent the ability of interest groups to work within the group and external factors represent the behaviour towards other associations, government, non-governmental organisations, etc. Semi-structured questionnaires to former and present FOAs officials were used containing questions about the basic role of FOAs as they can be found in the scientific literature. The crucial internal factor limiting the dispositional power of FOAs is the lack of financial resources for providing services or necessary apparatus, which might strongly hinder the fulfilment and achievement of set goals in policymaking. The disinterest of the state bureaucracy towards non-state forests also limits FOAs' dispositional power. The most important external factor from the officials' perspective is the disinterest of the state bureaucracy towards non-state forests at the sectoral and cross-sectoral level. There is a common agreement between FOA officials that current strategies and tactics in the form of dialogue are inefficient. FOAs are considered as a partner in policy formulation, but their actual political power is low, due to the disunity among FOA leaders and ineffective strategies and tactics.

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1. Introduction

Interest groups play an important role in public policy. Interest groups participate in the political process in order to satisfy their interests and achieve their objectives. Some groups are more powerful than others, in the sense that they are better able to influence policy outcomes. They not only represent the interests and attitudes of a whole group, but also provide reliable information to the state that can be recovered in the legislative process. Stakeholder involvement and participation are considered vital for the successful implementation of sustainable forestry, and have gained increasing importance within forest policymaking and cross-sectoral coordination (Elsasser, 2002, 2007; Hogl and Kvarda, 2008; Juerges and Newig, 2015).

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FOAs are one type of interest group in the forestry sector. Seen from the forest owners' point of view, at least two reasons exist why establishing interest or stakeholder organisations makes sense. Firstly, interest groups exist in order to protect and represent the common interests of forest owners in the policymaking process. Second, they help in the improvement of forestry knowledge and forest management, for instance, through FOA services (Rametsteiner et al., 2005; Glück et al., 2010; Weiss et al., 2011). Associations of non-state forest owners can be divided into main groups mostly according to type of ownership (private, community, co-cooperatives, municipal, church) or territorial scope (regional, national, supranational, and international) (Weiss et al., 2011).

FOAs operate predominantly in the forestry sector. The sectoral approach is important in order to explain the power of forest owners as policy actors. Hubo and Krott (2007) define 'sector' in the context of three elements: (i) actor-related elements (advocacy coalitions, interests, or belief systems, etc.); (ii) political programmes and public policy measures; and (iii) institutional and related procedural compounds. Giessen and Krott (2009) contribute to the sectoral debate with so-called 'boundary behaviour', meaning that actors are assumed 'to define, to structure, to identify and to distinguish' sector boundaries. Such 'boundary behaviour' may be explained by beliefs and/or interests and

in addition involves ensuring, defending, or even maximising the given degree of autonomy that sectors have.

FOAs are a stable member of the forestry coalition in Slovakia when it comes to the formulation of strategic forest policy documents (Dobšínská et al., 2013) and legislation. There are already several cases where they have actively participated in this arena, for example in the National Forest Programme (Sarvašová et al., 2014), or Rural Development Programme (Dobšínská et al., 2013). According to Dobšínská et al. (2013) an informal network of forestry actors exists that participates in forest policy formulation. This network consists mainly of members from state forestry administration, research institutes, FOA representatives, and other forestry interest groups. State bureaucracies consider FOAs as partners in policymaking.

In this article we focus on FOAs as political actors. Using Krott's (2005) definition, associations are organisations that articulate the interest of the groups they represent and attempt to implement them by lobbying politicians, similar to NGOs but with several special characteristics (Krott, 2005) or unlike bureaucracies, which aim at gaining and maintaining responsibility over political issues (Giessen et al., 2014).

The aim of this paper is to analyse the factors of political dispositional power for interest groups, using the example of FOAs in Slovakia. The potential impact of FOAs on forest policymaking will be analysed using power theory. First the concept of power will be explained, followed by proposing criteria for assessing the dispositional power of interest groups. Finally the criteria are applied for analysing the political power potential of Slovak FOAs.

2. Concept of power

There is a strong debate taking place among scientists about including power relations in forest policy analysis (Arts and van Tatenhove, 2004; Hassanagas, 2004; Krott, 2005; Giessen and Krott, 2009; Krott et al., 2013), especially when talking about actors.

When we think of power, we might initially think about how people, governments, and powerful groups in society can compel people to do things, often against their will. Some authors have focused on the ability to influence political process through power. Several faces of power were distinguished. The first face of power is the traditional one of who wins and who loses over a certain issue (Dahl, 1961). The second face refers to an actor's ability to set the agenda, and in particular to keep unwelcome issues off the agenda (Bachrach and Baratz, 1962). Scholars argue that this sort of power, the coercion of one person by another, is one of the two faces of power. The other face is the ability to keep a person from doing what he or she wants to do; instead of a coercive power, the second face is a blocking power. In the first face of power, A participates in making decisions that affect B, even if B does not like the decisions or their consequences. In the second face of power, A prevents B's issues and interests from getting on the agenda or becoming policy, even when actor B really wants these issues raised. The third face relates to an actor's capacity to prevent other actors from recognising their genuine interests; weak actors' preferences are manipulated to such an extent that may actually be contrary to their fundamental interests (Lukes, 1974).

Some authors understand power as the ability of an actor to influence other actors to achieve a political outcome. They consider the actor as an object, which is included in the policy formulation and implementation process, where the formulation and implementation are considered as a result of actors' intervention. These actors can be individuals or organisations (Krott et al., 2013).

Arts and van Tatenhove (2004) define power as the organisational and discursive capacity of agencies, either in competition with one another or jointly, to achieve outcomes in social practices, a capacity which is, however, co-determined by the structural power of those social institutions in which these agencies are embedded. They define power as a part of structural layers and develop a three-layered model. Relational power focuses on the achievement of policy outcomes

by agents' interactions, dispositional power focuses on the positioning of agents in arrangements mediated by rules and resources, and structural power focuses on the structuring of arrangements mediated by orders of signification, domination, and legitimisation.

Krott et al. (2013) focus on actors by looking to their power sources and look on structural power as a part of rules, discourse, or ideologies. Arts and van Tatenhove (2004) point out that structural power refers to orders of signification, legitimisation, and domination that materialise in discourses as well as in political, legal, and economic institutions of societies.

2.1. Political power of interest groups

'An interest group is an organised association which engages in activity relative to governmental decisions' (Salisbury, 1975, 130). Contrary to political parties, interest groups do not strive for governmental responsibility. Interest groups are indispensable in the developed democratic political system (Glück, 1976). In the interest of the high political agenda of their members, interest groups solve political problems. For this purpose they use methods to raise public awareness in order to provide a response from political actors and to formulate appropriate programmes. Interest groups may be influential, but their political activities may be most effective when they are consistent with public opinion (Denzau and Munger, 1986; Kollman, 1998). Hansen (1991) suggests that interest groups may be influential, in part, because they provide information that is useful to legislators, including information about what the public wants, thus serving as useful intermediaries between the public and the government. They represent some groups better than others, but overall may enhance the impact of public opinion on public policy. Denzau and Munger (1986) argue that it makes sense for interest groups to focus their efforts on legislators whose constituents are divided, ignorant, or indifferent, because it is too costly to influence legislators whose constituents are informed and clearly on one side or another.

Most scholars agree that interest groups' endowment with resources furthers their capacity to influence decision-makers and policy outcomes (Gerber, 1999; Burstein and Linton, 2002; Hall and Deardoff, 2006). Interest groups' resources include money, legitimacy, political support, knowledge, expertise, and information. Interest groups can use their financial resources to support an incumbent or a challenger in electoral contests. By dealing with certain political or bureaucratic actors, interest groups may also be able to convey legitimacy upon them. Interest groups, moreover, can express their support for a politician in exchange for policies that favour their economic or other interests, which may influence the voting decisions of a rationally ignorant electorate. Most importantly, interest groups may have knowledge, expertise, and information that can facilitate the task of decision-makers (Crombez, 2002; Hall and Deardoff, 2006). Groups can 'make noise' by way of demonstrations, rallies, petitions, statements in the media, and participation in public debates. Groups can try to attain their objectives with such outside lobbying (Kollman, 1998). On the one hand outside lobbying can influence public opinion in favour of the demands of certain groups; on the other hand, it can be used to transmit information on policy preferences to politicians.

Bayers et al. (2008) denote the criteria that interest groups involved in the political process should meet. According to them, the degree of organisation and structuring is relevant which is natural for a group and defines it to the general public opinion. The criterion which narrows down the image in organised groups is the political interest to which promotion and achievement groups direct their influence on the development of policy decisions using the political defence of the interest. The interest group becomes a political actor reflecting the needs of its members. However, in the political process many of the actors represent the political interests of their supporters (such as political parties/movements); therefore, it is necessary to define the interest group with the criterion of informality. This parameter creates, from interest group, actors who do not have ambitions to join the institutional state

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