



## The preconditions for the formation of private forest owners' interest associations in the Western Balkan Region

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### ABSTRACT

The private forest owners in Bosnia and Herzegovina, Croatia, Macedonia and Serbia are to a large extent not organised in interest organisations although their forests make up between 10% (Macedonia) and 52% (Serbia) of the total forest area. Private forest owners' interests are mainly in the hands of the public forest administration. This situation is not in accordance with democratic political systems. The paper investigates the preconditions for change by scrutinizing prevailing interest group theories by random surveys of private forest owners and in-depth interviews of forest policy decision-makers. As a result of the empirical research it has been found that, in spite of the large number of private forest owners, there are good chances for the formation of private forest owners' interest associations in all four countries, mainly because of the high critical mass of engaged private forest owners and the support of the majority of forest policy decision-makers.

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### 1. Introduction and objectives

The Western Balkan countries: Bosnia and Herzegovina (BH), Croatia, Macedonia and Serbia have in common that their forests are significant resources for the development of market economy and private ownership. Although the share of private forests varies between 10% (Macedonia) and 52% (Serbia) and will probably increase

when the restitution and privatization process is finished, the private forest owners are nearly unrepresented in national forest policy due to the lack of an independent interest association (Table 1). Private forest owners' interests are mainly in the hands of public forest administration.

The assumed causes of the existing situation are manifold (Ranković and Nonić, 2002) and rooted partly in forest history (Nonić, 2004:26; Nonić and Milijić, 2008:60). Firstly, the private forest owners are used to the existing situation that there is a powerful public forest administration that implements the forest regulations on private forest owners in concurrence with the state forest company (e.g. levies for timber harvests, permission for harvesting, tree marking by forest authority before felling, and license for timber transport) (Nonić, 2004:64). Secondly, the great number of private forest owners in combination with the small average size of their forest land, often fragmented into a number of dislocated cadastral plots, makes the owners believe that their property is not worth much. Thirdly, forest ownership often cannot be allocated to individual persons but rather to the family (common property). Fourthly, such small parcels of fragmented forest land are

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**Table 1**  
Private forest ownership in Western Balkan countries.

Country	Forest area (1000 ha)	Of which private (1000 ha)	Of which private (%)	Number priv. for. owners (1000)	Average size of for. prop. (ha)	Average size cad. parcel (ha)	Number cadastre parcels
Bosnia and Herzegovina <sup>a</sup>	2710	523	19	500	0.50		A few
Croatia <sup>b</sup>	2688	581	22	600	0.97	0.48	2
Macedonia <sup>c</sup>	997	96	10	240	0.40		
Serbia <sup>d</sup>	2313	1170	52	500–800	2.34	0.34	7

<sup>a</sup> Source: Avdibegović, M., 2006. Organization of private forest owners in Bosnia-Herzegovina. Unpublished note, Sarajevo, 1–7.

<sup>b</sup> Source: Croatian Forests Ltd. 2006. General forest management plan 2006–2015. Zagreb.

<sup>c</sup> Source: Ministry for Agriculture Forestry and Water Management–Agency for Spatial Planning. 2004. National Statistics and Spatial Plan of the Republic of Macedonia. Section Forestry. 26–34.

<sup>d</sup> Source: Medarević, M., Banković, S., 2008. Forests of Serbia Today. Forests, Srbijasume, Belgrade, 100: 6–11.

difficult to manage efficiently for the production of valuable timber assortments (Nonić et al., 2006:96). Thus, it is not surprising that the share of fuel wood in the annual removals dominates in private forests while state forests mainly produce industrial wood (saw logs and pulp wood). The preference for fuel wood production corresponds with the dominance of coppice forests in private forests with relatively modest growing stock per hectare and annual increment per hectare as compared with state forests where high forests prevail. Finally, demographic characteristics of the private forest owners as well as political culture, interests and values of forest policy decision-makers are further potential reasons for the existing situation of private forest owners in the Western Balkan region.

The basis of the paper is the fact that the voluntary interest associations of private forest owners in BH, Croatia, Macedonia and Serbia are just in the stage of development. This is not surprising as interest associations are key players in democratic political systems, and not enough time has passed since the transition of these countries from the Yugoslavian Socialism period to democracy. The situation in other former socialist European countries is not quite different (Hirsch et al., 2007; CEPF, 2008). The project aims at overcoming this deficiency and at enabling policy makers to apply appropriate policy tools. Thus, the *main objective* of the paper is to define the preconditions for the formation of independent interest associations of private forest owners in the Western Balkan region. In this context the following questions are dealt with:

- Why are private forest owners' interest associations (PFOAs) in the four countries almost not existent?
- What is the procedure of forming PFOAs?
- What kinds of services and lobbying are expected by potential members of PFOAs?
- What are the possible choices, constraints and possibilities to form PFOAs in the Western Balkan region?

In order to answer these questions the main characteristics of private forest owners are described and the prevailing hypotheses on associations are tested by empirical research.<sup>7</sup>

## 2. The role of interest groups in democratic political systems

The large number of private forest owners share a few though strong common interests which can be summarised in two groups. The first group refers to the representation of interests in the political process and the second group refers to support in forest management.

<sup>7</sup> In concurrence with the European Forest Institute and the Finnish FOPER ("Forest Policy and Economics Education, Training and Research") project for the Western Balkan region, the Austrian Ministry of Agriculture and Forestry, Environment and Water Management financed a two-year research project (from May 2007 until April 2009) on the Formation of Private Forest Owners in the Western Balkan region ("PRIFORT"). The full research report is available from the PRIFORT project's website: [www.prifort.com](http://www.prifort.com), volume 1 that will be published as EFI Research Report in 2010.

The first group of services refers to the *representation of their members' interests* in the political system. "An interest group is an organised association which engages in activity relative to governmental decisions (Salisbury, 1975:175)". Contrary to political parties interest groups do not strive for governmental responsibility. Livelihood of private forest owners is not only affected by forest policy and the national forest regulations concerning private forest owners, but also by a number of other policy areas such as environmental policy, tourism policy, energy policy and many other policy areas referring to forests. The representatives of PFOAs permanently observe the political process of formulation and reformulation of policies affecting the interests of their members. For this purpose they maintain close contacts to other interest groups, political parties, officials in public administration etc. in order to avoid detrimental and support favourable developments for their members.

With regard to the second group, efficient *forest management* cannot be done without appropriate skills in silviculture, harvesting, marketing of forest products and services, social aspects etc. as well as cost-efficient utilization of resources, such as forest roads, harvesting machines, hauling devices, transport facilities and information systems about product prices. Many of these facilities are only cost-efficient if applied to large adjacent forest areas in order to benefit from economies of scale. The same also holds for acquiring the necessary skills and competences in forest management by training. What is needed is an organisation that takes care that the most urgent needs of private forest owners for sustainably managing their forests are satisfied. This organisation supplies training courses in silvicultural techniques, performance-oriented harvesting methods, realisation of better timber prices, avoidance of accidents in forest work etc. It also provides the members with the possibility of using highly efficient machinery and even manpower for doing harvesting operations on their own in cooperation with other private forest owners.

Interest associations are irreplaceable in a developed democratic political system (Glück, 1976). They put policy issues in the interest of their members high on the political agenda. For this purpose they apply public relations and other means of raising public awareness to ensure responsiveness of governmental units to formulate appropriate programs. The associations evaluate whether the programs and their implementation meet their expectations. Furthermore, they control accountability by ensuring that government and bureaucracy have exercised their powers and discharged their duties properly. If this is the case, the government or a part of it, the public forest administration, is seen as legitimate and supported by the private forest owners.

## 3. Theories about the formation of interest associations

### 3.1. Pluralism

From a pluralistic point of view, interest groups are the organised reflection of the underlying society with the various interests of its

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