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# Private Landowners' Relation to Land and Forest in Two Estonian Counties

**ABSTRACT** This comparative study is based on two large surveys of private land and forest owners in two Estonian counties. While more than half of Põlvamaa is covered with forests, Läänemaa has a potential for summer tourism and second homes. We explore different rationales for obtaining landed property and analyse the individual property holders' relations to—and use of—land and forests. Based on the two interlinked restitution and privatisation processes from 1991 onwards, our surveys reveal two main rationales among the owners: emotional and economic. The owners' relations to the property are connected with legacies from both the interwar independence and the Soviet period. In addition, different rationalities, ambitions and attitudes are also related to how the property was obtained. In spite of the demand for land, many resituated landowners have chosen to maintain or recreate family property, even if the property was not actively used. In both Põlvamaa and Läänemaa the emotional bonds to land are strong among the owners of restituted or inherited property, while this is a weaker factor among those who have obtained land or forest through privatisation.

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**KEYWORDS** Estonia, restitution, privatisation, land ownership, forest, emotional bonds, economic rationality

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## Introduction

The collapse of the Soviet Union and the regained Estonian independence in 1991 were followed by complicated and time-consuming processes in order to recreate private property relations. In this context, the

restoration of private family farming—beyond the level of extended private plot production that appeared from the late 1980s—was an essential objective (Abrahams 1996: 7). Restitution became the most salient principle for re-privatisation of agricultural land, whereas most forests were to become privatised through auctions and sales. However, the policy of restitution was badly synchronised with the overall agricultural privatisation. Frequent legal impediments appeared, since previously collective assets such as machinery had been privatised long before the legal access to land was granted (Alanen *et al.* 2001: 395).

It was important for many former landowners or heirs to repossess their previous family property. In some regions the amount of land claimed for restitution also exceeded the available land area, which both postponed restitution and necessitated a tricky compensation procedure. In comparison to other parts of Central and Eastern Europe (CEE), in which we here include the three Baltic States, the Estonian property reforms thus became more sluggish, not least because of the initial lack of land engineers (Hedin 2003: 68). For the level of generalisation it is thus necessary to stress that the Baltic States—because of interwar independence—roughly spent the same time under Communism as CEE and therefore deviate from the general Post-Soviet pattern. The Post-Soviet reforms after 1991 were more similar to CEE, while the initial reforms already took place under Gorbachev's perestroika. This is important when explaining the differences in space of manoeuvring in the late 1980s and the determination to change after independence in 1991. In terms of property reforms, the choices made were thus specifically aiming at erasing the Soviet period. Thus, the so-called agricultural transformation process in Estonia was guided by political and ideological motives rather than economic efficiency criteria (Rabinowicz 1996: 20–23). However, the institutional legacies from the planned economic period and their impacts on the post-socialist property reforms have been profound. In a CEE context, based on both restitution and different privatisation schemes, the post-socialist land reform experiences are mixed. While all landed assets in Estonia, Latvia, Lithuania and Albania were fully nationalised and collectivised after World War II, the amount of state-owned land in CEE (sovkhoz-land) never exceeded more than one quarter of the total land area (Van Dijk 2003: 150). Formally, however, there were many restrictions on the use of non-state property. Depending on size, parts of the land could be privately managed and inherited, while other parts were managed by the kolkhoz (collective farm) to which the land was attached (Swinnen & Mathijs 1997: 340). The preconditions for de-collectivisation and property reforms were thus different in each CEE-country; however, one similar feature was the fact that for generations, land has constituted a specific political issue. This was the

case prior to collectivisation, during the planned economic period, and after. Another similar feature was the land fragmentation appearing after de-collectivisation due to the division of properties among several heirs (Alanen 1999: 440). Secondly, because of missing skills among the new owners and the general lack of capital for investments, many owners are unwilling or unable to manage the land properly (Stiglitz 2000: 39; van Dijk 2003: 150; Staehr 2004: 60). Finally, in most cases, restitution and the full acknowledgment of legal property rights recreated a property structure that once upon a time was economically viable. However, in the context of the post-war period's productivity development, technology shifts, and competitive trade environment, small-scale farming is obsolete. Property reforms and restitution must therefore be understood in the context of how the individual holder apprehends his or her land. Thus, the individual's preferences provide the key to the understanding of present and future land use.

Land contains an emotional component in the sense that the repossession of previous family land and property implies a reconnection to the place of birth or the link to the previous family residence (van Dijk 2007: 509; Jörgensen & Stjernström 2008: 104–110; Grubbström 2011: 36–37). Land ownership can, but does not have to, generate any economic output or imply an economic relation. On the one hand, this concerns to what extent the property owner can make profits by selling products on the market, leasing out land or generating incomes from hunting or tourism. On the other hand, the property owner may have specific emotional ties to the land, which for example represent social networks, family ties and history, or the well being of the owner. Since the early 1800s a widespread notion in Estonia has been: "Farmer and farm belong together" (Abrahams & Kahk 1994: 15, 65). Restitution therefore refers not only to the repossession of family property but also to the re-establishment of family ties related to a specific place (Jörgensen & Stjernström 2008: 109; Grubbström 2011: 34–35). It has been shown that emotional ties to property can put certain restrictions on the individual forest owner's ambitions: a restrictive impact on felling volumes and/or aversion to modern forestry management. This is the so-called *emotional filter hypothesis* (Jörgensen & Stjernström 2008: 97). However, the ambitions for obtaining land or forest and the aspiration to become property holders are based on a multitude of explanations.

Estonia makes a suitable case for the investigation of the personal relation to land and forest. At first, this small country was exposed to profound property changes and several shifts in political regimes during the twentieth century. During the first years of inter-war independence a radical land redistribution—based on expropriation—took place, while a majority of forests were kept in the hands of the State (Lipping 1980: 282). This was

also the case in Latvia and Lithuania, where somewhat less radical land reforms were carried out. In newly independent Finland, culturally and linguistically closer to Estonia but more politically developed, similar social problems needed to be solved by means of land redistribution in the early 1920s (Siaroff 1999: 107–108, 113). Furthermore, in contrast to the classical Soviet types of *kolkhozes* and *sovkhozes*, most Estonian large-scale agricultural production units were based on administrative mergers of the previous farmsteads. Many Estonian *kolkhoz* families thus continued to reside on their previous property after collectivisation, which also concerned tens of thousands of deported Estonians returning from Siberia after Stalin's death in 1953. Peasants saw the old farmstead as a symbol of continuity, and it was often possible to pass on the right to reside on the farmstead to the next generation. In addition, the private plots cultivated on a household basis were often attached to the place of residence (Nove 1998: 108; Abrahams & Kahk 1994: 86–87). Secondly, the relatively well-preserved property documentation from 1939 enabled—in spite of time-consuming investigations—the re-establishment of a land cadastre. Thirdly, in the midst of *perestroika* in the late 1980s, the Baltic Soviet Republics became laboratories for informal agrarian property reforms when eternal leases of *kolkhoz* land enabled small-scale private farming. Finally, restitution after the regained independence in 1991 was in line with the wishes of most Estonians because of the symbolic role of land, both prior to—and during—the first independence as well as throughout the years under Soviet rule. Thus, even though the path towards restitution was set already prior to 1991, the Estonian property reforms became more sluggish and complicated than in many other post-socialist states. While it was relatively easy to claim land back, the formal recognition of property rights after de-collectivisation was blurred by the semi-private reforms during *perestroika*, which needed to be solved by numerous legal amendments after 1991 (Tamm 2001: 408–416).

### Aims and Outline

The aim of this paper is twofold: to compare and explore the different rationales for obtaining land and forest property and to analyse the individual property holders' relations to—and use of—land and forests. This concerns both the present situation and future expectations. Two Estonian counties, the coastal county of Läänemaa and the inland county of Põlvamaa, are in focus. Our main research questions are based on the owners' relations to—and use of—land and forests as a resource, which we investigate by means of data from our two surveys merged with additional interviews. In addition to the surveys we will present some international comparative aspects that contribute to illuminating country specific similarities and differences.

## Methods and Data

From August to December 2006, we conducted a postal survey in Põlvamaa and Läänemaa. The general aim was to gain an understanding of the individual owner's relation to the property. Our questionnaires included questions about how and why the property was obtained, what plans the owners had for land use and their estimations of incomes from the property. We excluded properties below one ha, properties in urban areas and villages and land/forests belonging to companies.<sup>1</sup> The questionnaires were sent to 1,165 landowners; 770 in Põlvamaa and 395 in Läänemaa. In Läänemaa it was restricted to the municipalities of Nõva, Noarootsi and Ridala. The selection of these municipalities was due to the easy access to the land register, which contains both names and addresses of all landowners. Thereafter we made a random selection of land holdings. A corresponding methodology was impossible in the other county. In Põlvamaa we began with a random selection of properties from the land cadastre. Thereafter we contacted the Estonian Cadastre Registration Authority for names and social security numbers of the property owners, which we then matched with the population register in Põlvamaa. However, because there were more land and forest owners in Põlvamaa than in the Läänemaa municipalities, our sample became larger in the former case. After a reminder during the autumn, we ended up with a response rate of 36 per cent (n=420) in December 2006. When considering the scepticism towards various authority practices, the relative frequent flow of surveys of this kind, and not least the ongoing generational shifts implying multiple ownerships, we found the response rate satisfactory (Jørgensen & Stjernström 2008: 100; Grubbström 2011: 34).

Out of 420 respondents, 48 per cent were women and 52 per cent were men. The average age of responding land and forest owners was relatively high (Table 1). The share of owners older than 64 years of age was 33 per cent, which should be compared to the national share of 17 per cent in that age group in 2010 (*Statistics Estonia*).

Table 1. Age distribution among respondents in Põlvamaa and Läänemaa

Age	Frequency	Percent
-34	40	9,5
35-64	239	57
65-	139	33
No answer	2	0.5
Total	n = 420	100

Source: Data from Läänemaa and Põlvamaa surveys 2006–2007.

## Interviews

In addition to the large survey, we used interviews to gain a deeper understanding of some of the landowners' personal experiences and how their relation to the property has changed over time. Thirteen interviews were carried out in Põlvamaa in September 2007 and ten interviews in Läänemaa in October 2008. These 23 interviews represented a variety of land and forest property owners: six women and seven men in Põlvamaa and four women and six men in Läänemaa. From the interviews we obtained a more differentiated picture concerning the values related to land and the underlying causes of individual land use. We were able to identify a variety of individual strategies and expectations, and not least explanations of the individual owners' emotional bonds to the property. This concerned motives for keeping the land, attitudes to agricultural and forest co-operative associations, possibilities of land leases, or the impact from nature preservation actions or legislation related to the owners' property. Four of the interviewed landowners in Läänemaa lived in the Stockholm area in Sweden. Three owners resided close to their property and three lived in Tallinn. Four out of the thirteen interviewees in Põlvamaa resided in nearby cities, while the other nine resided permanently on the property. In spite of the fact that we do not know how many of the interviewees that had personal experiences from the Great Deportations in the late 1940s, we may assume that a majority of them, themselves, family members or relatives, had links to deported people. The deportations, which comprised around 20,000 people or 3 per cent of the population in 1949, became a means to speed up the forced mergers of family farms, that is forced collectivisation. This may explain one specific emotional link to private land and family farming, which partly was surviving in the cultivation of the so-called private plots (Jørgensen 2004: 150–153). The main results from these interviews will however be used for a forthcoming study with focus on the attitudes to agricultural and forestry cooperative associations.

## Põlvamaa and Läänemaa. Inland and Coastal Area

Põlva County in the southeast, with borders on land and across the great Lake Peipsi to the Russian Federation, roughly covers 1/20 of Estonia. Based on thirteen municipalities and one town area it has a total population of 32,000. Because of its richness in land and forests Põlvamaa is a suitable area for the investigation of land and forest property relations. More than 70 per cent of the population is rural and more than half the county area is covered with forests. While the average national growing stock is 200 m<sup>3</sup>/ha,

the Põlvamaa average of 217 m<sup>3</sup>/ha places the county among the top three in Estonia. Põlvamaa also has the highest number of commercial forests and the largest wood supply in Estonia. However, Põlvamaa has fewer forest areas devoted to nature protection than other Estonian counties (*Yearbook Forest* 2005: 3–4).

From the Põlvamaa cadastre it is possible to analyse the progress of the land restitution and privatization process. The year of restitution mentioned in the cadastre marks the year when the property was legally re-established. The data shows that almost half of the registered properties possess less than 10 ha of land and forest. 57 per cent of all holdings have forests and the other 43 per cent only possess agricultural land. 75 per cent of the forest properties are smaller than 10 ha, which means that most holders possess rather small properties while 3.3 per cent of the forest properties contain 30 ha or more.

Läänemaa, along the northwest coast of Estonia, was traditionally dominated by farming, but since the agricultural conditions are quite poor, fishing and shipping have become important. Today's farming consists of both small plots and a few large-scale farms (Grubbström 2009: 138). According to the Agricultural census of 2001, 42 per cent of the county's total land area is agricultural land and 33 per cent is forested (*Statistics Estonia*).

Among the landowners in the three studied municipalities in Läänemaa: Noarootsi, Ridala and Nõva (with a total population of 4,392), around 70 per cent are absentee owners living in other parts of Estonia or abroad. These areas have a long history of Swedish population (Markus 2004: 126). However, most of the Swedes left Estonia because of the threat from a second Soviet occupation. Estonian Swedes have showed great interest in the restitution of family land and a considerable part of absentee owners, especially in Noarootsi, reside in Sweden. Land fragmentation is profound because of restitution and inheritance, especially significant among owners in Sweden, where 70 per cent of the respondents share the property with family members or relatives. The corresponding figure for absentee and local owners in Estonia is 34 and 25 per cent respectively (Grubbström 2011: 36–37).

During the Soviet period Läänemaa became heavily militarised and the population declined rapidly. Many buildings were destroyed by the Soviet regime and people were forced to move to the cities or to the kolkhoz centres. The present age distribution implies that 30 per cent of the populations in the three investigated municipalities are dependent on pensions (*Statistics Estonia*). Owing to the fact that Läänemaa is attractive for second homes and tourism, the exploitation of the coastal areas has increased since the early 1990s. The "persistence of memory" is significant for tourism in



Estonia and this probably explains why many Scandinavian tourists once again have found their way to the area (Worthington 2003: 383). It is also an interesting area for tourists that want to spend time in the nature reserve that has been set aside along the coast.

### The Shifting Landed Property Relations in Estonia since the Nineteenth Century

In the early nineteenth century most land within the present territory of Estonia (the Russian provinces of Estonia and Livonia) was in the hands of the Baltic German nobility, the state or the church. The Peasant Act of 1856 made land purchases possible through the state as an intermediary and land sales increased, foremost in Livonia. By the end of the nineteenth century approximately 50 per cent of the land was in the hands of free peasants. After the declaration of independence in 1918, a land reform was carried out 1919–1926, which ended the Baltic-German supremacy, while the Bolshevik threat was not fully averted. One of the first measures of the radical Constituent Assembly that was elected in April 1919 was to introduce the *land-to-the-tiller* principle implying a radical expropriation and redistribution of land (Köll 1994: 41; Rauch 1995: 76). In spite of organisational shortcomings, the Estonian land reform became one of the most successful in the 1920s because of its emphasis on economic viability. Family farms were established without a fixed maximum or minimum areal limit. A so-called *viable holding* represented a unit that could support a family with two horses. The average farm size was around 24 ha, with more than 60 per cent of all farm units within the range between 10 and 50 ha (*Konjunktuur* 1940:64/65). A majority of the forestland, however, remained state property, partly as a currency reserve (Lipping 1980: 282; Köll 1994: 43).

Land reform and the expansion of agricultural cooperative associations enabled a relatively successful agricultural export performance, with the exception of the impact from the Great Depression 1929–1933, which hit all agricultural export countries hard. However, the Soviet annexation in 1940, followed by full nationalization of all productive assets and the introduction of an ad hoc command economy, cut off the Western export markets and terminated private property rights. While the first attempts to collectivize during World War II were interrupted by German occupation 1941–1944, forced collectivisation was—in spite of an earlier promise not to collectivise—completed in the early 1950s.

In June 1991, a few months prior to formal national independence, the Estonian government passed the Law on Property Reform, which stipulated that all property that had been illegally expropriated after June 1940 should be returned to the rightful owners or their heirs based on claims from the



previous owners or their heirs. Restitution and compensation aimed at re-establishing historical justice (Kuddo 1996: 167). However, the unforeseen consequences of the laboratory experiments under Gorbachev after 1988 based on eternal leases of farmland, not to mention the cases when property could not be returned in its original shape, led to a time-consuming compensation procedure and several legal amendments (Jørgensen 2004: 168–170). In many other parts of the former Soviet Union, restitution was not an option since private ownership was abolished already after the Russian revolution or in the early 1920s. Tracing the pre-war property relations would not only have been extremely difficult because of lacking documentation but also hard because of the negative attitudes to private ownership of land in general (Hedin 2003: 51).

The point of departure for agricultural privatisation in many CEE countries was the communist-led land reforms after World War II. This was for example the case in Poland and Czechoslovakia. However, each country has used its specific method based on restitution, privatisation through auctions, or voucher schemes. In CEE land was not restituted to minority groups or to those who had become foreign citizens, which actually was the case in the Baltic States with large numbers of exile citizens (Swinnen & Mathijs 1997: 341–342). Estonia's return to the pre-1940 property relations thus acknowledged those who left the country during and after World War II to be entitled to get their former land back, which for example enabled the Estonian Swedes living abroad to become absentee owners.

The restitution and privatisation reforms in Estonia intended to recreate private property and private family farming. However, because of several heirs, a number of dilemmas appeared; who would manage the farm, who would be compensated and was it possible to have access to suitable buildings and machinery? In fact, most farming was unprofitable (Alanen 1999: 442–452). Thus, it was not a return to viable family farming in the sense people had expected (Holt-Jensen & Raagmaa 2010: 140). Up to around 2004 there was still a considerable number of small plot farms, which could be seen as a continuation of the private plots people had cultivated during the Soviet period (Alanen (ed.) 2004: 33). However, there is also a group of large-scale farmers who are better off due to the access to additional land from purchases or leases.

If the Estonian land market was stagnating during the first 10 years, a change appeared in 2001–2002. Land and forest prices increased when the aspired EU membership seemed to be within reach. Simultaneously, the implementation of new phytosanitary regulations created higher production costs, which limited the possibilities for most small-scale producers to market their produce locally (Jørgensen 2004: 170).

If the legal changes and the deteriorated market situation had an impact on small-scale farming, Estonian forestry was affected differently from the interwar independence onwards. Nowadays, forestry is a multifunctional business or activity. In fact, in the eyes of many small-scale owners, the business perspective referring to felling is barely visible, if not taking into account the private access to wood for heating. For instance, in Põlvamaa only 10 out of 276 respondents stated that they had incomes from the forested activities that exceeded 25 per cent of their total annual income (Jørgensen & Stjernström 2008: 105).

Forestry also differs from agriculture when we scrutinise the Post-Soviet property reforms. While land restitution was connected with numerous compensation issues, forestry privatisation had fewer legal impediments. Since almost all agricultural land in Estonia was redistributed in the 1920s, it created a specific family attachment to land and place that survived the Communist period. In contrast, privatisation of the state-owned interwar forests is a post-1991 phenomenon. If Estonia's main role in the Soviet economy was agricultural production, forestry was thus of secondary importance and many forested areas were left untouched. Natural reforestation took on in the remotely located agricultural fields and in the areas where post-war felling had been substantial. Some fields were deliberately turned into forests through plantation. As a result, a very unbalanced stock appeared, since both forest management and silviculture were neglected. Restitution of interwar farmland has therefore often implied return of forested fields. However, while biodiversity prospered from the neglect and the creation of natural parks and recreation areas, the size and quality of timber was affected in the opposite way. To conclude, the forested area in Estonia, which was around 853,000 ha in 1940 had increased to 1,915,000 ha in 1991 (Dahlin 1999: 103–104). In 2004 the forests had expanded to cover a total of 2,284,600 ha (*Yearbook Forest* 2007: 14).

Starting from an initial draft in 1993, The Estonian Forestry Act was adopted in 1997. This law was stepwise adjusted to EU regulations on biodiversity, preservation and sustainable development. However, it was also stressed that the Estonian forestry sector was to become a main contributor to the national economic and social well being (FAO 2000: 3). According to Hain and Ahas, this neo-liberal order enhanced illegal forestry activities, since the Forest Act abolished the private owners' obligations to present a forest management plan. Felling declarations were not mandatory until 2004. In 2002 it was estimated that more than 50 per cent of total felling—to some extent—was illegal. As Hain and Ahas underlined some years ago:

It is evident that the high share of illegal logging is directly caused by individuals who are exploiting the weak legal and enforcement system with a desire to gain quick profits (Hain & Ahas 2005: 93–95).

## Estonian Forestry in a Comparative Perspective

Forestry and silviculture are not only about logging and planting. In the last 25–30 years increasing efforts at nature preservation and multifunctional land use have played a major role for the development of certificates and price policies related to the lifecycle status of for example forestland. In Estonia, environmental pressure groups and organisations paved the way for the introduction of Forest Stewardship Certification (FSC). This was a set of forest principles, a global approach inspired by the organic movement, which were developed by a network of individuals and organisations after the Rio Conference in 1992–1993. This multi-stakeholder strategy aimed at creating sustainability principles and responsible forest management on a global level (Cashore *et al.* 2006: 11).

In the Baltic States and in several CEE countries where forestry often is small-scale and multifunctional, the introduction of FSC met some common characteristics. Because of the socialist property relations, there were relatively good ecological conditions because of the low exploitation in former state-owned forests. In the first years of transition, however, the proximity to consumers outside the transition countries and the demand for foreign exchange was considered a possible threat. If Baltic and Polish forests were over-utilized in the years around World War II, a so-called *preservation paradigm* followed based on the biological limits. After 1991 Estonia was the only country out of these four to exceed these biological limits on a national level, implying that annual felling exceeded estimated annual forest growth. The most widespread illegal logging, however, in fact took place in parts of the Russian Far East. Russia has a forest reserve roughly 550 times larger than Estonia and a population around 70 times larger (Meidinger *et al.* 2006: 164–167). In this regard Estonian forestry plays, however, a marginal role in a global perspective, but from a national perspective the forest reserves contribute to significant export earnings.

In the present context, forest policy makers recommend large-scale forest ownership and management, while the trend in CEE has been increasing parcelling. It has been shown that parcelling of land can reduce the likelihood and intensity of management, for example the amount of woodland harvested and the rate of planting (Rodríguez-Vicente & Marey-Pérez 2009: 483). Wiersum *et al.* have investigated small-scale forest ownership

in Europe. They highlight the trend that when a family have ended their productive farming, it is more common to transfer forestland than farmland to the next generation. If this continues, the size of the forest holdings will gradually become smaller (Wiersum *et al.* 2005: 10). Fragmented forest ownership is also an obvious trademark of Estonia. In 2006 the average size of a private forest property was around 12 ha. At this point forest privatisation was far from completed and further land fragmentation was expected. Another problem was that very few forest owners had chosen to comply with forest certification, both because of the relative costs per ha and due to limits on felling, which in the end would imply severe limits on incomes.

## Rationality, Land Use and Individual Preferences

The following discussion concentrate on how owners value their land and in what way land and forest can be seen as a resource. A majority of the respondents in our two surveys have obtained their land through restitution. In spite of the differences between the numbers of questionnaires sent out and the rate of respondents we can see that the results are generally concordant, based on the relative frequency in the surveys.

### Rationales for Obtaining Land and Time Spent on the Property

Many respondents in both counties stated that they felt emotionally attached to their property. Among those who had regained family land, which might have been acquired by their parents or grandparents as early as the late nineteenth century, the historically rooted links are especially common to find. Around 32 per cent of the respondents had their property originating from restitution, somewhat more in Läänemaa than in Põlvamaa (Table 2). The figure is based on information about the first property obtained by the individual owners.

Some owners started out as proprietors by means of a combination of restitution, gift, purchases etc. Inheritance or gift was the second largest category, implying that 29 per cent of the property has already been transferred, either to the second generation or redistributed among siblings or spruces. Within this group, land transfers seem to have been more frequent in Põlvamaa than in Läänemaa. This could be explained by the fact that the coastal minorities left their holdings in connection with the Soviet occupation. Owners who obtained their property from first refusal were owners who either bought houses during the Soviet rule or held eternal leases

Table 2. Respondents' ways of obtaining their first property of land/forest

	Läänemaa (n=144)		Põlvamaa (n=276)		Total both counties
	Frequency	Per cent	Frequency	Per cent	Per cent
Restitution	52	36.1	83	30.1	32.1
Combination, including restitution	14	9.7			3.3
Inheritance or gift	25	17.4	97	35.2	29.0
First refusal	17	11.8	28	10.1	10.7
Purchase or/and auction	25	17.4	63	22.8	21.0
Other comb./missing	3	2.1	5	2	1.9
Total	144	100	276	100	100

Source: Data from Läänemaa and Põlvamaa surveys 2006–2007.

achieved from the kolkhoz from the late 1980s. For the third largest category, the 21 per cent land-owners who obtained their first property through purchases and/or auctions, the tendency indicates that somewhat more people might have seen a rationale in buying productive “forest” land in Põlvamaa than in Läänemaa, which makes sense when considering the different land structures. One landowner who bought land in Läänemaa stressed for example that he valued things like closeness to the sea, a nice house, and that he longed for country life. Since these attributes can be found in many areas it does not presuppose a single unique property, but rather a property that meets a set of preferences.

In the surveys we asked the respondents to rank a number of reasons by valuing these from 1 to 5, where 1 was most important and 5 least important (Table 3). The respondents in both counties stated that the most important motive for obtaining land and forest was to regain family property. A fairly high proportion of absentee foreign owners in the coastal area probably explains why re-established family contacts with a specific place are valued higher than in Põlvamaa. One of the interviewees in Läänemaa, a person living in Sweden, explained this as a way to maintain contacts with his father's family. The restituted and inherited land along the coast that he referred to was thus in his eyes a physical link that gave him access to his father's side of the family. In this way land becomes a symbol of family history and a way to connect different generations to a common past. This is known as vertical connection (Stjernström 1998: 50).

In the forest dominated Põlvamaa, preferences are somewhat different. Forests provide opportunities for a certain kind of self-sufficiency in wood for heating and for construction, which probably explains why this motive

Table 3. Most important motives for obtaining land and forest property

Most important motives for obtaining property. 1=most important, 5=not at all important.						
Reason	Läänemaa N=144			Põlvamaa N=276		
	Numbers	Mean	Std. Dev.	Numbers	Mean	Std. Dev.
Regain family property	100	1.95	1.438	189	2.14	1.56834
Access to wood for heating and construction	100	2.49	1.521	220	2.31	1.43243
Access to second home	88	2.23	1.491	174	2.48	1.52704
Re-establish contact with family home district	86	2.43	1.642	177	2.48	1.57071
Access to arable land for own use	95	3.0	1.624	213	2.56	1.52401
Income possibilities	87	3.13	1.500	191	2.76	1.44440

Source: Data from Läänemaa and Põlvamaa surveys 2006–2007.

is the second most important. Second home is the third most important aspect when both counties are compared. Even if income opportunities were considered relatively unimportant, the interviews show that property is regarded as a long-term investment. In other words, in spite of the owner's present motives, land and forest can contribute to greater economic security for future generations. Thus, it seems that the emotional factor and the sense of place are more highly valued in Läänemaa than in Põlvamaa.

If land and forest are located in a different place than the owner's place of residence, this has effects on the time spent on the property. As shown in table 4, 35 per cent of the respondents spent longer periods on the property. Half of the respondents spent less than two weeks or no time at all on the property, which on the one hand indicates passive ownership. On the other hand, this passive ownership may be temporary, if the present situation offers few economic incentives for, for example, making efforts to improve or maintain the land.

In general, as far as the lengthier stays are concerned, landowners in Põlvamaa spend more time on their property than those in Läänemaa. The greater number of absentee owners in Läänemaa, living abroad or in distant places, thus implies that vacations are used for lengthier stays on the property, while most owners in Põlvamaa can visit their property for a day or two throughout the year. Another difference is that a majority of the owners living in Sweden do not have a house to stay in on their property (Grubbström 2011: 35). Under these circumstances two weeks in a nearby hotel or among relatives are affordable, even though a large majority mentioned that they would like to spend more time on the property. The results partly confirm

Table 4. Estimations among non-residential property owners in Läänemaa and Põlvamaa of the time spent on property 2006

	Läänemaa n=106		Põlvamaa n=176		Both counties	
	Frequency	Per cent	Frequency	Per cent	Frequency	Per cent
Longer periods	33	31	67	38	100	35
2–4 weeks per year	19	18	24	14	43	15
Less than 2 weeks	33	31	56	32	89	32
No time at all	21	20	29	16	50	18
Total	106	100	176	100	282	100

Source: Data from Läänemaa and Põlvamaa surveys 2006–2007.

the importance of access to a second home, while this is not more significant among the coastal owners than in the inland areas.

### The Individual Owners' Preferences, Attitudes and Experiences

In both counties the main reasons for ownership, buying land or claiming restitution of land, are emotional, even though several owners nowadays consider property a long-term investment. When the interviewees talk about the emotional links to land, they often mention memories from their childhood and the work efforts of earlier generations. One man living in Sweden said:

We wanted to go back and show where we were born. It was the emotional values that appeared, the intellectual aspect was put aside and it is still this emotional side that drives us back.

This feeling for the land is reinforced and deepened by the experiences from the Soviet occupation with the loss of land and exposure to terror acts. The emotional links therefore often contain reluctance to sell land. One interviewee strongly emphasized all the hard work that had been carried out by their forefathers for centuries and then concluded that it was not an option to sell what they had been able to regain for free. In fact, most owners want to maintain the land and regard it as important that the land stays in the hands of the family. The negative attitudes to selling land became especially evident during the interviews in Läänemaa, where the absentee owners wanted to maintain property in case someone within the family becomes interested in the years ahead. The older generations expressed hopes that their children would spend more time there in the future and perhaps build a summerhouse (Grubbström 2011: 37–38).

In general, agricultural land is primarily used by local owners residing



on their land. In cases when land is not cultivated, these areas become leases for larger farmers. Among our 23 interviewees only four owners verified significant annual incomes from agriculture or forestry in the last few years. Several of the owners were considering to initiate some tourist activities, but so far only one owner in Läänemaa, involved in agro tourism, had realised any plans. In Põlvamaa there were several examples of incomes from felling between 1996 and 2000, which were made in order to pay for additional forest investments. However, none of the owners had any significant debts. Only two had remaining mortgage payments, but these were not considered burdensome because of the low price paid ten or fifteen years ago. It was more important that eight forest owners had their annual access to firewood secured, which is a benefit that must be added to the relatively modest annual incomes they otherwise presented. Two owners in Põlvamaa also had extra earnings from firewood sales, and for one interviewee the main income was derived from a small sawmill.

While land improvements, for example planting and machinery investments, were modest in both counties, many owners stressed the importance of nature preservation and active land use. Thus, if the owner lived far away from the property—or lacked time for or interest in cultivating the land—it was leased out. In fact, many landowners do not obtain any money rents at all. A majority of the studied landowners in Läänemaa own forest but most of these owners do not regard forestry earnings as important. In fact, several of the Läänemaa landowners were in possession of forests of rather poor quality. But in both counties land investments like planting, thinning or drainage improvements through ditching had already been carried out by the owners themselves. In Põlvamaa most owners had plans for carrying out thinning or clearing up in the near future.

Owing to the fact that small-scale ownership cannot provide enough capital for many costly projects needed in for example forestry, it would be likely to expect a positive attitude to the work and services supplied by local forestry cooperative associations. However, most of the informers claim that they had little knowledge about the forest cooperative associations and their activities. In fact, a few also stressed that they did not want to join. Only one owner had his Forest Management Plan developed by the local private forest association and he would like to see more engagement from their side. Several owners claimed that they were too small for demanding the services offered by the forestry associations, while others just seemed uninterested. In the eyes of most small-scale forest owners the forestry associations are therefore not important. On the one hand, it goes without saying that the impact from the Soviet period can explain why cooperation is discredited. Only two out of the thirteen informers could actually see a ra-

tionale in having access to advisory services, certification, management and logging capacity through these associations. On the other hand, two owners also admitted that they had had substantial informal incomes from their forest activities and therefore did not want to become involved at the moment. The absentee Swedish landowners in Läänemaa rarely use their forest resources, but they express a more positive attitude to the forestry associations than owners living in Estonia. To join a forestry association can in fact enhance the interest in maintaining the ideal that land should be managed and cultivated, even if the owner lacks both time and means to solve this by themselves. This is in line with the so-called “moral responsibility,” here implying to look after the land (Rodríguez-Vicente & Marey-Pérez 2009: 489). This moral responsibility was visible among most of our interviewees. In spite of the fact that they often represented small-scale land and forest owners they had a specific purpose for their future land use.

The first ten to fifteen years of the Post-Soviet transition in Estonia were marked by profound problems of a legal character. In this environment the general lack of auditing and efficient enforcement mechanisms opened up for frauds and thefts. We asked our informers about their personal experiences from these illegal activities. Only six owners admitted or could explicitly relate to this. In one case the owner himself had, as he said, by mistake exceeded the legal felling volume and thus he had to pay a small fine for this. Another example was related to a border dispute when logging was accidentally made on another owner’s property. Three other owners had either been exposed to illegal logging themselves or seen the effects from these actions in the nearby area.

One informer referred to a giant theft taking place in a protected state forest area in 2004. This illegal logging went on for about six weeks and the theft caused severe damages to the area. Another individual described that just when he had regained the land in the mid-1990s, a volume of 30 m<sup>3</sup> was immediately stolen. A few years later, after he had contacted/notified the environmental services for permission to fell timber, another theft started. Within a few days from his first contacts with the supervising authorities, he was offered several proposals from various business entrepreneurs for the job. These people, however, stole parts of the timber they transported, and he believed that the authorities were intimately allied with the same entrepreneurs that he had hired. After guarding his timber day and night because of continuous stealing, he ended up selling the assortments to a local saw mill without any documentation and of course without any tax payments either. The felling and transportation of timber, however, left his property in a very bad shape.

## Conclusions

The general picture of the landowners' relations to—or perceptions of—land, and their actual land use, in the two Estonian counties here explored, has revealed a number of similarities with other CEE. Firstly, the predominance of a small-scale ownership structure. Secondly, the trend towards increased land fragmentation, and thirdly, a strong emotional component guiding the owners' aspiration of both maintaining and cultivating the land possessed. Most important however, regardless of restitution or purchase, land and/or forest possessions provide a connection either to the owner's actual place of birth or to a place in the countryside to which the owner develops emotional links.

The landowners' decision on land use depends on the institutional pre-conditions, the individual expectations and his/her emotional relation to the property. In the case of Estonia, the supremacy of restitution in the re-privatisation of state assets meant that most previous landowners or their heirs had an initial choice either to receive or to sell the property. This was not the case in all parts of CEE, where the post-war nationalisation of land was less far-reaching. The density and mobility of the population and the Socialist period's impact on the physical land use therefore gave a set of specific patterns in some of the post-Soviet states: Estonia as well as Latvia and Lithuania.

Our surveys and interviews have shown that the emotional links to land and forest are especially strong among owners that obtained land through restitution. This also creates specific ideals and expectations connected to the property. *Firstly*, the owners want to maintain the land within the family and are often reluctant to sell or to parcel the land. Even if the land is not cultivated, older landowners often have expectations that the next generation will take over or at least spend more time at the property. It goes without saying that this also represents some kind of a hidden economic rationality, which must be understood from the perspective of the owner's will to guarantee future generations a better economic outlook. Land or forests, which were low-valued initially, may become far more valuable in the years ahead. Thus the economic rationality may have been blurred by the fact that property was purchased or received at a low cost or restituted for free during the initial years of reform. *Secondly*, many owners stressed that land should be managed and actively used. There is however a difference between land and forest owners. While agricultural land can be leased out to active farmers and thus cultivated and prevented from natural reforestation, a majority of the forest owners did not emphasise any significant economic incentives, beyond wood for heating as a main benefit from the

property, which was due to low or in fact absent mortgages. A *third* difference concerning attitudes seems to be that the land/forest owners living in Sweden do not have the same prejudice against cooperative associations as those expressed by Estonian owners. While we expected to find a somewhat more positive attitude to the cooperative forestry associations among the forest owners in Põlvamaa, because of the long-term costs for productive forestry and silviculture, it seems that this kind of economic reasoning is hardly present.

One way to understand the impacts from the shifting property relations that are visible in a transforming society like Estonia is based on how the informers ranked their motives for obtaining land. It shows that in both counties the motives for regaining family property and re-establishing the connections to the family home district were by far more important than economic returns. The difference may be that in Läänemaa, the specific place was of more importance than in Põlvamaa, suggesting that the countryside itself was sufficient in the latter case for nourishing the emotional links. Since a majority of owners in both counties have obtained land or forest through restitution, our assumption—that the emotional ties to property override rational economic land use—is at least verified for the restituted owners.

In spite of the emotional links discussed above, the economic values or incentives are important, but they must also be understood from the perspective of nature-given preconditions in the specific areas. In Põlvamaa most landowners described the high value of access to wood for heating and for construction works, while the absentee owners in Läänemaa rather stressed the access to second homes. The fact that most respondents want to spend more time on their property also shows that this motive could become even more important in the future. Arable land, which historically would have been the most valued motive for obtaining property, has less significant value because of increased specialisation and the decline of small-scale agriculture. For land use this means that the relatively high proportion of Swedish owners in Läänemaa, especially in Noarootsi, implies that owners living in Sweden often end up as passive landowners, while the properties owned by Estonians are more regularly cultivated by the owners themselves.

We confirm that most owners have stressed that it has been important to regain family property. If not the original property, at least property in the surroundings where the owner spent his/her childhood or where family life was centred. It is, however, reasonable to assume that the subdivision of land may increase in the future when for example siblings take over and divide the existing restituted properties. Furthermore, it is likely that the

younger generation has developed—or will develop—a weaker emotional link to land and forests than the older generation, especially if the economic incentives are increasing. The question is for how long the small-scale structure can survive. With a high degree of absentee owners and owners that really do not need to make any actual profits from their land, it might as well be the case that the Estonian forests can have a period of recovery after the years of excessive felling that characterised the late 1990s and early 2000s.

In the legal vacuum existing during the first 10 years of restitution, illegal logging was common but for agricultural land it rather meant that land was left unused and large-scale farmers could use the opportunity to lease land for free. In the present world market situation, prices for agricultural produce are declining. While it makes sense for small-scale forest owners to have access to their own wood for heating and some timber for construction, the cultivation of smaller land areas is often limited to supporting the household's need for, for example, potatoes and vegetables. The value of these crops, which is consumed by an ordinary household, may be of less monetary value. However, in most rural households in Estonia it is still common to grow these crops, which may express and illustrate the emotional link to a kind of subsistence production that the Estonians and most East Europeans were used to and dependent upon for generations.

## NOTES

- <sup>1</sup> In Läänemaa we received addresses to the landowners from each municipality. In Põlvamaa, however, this was not possible and we therefore had to begin with the selection of landowners. Thereafter we obtained name and security number from the Estonian Cadastre Registration Authority. In the following process we could use the population register of Põlvamaa to find the individual address of each landowner.

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