

# Private forest ownership in Europe

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In Europe, private forest owners have a crucial role in achieving sustainable forest management, in sustaining the productivity of forests and in satisfying the increasing demand for wood resources from wood processing manufacturers and bioenergy producers. An enquiry on private forest ownership conducted in 2006/2007 by the Timber Section of the United Nations Economic Commission for Europe (UNECE) and FAO, in cooperation with the Ministerial Conference on the Protection of Forests in Europe (MCPFE) and the Confederation of European Private Forest Owners (CEPF), confirms the significance of private forestry across Europe.

A questionnaire was addressed to 38 European countries that are members of MCPFE and have recorded private forest area. Twenty-three countries submitted data, mostly for 2005: Austria, Belgium, Bulgaria, Cyprus, the Czech Republic, Finland, France, Germany, Hungary, Iceland, Ireland, Latvia, Lithuania, the Netherlands, Norway, Poland, Romania, Serbia, Slovakia, Slovenia, Sweden, Switzerland and the United Kingdom. The lack of response from some countries, particularly in southern Europe and the Balkan countries, may be explained by

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The private forest ownership database and more detailed information on the enquiry are available on the Web site of the UNECE/FAO Timber Section: [www.unece.org/trade/timber](http://www.unece.org/trade/timber)

an insufficient capacity to report or to collect the requested data. The relative youth of the private forest sector in some countries with economies in transition may also have played a part.

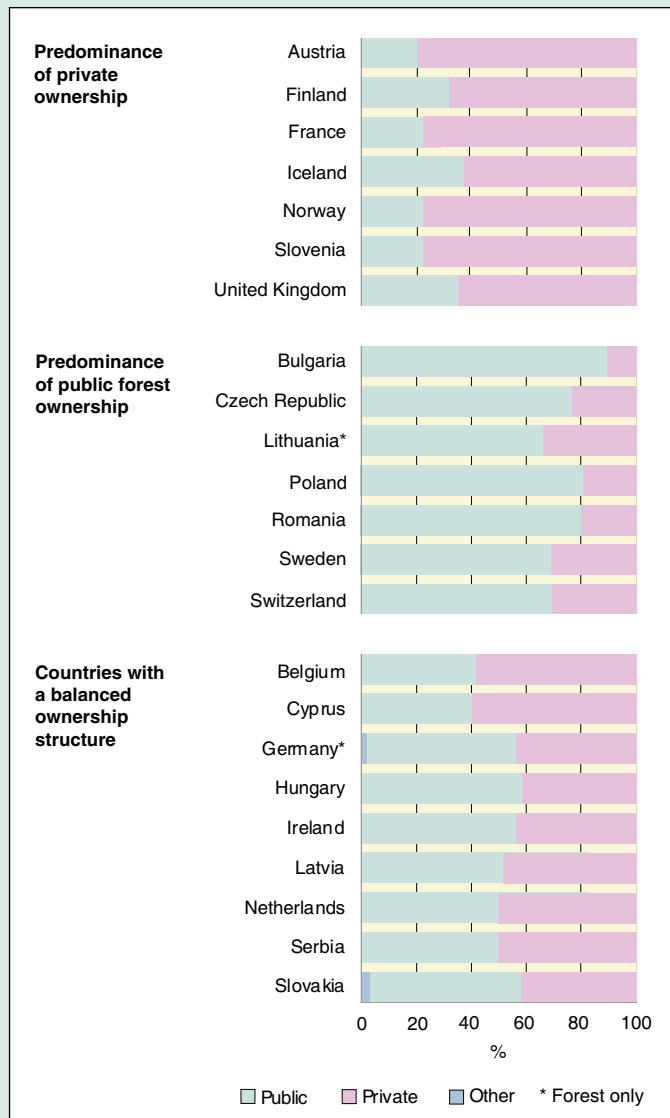
## Balanced overall ownership structure, but large differences among countries

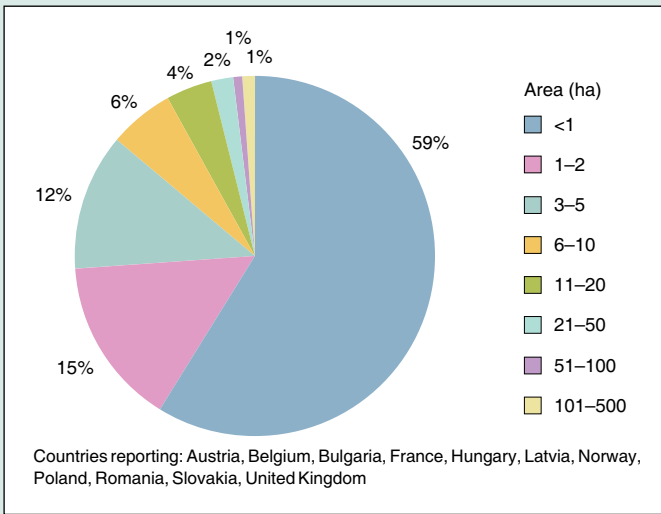
The reported results reveal an overall balance between public and private ownership: 49.6 percent of forest and other wooded land is privately owned, and 50.1 percent publicly. Other ownership, classified as neither public nor private, amounts to less than 0.4 percent. This includes, for example, German forest

expropriated within the scope of land reform in the former German Democratic Republic and now either privatized or about to be privatized.

However, the ownership structure varies greatly among countries (Figure 1). In Austria, France, Norway and Slovenia, privately owned forests account for more than three-quarters of the total forest area, whereas in Bulgaria, the Czech Republic, Romania and Poland they represent less than one-quarter. Several countries are characterized by a relatively balanced forest ownership structure, including some in Central and Eastern Europe (Figure 1).

1  
*Ownership structure of forest and other wooded land*



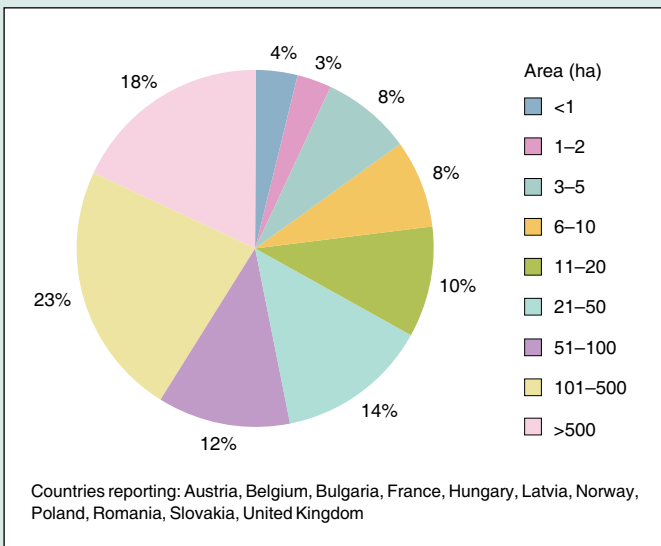


**2**  
*Share of size classes as percentage of total number of private holdings*

**Private ownership mostly by individuals, public by the State**

More than 80 percent of private forest in Europe is held by individuals or families, followed by private institutions and forest industries. In the 11 countries that provided data on these subcategories, public forest is predominantly owned by the State; 13 percent of public forest is owned by cities, townships (communes) or municipalities and merely 1 percent by provincial governments (Figure 4).

However, the ownership structure varies significantly among countries, so it is difficult to draw general conclusions. In Finland, for example, more than two-thirds of forests are privately owned (56 percent by families, 12 percent by forest industries and private institutions), 30 percent by the State. In France, on the contrary, more public forest area is under communal than State ownership. In the Czech Republic, public ownership has declined significantly since the beginning of the 1990s, but most forested land is still owned by the State (61 percent) and communes (15



**3**  
*Share of size classes as percentage of total area of private holdings*

A further point of variation is that in some countries privately owned forests are to a great extent owned by large companies, whereas in others, they are mainly owned by individuals.

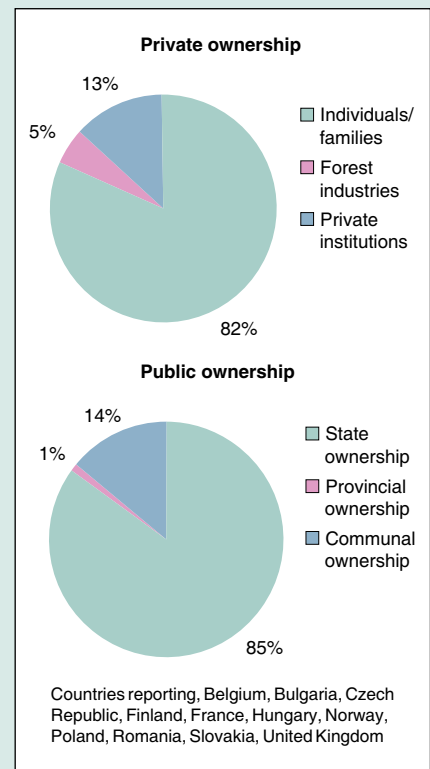
**Increasing number of smallholdings in Central and Eastern Europe**

Significant shifts in ownership have taken place in the formerly centrally planned economies during the past 15 years. In most Central and Eastern European countries, land restitution and privatization is nearing completion, but future changes in ownership patterns are still expected in some countries, notably Romania, Slovakia and Serbia.

In some Central and Eastern European countries the number of smallholdings has increased as a result of restitution and privatization. Holdings smaller than 6 ha represent 70 percent of the total area of private holdings in Poland and 40 percent in Slovenia, but only 5 percent in Hungary, where holdings larger than 100 ha represent over 45 percent.

At the overall European level, the number of smallholdings is vast. In number, almost three-quarters of all private holdings are less than 3 ha (Figure 2). At the same time, holdings smaller than 3 ha account for only 7 percent of the area of privately held forest in the 11 countries that reported these data (Figure 3).

**4**  
*Aggregate structure of private and public ownership*



percent). The ongoing restitution and privatization has primarily increased the number of individuals and families owning private forest land (23 percent).

**Socio-economic observations: ageing, urbanization and gender**

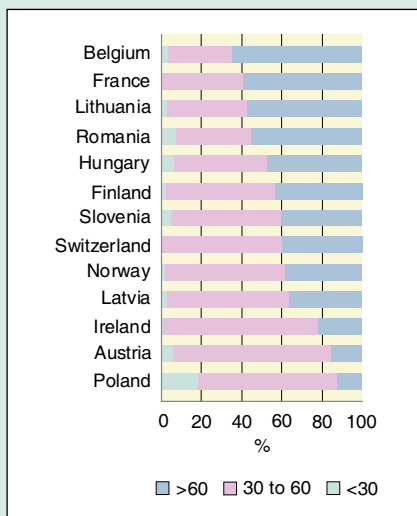
As privatization of forests continues to increase, urbanization and ageing of forest owners can be expected to continue to have an impact on forest management in Europe.

Few European private forest owners are under 30 years of age, and in many countries a large proportion is over 60 (Figure 5). As a result, in the near future many forest holdings will be inherited by new owners whose attitude and motivation towards forestry is uncertain.

Austria, Finland, Iceland, Norway, Poland and Sweden reported an increasing number of urban owners, whereas the Czech Republic and France reported no changes in ownership. A large share of individual owners is occupied outside the traditional agriculture/forestry sector (Figure 6), which may affect owners' knowledge of and attitudes towards forest management.

The majority of private forest owners are male; the proportion of women varies among countries from 20 to 40 percent (Figure 7).

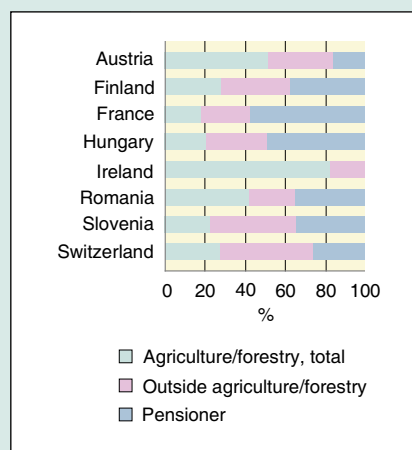
**5**  
*Age of individual private forest owners*



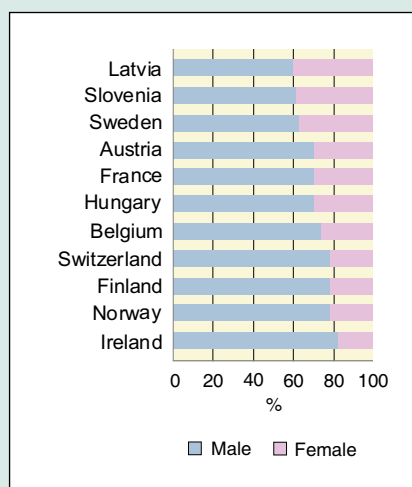
**Policy implications of fragmented ownership**

Twelve countries reported that the fragmentation of private holdings represents a hindrance to sustainable forest management. Small-scale owners may find it more difficult to draw profits than larger entities, and transfer of knowledge and access to infrastructure can be complicated when owners are many. Local and regional cooperation among owners is thus crucial. The enquiry revealed that membership in national associations and the proportion of organized owners differ substantially among countries.

**6**  
*Occupation of individual private forest owners*



**7**  
*Gender of private forest owners*



A workshop on "Mobilizing Wood Resources", organized in January 2007 by the UNECE/FAO Timber Section and partners (see [www.unece.org/trade/timber/workshops/2007/wmw/recomm.htm](http://www.unece.org/trade/timber/workshops/2007/wmw/recomm.htm)) recommended facilitating cooperation of forest owners and servicing of professional units. Governments, academic institutions and professional bodies should provide information and educational programming to help forest owners take sound decisions about forest management. Enhanced capacity building among owners would benefit both public and private ownership structures.

**Further information needs for adequate policy-making**

The UNECE/FAO study contributes to improving information on private forest ownership in Europe, in particular with regard to the restitution and privatization processes in Central and Eastern Europe. Nevertheless, the level of information on some aspects of private forestry remains low, notably on the number of smallholdings, the different private ownership categories, the social background of individual owners and the objectives of ownership. Further improvements in the information base are essential for appropriate policy decisions.

The continuing urbanization and ageing of owners, the increasing number of smallholdings and the resulting fragmentation of ownership are trends that potentially affect the whole private forest sector and must be considered in policy development and application. Owning approximately half of Europe's forested area, private forest owners can make an important contribution to promoting the sustainable management of the region's forests and sustaining their productivity.