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1. Introduction and aims of the study

One result of the land restitution process, following the collapse of the Soviet system, is the large number of absentee owners. This has been looked upon as a problematic side effect of the transition process (van Dijk, 2007). Stiglitz highlights that one consequence is that absentee owners may feel alienated from the land and only be interested in making a rapid profit (Stiglitz, 2000). Staehr (2004) applies this argument to Estonia, arguing that the result of the widespread restitution in Estonia is that some owners are not interested in their property and therefore leave it uncultivated and let the buildings fall into disrepair. The Estonian case is of particular interest since the decision to return to the land ownership pattern that existed in 1939 means that all minorities and all those who left the country during the Second World War now are entitled to get their family land back. This is in contrast to many other CEE (Central and Eastern European) countries, in which the starting point for the restitution process is post-war ownership patterns, for example in Poland and the Czech Republic (Swinnen & Mathijs, 1997). Estonia is also of particular interest since owners of restituted properties are able to repossess the exact plot of land they (or their relatives) owned before the Soviet annexation. These historical links between family and land could generate emotional bonds with the property among this group of landowners. This procedure was not possible in many former Soviet republics, since private ownership was abolished at an earlier stage and it was therefore impossible to trace land ownership patterns (Hedin, 2003). The northwest coast of Estonia now has a group of absentee owners from other parts of Estonia and from other countries, especially Sweden.

Transition processes concerning Estonia have been studied by several authors, for example Tim Unwin (1997) and Ilka Alanen (2004). The former Swedish settlement areas in Estonia have previously been studied by Hedin (2003, 2005). Hedin compares landowners living in Estonia and landowners living abroad. However, this paper contributes with a complementary analysis by
differentiating between local Estonian owners and owners living in other parts of Estonia. Rodríguez-Vicente & Marey-Pérez (2009) highlight the importance to consider the various profiles of private landowners when designing development programmes intended to secure long-term management and sustainability in an area. Brown (2007) also argues that policy should take into consideration that there is an increasing plurality of landowners with different kind of values and attitudes. This paper aims to give examples of how different owner groups value their land and how this might affect their future plans for the property. Such knowledge is valuable when meeting planning demands for future housing, second homes and tourism. The first research question explores how the three landowner groups studied – local owners that live in the same municipality, owners from other parts of Estonia and owners living in Sweden or Finland – value and use their land. Little investigation has been made of the effects of the emotional attachment to land. The second question therefore concerns analysing how emotional bonds to land have affected the landowners’ view of their land and their future plans for the property. This paper includes studies carried out in the coastal municipalities of Noarootsi, Ridala and Nõva, situated in Läänemaa County (Figure 1).

Figure 1

![Research areas.](image_url)
2. Land ownership in Estonia – the historical context

The roots of the values that landowners in Estonia attach to land can be found in the historical context. In the 19th century most of the farms in the Russian province of Estonia were owned by Baltic-German manors. It is of importance to the present land ownership pattern that the study area was a part of the Swedish settlement area and that a considerable proportion of the population, especially in Noarootsi, were Estonian Swedes at that time. The Peasant Act of 1856 made it possible for tenants to purchase land. Land was categorised as peasant land or manor land and at the end of the 19th century approximately 50 percent of peasant land in Estonia was privately owned (Raun, 1981). The radical land reform of 1919, which was implemented during the first period of Estonian independence, aimed at distributing land that had previously been owned by the manors to landless peasants (Lipping 1980). This reform made it possible for a large number of peasants to become owners of family farms, and Taagepera (1972) estimate that in 1939, 86 percent of the farms in Estonia were in private ownership.

The terror experienced during the first Soviet occupation 1940–1941 and the threats of a second Soviet occupation made the majority of Estonian Swedes leave Estonia in 1943–1944, most of them going to Sweden. The Soviet annexation of Estonia in 1944 ended the short period of independence. The subsequent collectivisation towards the end of the 1940s abolished private ownership, and the population was only allowed to keep small household farms (Maandi 2009).

The politics of perestroika, beginning in 1987, led to the emergence of private plot farming and the opportunity for some private family farms to be reinstated in the form of eternal leases of land from the kolkhozes (Alanen, 1999). A radical land reform was implemented in October 1991 by the independent Estonian government. Those who were Estonian citizens could demand the return of or compensation for land that was nationalised by the Soviet regime (Terk, 2000). By using the land
ownership pattern from 1939, the Estonian restitution process seeks to undo and erase from history
the changes that took place during the Soviet period. In this way a reconnection with tradition and
family history linked to the land was made possible. The restitution process is now complete and in
Läänemaa in 2008, 82 percent of the total area of the county had been registered with different
owners (www.maamet.ee 10.05.17). Land has mostly been restored to previous owners or their
families but the figure also includes owners that have received their property through auctions or
purchases. There are some exceptions where land could not be restituted. Owners of houses bought
during the Soviet period have first refusal to their houses and the surrounding land. Owners with first
refusal also include those who held eternal leases of land from the collective in the late 1980s
(Maareformi Seadus 1999).

3. Values of land ownership and emotional attachment to land

A number of values can be attached to land ownership, both economic and non-economic. These
values may be expressed through land use, through leasing out land or selling property rights. Brown
(2007) states that property ownership is not characterised by a static relationship between people and
objects; it is constantly changing and “continually renegotiated depending on how people see it, the
meanings they attach to it and the purpose they wish it to serve”. This view makes it crucial to
further investigate owner’s attitudes to land. Several researchers have emphasised the non-economic
values attached to land ownership. Hedin (2003) shows that non-economic values such as attachment
to a place and kinship relations are important for understanding landowners’ relationship to the
property. The importance of kinship has also been recognised in the field of generational change
within farming (Errington & Lobley 2002). In their study of Norway, Flemsaeter & Setten (2009)
highlight that by studying this close relationship between property and kinship, it is possible to
clarify why owners choose not to sell their property. They show that among Norwegian
smallholders, there is a strong feeling of responsibility between different generations. In the case of Eastern Europe, these feelings of responsibility towards past and future generations may be reinforced by the historical experiences of loss of land and then restitution. Such historically rooted emotional attachments to land are in focus here. Smith et al. (2009) claim that geographical research has mostly excluded emotional aspects but that there is a growing interest in emotions when dealing with people and place. The absence of research dealing with emotions could be due to the difficulties in defining emotions. In the case of emotional values of land ownership, these values must be understood through the landowner’s own experiences.

The particular forms of emotional bonds to land that might occur in Estonia and other countries affected by the Soviet collectivisation have rarely been illuminated. One exception is van Dijk (2007), who states that the communist system in Central and Eastern Europe affected the way in which landowners bond with their land in a manner that has made land more emotionally charged than in Western societies. Van Dijk draws the conclusion that absentee owners in Central Europe seem to have a greater propensity for developing emotional bonds to the land. Hedin claims in her study of the Estonian Swedish area that the main difference between Estonian and Swedish owners is that “the economics of land use” is of minor importance for the Swedish owners and that their landowning had more of a symbolic value (Hedin 2005). There are a few other studies that concern Estonia. Research on Estonian forest owners and their objectives with respect to forest ownership shows that economic objectives are the most important but that “emotional and traditional values of forest ownership” was listed as number four out of ten objectives (Järvinen et al. 2003). Jörgensen and Stjernström emphasise that emotional bonds can have an impact on the management of the forest. They argue that these kinds of emotional links could restrict the implementation of modern forestry, since the emotional bonds to land are stronger than the economic motives for land
possession (Jörgensen & Stjernström, 2008). Earlier research in Noarootsi shows that landowners view the house as the most significant part of their property (Grubbström 2009). There is a close connection between actual land use and the values and feelings that an owner attaches to land. The garden and the fields close to the house are often more intensively used and may therefore have stronger emotional values attached to them than more extensively used land, for example forest land.

A landowner’s relationship with a certain place is central to understanding the emotional bonds with land that owners have. Massey considers place to be “formed out of the particular set of social relations which interact at a particular location” (Massey, 2004). Place is seen here as a constant process of change in which social relationships from both past and present are significant. Setten (2005) argues that relationships between different generations create knowledge that bind together the family and create a sense of identity with the land. Tuan writes about “affective bonds” between people and place (Tuan, 1974). An assumption in the present study is that the affective bonds that may evolve can be long-lasting and influence attitudes towards a place and a landowner’s decision regarding what to do with the land. The owner’s land in Estonia could also be important to the next generation, even if the children were not able to visit it during the Soviet period. In such cases, interaction with the place is indirect and devoid of personal experiences, the result of stable, learnt images of a place (Holloway & Hubbard, 2001). In this sense the mental images of a place are important for the emotional bonds that may evolve.

The transfer of the land and the conveyance of feelings of attachment to the land from the older to the younger generation can be related to Bourdieu’s (1986) different forms of capital. Here, the economic capital is the transfer of the property itself. Cultural capital is, as Bourdieu emphasises, “invested by the family” in the form of knowledge and values. Social capital may be transferred in the form of relationships and contacts. Both cultural and social capital can be converted to economic
The last form of capital that could be of relevance for this study is *Symbolic* capital which is the symbolic representation of the other forms of capital.

Although earlier research has highlighted non economic values of land ownership, this has rarely been discussed in the context of the post-Soviet countries. There are few studies of the Estonian case and those studies only briefly touch upon the emotional aspects of land ownership.

This study aims to deepen the understanding of the emotional bonds to land among landowners who received land through restitution in countries affected by Soviet collectivisation. It also aims to provide further insights into the effects such bonds might have for an area. Since earlier research has emphasised that future planning must take into consideration many different owner profiles, more research is needed to show how attitudes to land might vary between different owner groups and the reasons for these variations. The present study has therefore been designed to investigate landowners’ own experiences and thoughts about their land ownership.

### 4. Study area

A majority of the landowners in Nõva, Noarootsi and Ridala are absentee owners (Table 1). The term ‘absentee owner’ is used here to describe an owner who does not live in the municipality in which the property is located. The coastal region is an interesting area for study since the demand for land for second homes and other investments in tourism mean that it is under pressure to be exploited.

The population in the area has traditionally earned their living from farming and subsidiary occupations such as fishing and shipping. Today, the tradition of family farming is disappearing, and the agriculture that remains consists on the one hand of small plot farms that are mostly cultivated by pensioners and, on the other, large scale farming. According to the agricultural census in 2001, 42 percent of the total land area in Läänema is used for agriculture and 33 percent consists of forest.
In total only 3 percent of the population in the area declared income from farming as their major source of income in 2000. The population in the area has rapidly declined since the mid 20th century. At present, the land ownership pattern in the area is quite fragmented with many landowners involved. Swedish and Finnish landowners are more strongly represented in Noarootsi than in Nõva and Ridala (Table 1). Due to their pre-war settlement patterns, Swedish landowners mostly own properties in villages close to the coast. In most cases, there is no such historical connection among the Finnish landowners.

**Table 1**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>(n= 8136)</th>
<th>Same municipality</th>
<th>Another municipality in Estonia</th>
<th>Sweden or Finland</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Noarootsi</td>
<td>24</td>
<td>45</td>
<td>31</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ridala</td>
<td>38</td>
<td>59</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nõva</td>
<td>39</td>
<td>55</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The place of residence of landowners and their number in percent. The figure is based on the total number of properties in the municipalities studied.

A great many buildings were destroyed during the Soviet occupation. Nowadays many of the remaining old houses are used as second homes during the summer season. This coastal area is also attractive for building second homes. However, the coastal land has partly been designated a nature reserve with the aim of safeguarding important geological and biological values. This also prevents new buildings being erected close to the shore, and those who own land in the reserve can only sell it to the municipality. In order to prevent widespread fragmentation of plots, a restriction on the minimum size has been introduced. Forests are to be managed according to the forestry management
plan, and properties that include cropland must harvest hay once a year and are entitled to EU subsidies for this work. The municipality has set up contact between absentee owners and the local farmers so that the owners can lease out land to active farmers. This makes the conditions for local agriculture more favourable while preventing land becoming overgrown. The area has a tradition of resorts and sanatoria and this kind of resort tourism, combined with nature-oriented tourism with visitors interested in visiting the nature reserves, has a potential in the area.

5. Research methods

This study uses a combination of quantitative and qualitative methods. A postal survey was followed by an interview study. The aims of the postal survey were to investigate the relationship of the owners to their property, as well as current and planned land use. Interviews were used to acquire more personal information about the owners’ attitudes towards their property and their ideas about future land use. The interview study was also intended to achieve a better understanding of the landowners’ feelings about their land and how these feelings have developed over time.

5.1 Postal survey

The land register from 2005, with data for each land holding and the address of the owner, was acquired from the municipalities studied. Properties over one hectare in size and in private ownership were considered relevant to the survey. A sample of landowners was selected at random and 395 questionnaires were sent out in August 2006. After a reminder, a second questionnaire was sent out five weeks later. The response rate was 36 percent (n=144). Some respondents informed me that they had decided not to participate, and the most common reason was that the owner was deceased, ill or already had transferred the property to the next generation. If a generational shift is in progress and land is in the process of being transferred or has recently been transferred, this may
negatively affect the response rate, since the ownership situation may be unclear. An additional reason for the rather low response rate could be the scepticism towards authorities in Estonia (Jörgensen & Stjernström, 2009). This argument is supported by the fact that the response rate among owners living in Sweden or Finland was higher (51 percent).

The respondents were evenly distributed among men and women, 50 percent of each sex. The mean age of the respondents was 59 years. Almost 39 percent of the respondents were 65 years or older. It is to be expected that many of the owners who acquired a property through restitution are relatively old. As many as 46 percent of the respondents are pensioners, and it is likely that this group had more time to fill in the questionnaire compared to other groups and is therefore overrepresented in the response group. Data was analysed with respect to the landowner’s place of residence. For purposes of comparison three groups of landowners were identified: owners living in the same municipality, owners from other municipalities in Estonia, and owners from Sweden and Finland. Since Finnish landowners are a minority of the group referred to as landowners from Sweden and Finland, this group mostly represent Swedish landowners. A comparison between the respondents and the total number of landowners in the land registers shows that relatively few of those who have a property in Noarootsi but live in another municipality in Estonia responded to the questionnaire. The landowners that have a property in Noarootsi but live in Sweden or Finland are overrepresented. Other groups of landowners are quite representative among the respondents.

5.2 Interviews

An important point of departure is that the history of the property and of the family who owned or cultivated the land is crucial for understanding the landowner’s relationship to the land. The interviews were designed as topical life stories, a concept used by Riley and Harvey where the focus lies on one aspect of a person’s life (Riley & Harvey, 2007) – in this case on the relationship to the
property in Estonia. This topic is bound up with personal and family histories. A family history can reveal relationships to the land in question and provide some insight into people’s reaction to political changes in a broader perspective. The interviews can also present a more nuanced picture of the experiences of land ownership among different types of landowners.

The interviewees were selected from among those who had responded to the survey, and the intention was to meet landowners from different areas, of different ages and of different genders. Nine semi-structured interviews were held in 2008, and an additional short telephone interview was conducted with a young landowner who lives in Sweden and owns land in Nõva. Four of the interviewees were women and six men, and the interviews in Estonia required an interpreter. Three of the landowners interviewed lived in the vicinity of Stockholm and owned land in Ridala and Noarootsi. Three local owners from Noarootsi were also interviewed. Lastly interviews were conducted with three owners who lived in Tallinn and owned land in Ridala. I have also used some information from an interview study in 2006, conducted with eight local farmers in Noarootsi, and two interviews with large-scale farmers in Noarootsi in 2009. It is quite possible that the emotional values are stronger among the group studied than among owners in general, since those who are emotionally attached to their property may be more predisposed to accept a request for participating in the study.

6. Different ways of and reasons for acquiring land

Restitution, inheritance or gift imply rather passive ways of acquiring land, but landowners who have obtained land in these ways are those who are the most likely to want to re-establish links to family tradition and history. Buying land is a more active way of acquiring a property, but these landowners more often have a weaker emotional bond to their land (van Dijk, 2007). It is clear that a larger proportion of the landowners who live in the same municipality and in Sweden have acquired
land through restitution or a combination including restitution compared to landowners living in another municipality. All landowners who acquired land through purchase or auction, within the group of landowners from Sweden or Finland, are respondents from Finland (Table 2).

Table 2

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>(n=144)</th>
<th>Same municipality</th>
<th>Another municipality in Estonia</th>
<th>Sweden or Finland</th>
<th>Total</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Restitution</td>
<td>24</td>
<td>16</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>52</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Combination including restitution</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>14</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Inheritance or gift</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>25</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>First refusal</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>17</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Purchase or/and auction</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>25</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other combinations</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>52</td>
<td>58</td>
<td>34</td>
<td>144</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Local and absentee owners’ ways of acquiring land. The figures refer to property number one, the land first acquired by the owner.

The reason for acquiring the land provides significant information on how the owner values the land and is a measure of the relationship between economic and non-economic values. The respondents were asked how they valued a number of motives by assigning them a value from 1–5, where 1 was the most important (Table 3). Figures show that regaining family property is the most important motive for the owners. Access to a second home is also of great importance, which reflects the attractiveness of the coastal area. In third place comes re-establishing contact with the family’s home district. This shows that emotional, non-economic values are of considerable importance for a large part of the landowning group.
Table 3

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Motive</th>
<th>Number</th>
<th>Mean</th>
<th>Std. Deviation</th>
<th>1=most important</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Regain family property</td>
<td>100</td>
<td>1.95</td>
<td>1.438</td>
<td>58%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Access to second home</td>
<td>88</td>
<td>2.23</td>
<td>1.491</td>
<td>48%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Re-establish contact with the family’s home district</td>
<td>86</td>
<td>2.43</td>
<td>1.642</td>
<td>44%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Access to wood</td>
<td>100</td>
<td>2.49</td>
<td>1.521</td>
<td>37%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Access to arable land for own use</td>
<td>95</td>
<td>3.0</td>
<td>1.624</td>
<td>25%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Possibility of income</td>
<td>87</td>
<td>3.13</td>
<td>1.500</td>
<td>22%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The importance of motives for acquiring the property. Figures show the number of respondents who have selected a specific motive, the mean value for how the respondents have valued each motive (1 = most important, 5 = not at all important), the standard deviation, and the percentage of respondents who selected value 1 for each motive.

The three different groups of landowners valued their motives for acquiring land quite differently if the mean values for their motives are compared (Table 4). Regaining family property is more important for landowners living in Sweden or Finland and for those living in the same municipality compared to landowners from other municipalities. The link between family and land seems to be of great significance to those who have historical connections to the area. As one Swedish owner expressed it: “When it became possible to apply for the land, it felt completely natural to connect with our roots. We wanted to own it again; no-one else should take it over”. As Hedin (2003) claims, the most important thing was to once again own family land; deciding what to do with it was of secondary importance.
The importance of motives for acquiring the property. Figures show the mean values for different owner categories: 1 = most important, 5 = of no importance.

Land forms to only a minor extent the basis of the owner’s income. Overall, ten respondents stated that their property contributed to their individual livelihoods. Generally, economic reasons are more important for owners living in Estonia compared to owners from Sweden and Finland. Only one of the landowners living abroad stressed that income was a crucial factor in the decision to acquire the land. Access to a second home is most important for absentee owners in Estonia. Not surprisingly, access to wood or access to arable land for their own use was most important for the owners living in the same municipality. These results in some respects correlate with the arguments presented by Hedin that family tradition was important for both landowners living abroad and landowners living in Estonia (Hedin, 2005). However, the present study’s distinction between the two groups of Estonian owners indicates that local owners have the most varied motives for acquiring land. Compared to owners living in other municipalities in Estonia, they are more dependent on their property to make a living and, at the same time, attach greater importance to emotional aspects such as regaining family property.
7. Attitudes to land and land use

As many as 73 percent of the landowners living abroad spend less than two weeks per year or no time at all on their property. The corresponding figure for landowners living in another municipality in Estonia is 47 percent. One important explanation for this is that only 36 percent of the landowners living abroad and 67 percent of the landowners living in another municipality have a house on the property. The standard of the houses can be quite simple, thus limiting their opportunities and willingness to stay overnight. In total 67 of the respondents wanted to spend more time on their land.

Owners’ descriptions of land use provides important information about how different owners value land. Respondents were asked whether the agricultural land is tilled or if the forest is managed. They also answered questions on other possible uses of the land, for example hunting and picking berries. Regular visits where the main purpose of the visit is social are thus not regarded as land use. Arable land is, not surprisingly, most actively used by the local owners. The postal survey also shows that it is mostly Estonian owners who lease out their land. However, large scale farmers in Noarootsi claim that quite a large part of their land is leased from Swedish owners. One of the local owners leases land for pasture and she says that the neighbours view this positively. “My neighbours come and ask if I can bring my horses. They say that the horses can graze there and I can also make hay”. Landowners lease out land for free since it is important for them to take care of family land and prevent land becoming overgrown. One large scale farmer estimates that he only pays rent to 10 percent of the landowners from whom he leases land. Compared to arable land, forest land is more easily managed by absentee owners, which explains why a relatively large number of owners living in other municipalities in Estonia stated that they use the forest and that their earnings from forestry are important. Access to wood is also the third most important motive for acquiring the property for this group of owners (Table 4). Absentee owners living in Estonia use their forests for
picking berries and mushrooms and sometimes use land for growing vegetables and potatoes. In this way, the land provides additional economic value but interviews indicate that the main motive is the opportunity to eat home-grown, clean food that is free from chemicals.

The earlier findings of Hedin (2003), that few landowners living abroad have done anything with their property, are still valid. Only approximately 2 percent of the owners living in Sweden or Finland have reported any form of land use in their response to the survey. Even if the land is not actively used, ownership can still be important. As one landowner from Sweden explains: “Owning it means that no one can destroy it or start building something offensive on it”. Ownership is looked upon as a way to prevent the area being developed in a way that the owner would oppose. However, this attitude contributes to the fact that the land has become overgrown, something that several of the interviewees look negatively upon. Local owners are affected by this visually, and stated that the ideal for “a real farm” is that it should be active. Earlier research has shown that rural residents with a strong emotional attachment to a place are more positive towards getting involved in landscape preservation, such as farmland protection (Walker & Ryan, 2008). Local owners also mentioned that the overgrown landscape may result in tourists being less attracted to the area. Few landowners see the opportunity to develop tourism as viable on their own properties. All in all, 62 owners (n= 92) consider that their own property has no potential for generating income through tourism or cottage rental. Only 15 landowners describe the potential in this area as being very great or great, and these are mostly owners from coastal villages.
Figure 2. A dilapidated cowshed with a renovated residential building just visible behind. Photo by the author, Noarootsi 2009.

A dilapidated cowshed with a renovated residential building just visible behind. Photo by the author, Noarootsi 2009.

A possible means of income would be to partition and sell the land. However, the most important reason for partitioning the property for second homes is consideration for future generations, and hence partitioning for family use. Re-establishing contact with the family’s home district is also important. Owners living in another municipality in Estonia are also interested in possibly setting up home there in the future. The respondents who are positive towards partitioning for second homes seem to value non-economic motives, such as access to the countryside, more highly than economic motives, and there are no differences between owners of properties in coastal villages and owners in
other villages. Owners with strong emotional bonds to the property do not seem to think that the location and the size of the property are important in terms of the decision to sell or keep the property. However, some owners of large properties say that they could envisage selling off land to which they are less emotionally attached, for example forest. In conclusion, it is clear that emotional aspects override economic considerations for most of the landowners.

8. The legacy of emotions and its impact on future plans

Evidence from the interviews shows that the content as well as the effects of the emotional attachment to land differs to some extent between the three owner groups studied and between different generations. It should be clarified that the following discussion mainly concerns owners of restituted or inherited property.

8.1 The foundations of the emotional ties to land

The interwar period with private family farms was seen as an ideal and, as Unwin expresses it, “all led to a conceptualisation of the Soviet occupation embodying the destructing of Estonia’s rural identity” (Unwin, 1997). The interviewed landowners explain how their parents or grandparents became freeholders and subsequently built up a family farm. This process involved a great deal of work and was often accompanied by a sense of pride. The Estonian Swedes talk about the frustration that their parents felt when they had to leave everything behind. The Estonians recount that their parents rarely spoke about the farm they owned or the possibility of nationalised properties once again being in private possession. The reasons for this were fear of being reported to the communist regime and the loss being connected with so much hurt and anger that it was best not to talk about it. As one local landowner recalls: “We were not allowed to control the land we formerly owned. You weren’t allowed to do this openly, but my father did note what happened to our land and when he had been drinking he became angry and when he was at home he could say that now they are cutting
down trees on our land.” Hence, children were aware of the despair that their parents felt about the nationalisation of land, even if it was rarely mentioned. This awareness seems to be significant for the feelings they developed as adults towards the land and how they felt about the opportunity of reclaiming it through restitution.

Not only material losses have implications for people’s attachment to land. The destiny of the people who lived on the land is also an important factor. The Second World War meant arrests, deportations and mobilisations, which resulted in families being scattered to the winds. Almost all families were affected directly or indirectly by such acts. Family memories and experiences might be closely connected to the house and the land where the family had lived. Land, and houses in particular, therefore becomes a symbol of family history and in that way symbolic capital in the transfer process.

8.2 Memories of and experiences on the land

According to the interviewed absentee owners, memories and events that can link the owner with the land are essential. However, there are differences between absentee owner groups and different generations. The Tallinn-resident owners point out that social capital as contact with family, relatives and friends who live in the area or spend time there during holidays and at weekends has significance for their attachment to the area. It is also clear that childhood memories are important. One of them spent time at his grandmother’s farm as a child: “…childhood memories play an important role…We were all there and there were a lot of people and it was so much fun when we made hay. I have great memories from that time”. In contrast to owners from Sweden and Finland, such memories from the Soviet period are likely to be found among a majority of the Estonian absentees who obtained their land through restitution or inheritance.
The older generation of landowners from Sweden has their own relationship to and experiences from the time they lived on the land in Estonia. A woman who lives in Sweden and has no memories from Estonia explains the difference between her own feelings and the feelings that her older brothers have towards selling the property. Her brothers have memories from their childhood in Estonia: “I thought we should try to make as much money as possible ... I think they are more careful in a way. They have emotional bonds in another way. They want to sell but can’t bring themselves to do it”. The quote highlights that emotions can act as a constraint, prohibiting the sale of the property. It is common with shared ownership among the owners living in Sweden or Finland, the survey shows that 70 percent share the property with other family members or relatives. The corresponding figure for the owners living in another municipality in Estonia is 34 percent, and only 25 percent of the local owners shared the ownership of the property with someone else. For Swedish owners it seems like shared owning was a first step and that prior to the next generational shift, they tend to partition the property more often. Shared ownership could be a source of conflict and prevent owners from selling or subdividing land, since all owners must come to an agreement.

The younger generation in Sweden was long told stories about Estonia by parents and relatives. “My mother was a wonderful storyteller… I knew all about her life, as much as she could remember, about all our relatives, everything that happened …”. These stories were often the only connection to the land that they had during the first part of the Soviet occupation. From these stories the children constructed mental images about family land in Estonia. During the last twenty years of the occupation it was possible to visit Estonia, although there were tight restrictions. Those who went back during the Soviet era brought back information about family land and relatives that was important for the part of the family who lived in Sweden. This is example of how social relationships and contacts could be upheld and transferred to the younger generation.
Independence and the restitution process drastically changed the situation for the Swedish owners with respect to their relationship with Estonia. It was once again possible to own family land, travel to Estonia, and keep in touch with Estonian relatives and friends. As one young landowner from Sweden expressed it: “When Estonia became independent, it meant a new start for my father”. He describes how his father started to tell more stories about his childhood in Estonia and how this also had an impact on his own interest in the family’s links with the country: “it was a new start for me as well”. This young landowner is an example of how cultural capital in the form of knowledge and feelings towards the property has been transferred to the second generation. His mental image of the place has now been supplemented with his own experiences from trips to Estonia. Those who visit their family land and remaining relatives often find this a potent emotional experience. They can compare their childhood memories, or the mental image they constructed from the stories they were told, with reality. Interviewees describe the discrepancy between these two images. The overgrown landscape, the decline in population and the fact that so many houses have disappeared are features that they mention.

8.3 Future generations, expectations and hopes

The interviewed absentee owners are not interested in living permanently on their land. Those who live in Tallinn want to maintain their comfortable life in the city. However, it is of great importance to keep their property – as one of them said, “We will never sell this property.” Granberg (2004) emphasises that the property can be seen as a link to their country roots while they enjoy a modern life in the city. By keeping the land, these links can be upheld and possibly also strengthened in the future. Such plans for the future can include a desire for children and grandchildren to spend time on the property and build houses there. Several of the absentee owners interviewed had plans to build second homes that had not yet been realised. Emotional bonds to the land among the older
generation sometimes create expectations for the next generation. As one of the landowners from Sweden interviewed expresses it: “They know that I would like them to live on the land in the village where our ancestors worked so hard. I think they will take up that tradition, when time allows it, eventually, maybe”. This landowner had already transferred his land to the next generation. However, the above quotation also shows that he has transferred other cultural values – in the form of a strong desire for his children to use the family land and honour traditions. It also shows the feeling of uncertainty about whether or not his expectations will be fulfilled. This is something that other interviewees also mention, and they are aware that the younger generation has a complicated ‘life balance’ to maintain. One landowner from Tallinn explained why their son has not yet realised his plans of a second home on the property: “He always has great plans where this is concerned, but he has so little time since he has to travel a lot with his work and he also has children who take up his time”. It is not easy to find the time to take care of family land and Van Dijk claims that the younger generation of landowners will probably not be so interested in owning a plot, and consequently a considerable portion of the absentee’s landholdings will be put up for sale (van Dijk, 2003). I would argue that, compared to the owners in Sweden and Finland, it seems much more likely that the next generation of owners living in other parts of Estonia will spend time on their family land and may even build second homes. This is, of course, simply a consequence of the fact that the land is closer and easier to visit. However, it should be emphasised that childhood memories and regular visits are factors that can strengthen feelings for family properties, and therefore the will to keep and use the land.

9. Concluding discussion

This investigation of landowner’s attitudes to their land in North West Estonia adds to previous research by examining the emotional bonds to land in a post-Soviet context, which previous research
only briefly touched on. One main finding is that the studied landowners generally attach strong emotional values to land, for historical reasons, and that such values are a strong incentive for keeping the property. Earlier research has highlighted the absentee owner’s emphasis on the non-economic values of land in contrast to local owners. This study shows that owners who obtained their property through restitution generally seem to have a greater propensity for historically rooted emotional attachment to land, and that this group of owners is most likely to be found among local owners and those who live in Sweden. The thinking behind the emotional motives for obtaining land can be summarised in three main points.

Firstly the loss of the land that parents or grandparents purchased at the end of 19th century or were assigned as a land reform farm in 1919. How this loss, as a result of the Soviet annexation in 1940, was experienced is crucial for the development of strong feelings for land. The second aspect is the idea that the land represents the roots of the family, thus making it important to regain family land irrespective of its size and the location. The third aspect has to do with memories of the land and the area in general. In a comparative perspective, those with their own memories of family land have a greater propensity to develop strong emotional bonds with the land than those who only have mental images of it based on stories told by parents and other relatives. Emotional attachment to land also seems closely intertwined with the memories of the individuals who used to live on the land. The first aspect concerning the experience of losing property during Soviet rule is specific to Eastern Europe and can strengthen the value that landowners place on other aspects as well. The link between different generations and family land that has been described by Setten (2005) for example may therefore be enhanced.

Interviews show that parents, in addition to economic assets, often want to pass on emotional values associated with land to the next generation. This is in line with Bourdieu’s (1986) ideas about...
different forms of capital within transmission. This transfer of capital could be discussed in terms of

cultural capital as knowledge about the land and the family history associated with the property.

Cultural capital also includes values that are passed on with the expectation that the younger
generation will continue to own and manage the land of their ancestors. The social capital is
transferred in the form of relationships and contacts with friends and relatives who live in the area
where the land is situated. The property becomes a symbolic representation of family memories and
experiences – a symbol of family tradition and history.

The results from this analysis also contribute to previous research by examining different
owner groups and the implications of emotional bonds to land. One key finding is that the non-
economic motives for owning land in the area seem to override the economic ones for most of the
owners investigated. Emotional values also appear to govern owners’ decisions about land to a great
extent. However, economic motives are more important for owners living in Estonia than for owners
from Sweden and Finland, even though few make a living out of their land. Local owners were more
resolute than the other owner groups with respect to the importance of actively using land. One
strategy was to rent out land, sometimes even free of charge, if they were not able to use land by
themselves. An important result, in line with Hedin’s research from the beginning of the 2000s, is
that very few of the owners settled in Sweden and Finland use the land at all. They also spend very
little time on their land, which is the case for a great number of the absentees living in Estonia as
well. Staehr claims that this shows that the owners are not interested in the property (Staehr 2004).
The present study indicates that it might instead be justifiable to speak of a kind of preventive land
ownership, intended to make sure that nothing happens to the land to which the owner would object.

It is also a result of the uncertainty that many owners feel about the future. They do not use their
land, but if they have emotional bonds to the property, they want to make sure that the land remains
in the family’s ownership in case someone takes an interest in using it. One explanation for this *non-active land ownership* among Swedish owners is that a majority share ownership with another person, which in some cases makes it difficult to reach an agreement about land use or sale. The discrepancy between the images of the land based on memory or mental images on the one hand and reality on the other is also an important reason why many of the landowners interviewed do not spend that much time on their property and have never realised plans of building a second home there. This, along with the sometimes considerable distance between the respondent’s home and the restituted property, and lack of time, probably explains why many properties remain unused. Another effect of emotional bonds is that relatively few owners are interested in partitioning the property, especially if this means putting parts of it up for sale.

What do these results imply for the study area? Despite the land management policies and that some owners lease out land to active farmers, the overgrown landscape seems to be a problem. Non-active land ownership affects the landscape and visitors’ impressions of the area. This is especially relevant in Noarootsi, which has a considerable group of non-active landowners from Sweden who own properties located in coastal villages. Strong emotional bonds can act as a constraint to sale and with such bonds existing in a large group of landowners it means that land in the area that has potential for tourism has actually been taken off the market. If few properties are put up for sale, the predominance of an elderly population is likely to continue. Furthermore, the level of service in the area studied will not improve and the kind of tourism that requires a high standard of food and accommodation will not be attracted to the area. However, there are already signs that the ongoing generational shift will lead to greater willingness to sell off land. Bourdieu’s view of capital as convertible could in this context be used to show how the importance of social and cultural capital could decline and be converted to economic considerations. If the younger generation
does not form a close relationship with the land they own, most of them will not experience the same emotional attachment to it as their parents have experienced. However, it is also possible that absentee owners from other parts of Estonia will use their land more actively, most likely for second homes or perhaps as a permanent home when they retire. It is essential for contemporary policymakers to take into account the different profiles of private landowners. This knowledge may in turn have an impact on the kinds of plans and investments that are regarded as suitable for a specific area.

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