



# “I think that they should go. Let them see something”. The context of rural youth’s out-migration in post-socialist Estonia



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## A B S T R A C T

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This article aims to provide insights into the topic of rural out-migration in Estonia. By looking at media and in-depth interviews with rural youth workers, narratives surrounding young people are examined. These narratives enable rural youth to ground their choices of migration. Rurality is constructed in media through two powerful templates: one of structural marginalization and the other of the “pastoral idyll” based on the stereotypes of nation construction. Youth migration is often explained in media as self-realisation or inevitable moves. Rural youth workers are concerned about young people leaving their home areas, but at the same time they rationalise their leaving by contemporary narratives of self-empowerment and self-expression. Thus, leaving is depicted as moving “forward” rather than “away”. In addition, the constantly changing rural context in post-socialist Estonia contributes to a notion of non-fixity in life course decisions and the perception that it is always possible to come back.

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## 1. Introduction

Since the dissolution of the Soviet Union, post-socialist Estonia has gone through remarkable demographic and regional changes. In recent decades, the development of Estonian rural areas has been accompanied by a diminishing birth rate, urbanisation and dissolution of the Soviet agricultural structures. The restructuring process from collective farms to private farming has been far from smooth. This has resulted in the marginalisation of some rural areas, structurally as well as in discursive fields. The diminishing size of the rural population has led to the closing down of many vital social structures in some regions. Along with shops, pharmacies, libraries and local pubs, schools have been closed. Many argue that the closing of schools in particular may result in the extinction of the rural population altogether, since young people will not come back to their home areas after studying elsewhere. Thus, closing schools can be perceived as a “loss of a new generation” (see also Haartsen and van Wissen, 2012, p. 489; Kovács, 2012, p. 113). Those who leave are also potentially most useful to the area, being educated and active (Demi et al., 2009, p. 326; Stockdale, 2004, 2006), and therefore migration can be defined as one of the most critical issues related to rural youth (Auclair and Vanoni, 2004, p. 103; Gibson and Argent, 2008; Thissen et al., 2010, p. 428). The problem is acute even in countries where counter-

urbanization has otherwise been a strong trend in recent decades (e.g. in Britain; see Woods, 2011, p. 179).

This article looks at the question of rural youth out-migration from somewhat novel angle. Instead of concentrating on the opinions of the young people themselves, a glance at media discourses and youth worker’s opinions are offered, relying on a qualitative content analysis of the biggest daily (*Postimees*) in Estonia during 2010 ( $N = 157$  articles) and 17 qualitative interviews with youth workers<sup>1</sup> conducted during several fieldwork projects in 2010–2012. By leaving the voices of the youth aside, this paper does not imply that young people have little agency in their migration decisions. However, it suggests that young people operate in complex discursive fields, and studying those fields from the viewpoint of youth migration is often neglected in rural youth research. The paper advocates that studying the contexts young people deal with, may be as crucial as researching the dispositions of the youth. Looking at the Estonian media and youth worker’s discourses, for example, has shown that there is more to it than just closing down the infrastructures that may influence the migration decisions of the young people. The discursive constructs surrounding youth tend to normalize the practices of leaving by conceptualising leaving as moving forward rather than moving away.

<sup>1</sup> “Youth workers” as a term is used here and throughout the article only conditionally. As rural areas are sparsely populated, those dealing with young people are not always specifically youth workers; they may also be other officials or enthusiasts who deal with young people in their free time or during work hours. For details, see Appendix I.

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The article begins with a discussion of the research background concerning rurality and youth. Then, there is a brief look at the Estonian rural context, and demographic and geographical conditions. After describing the methodology and data of this article, an analysis of media discourses and the interviews with the youth workers follows.

## 2. Theoretical background

There is no agreement on an objective definition of rurality (Woods, 2011, p. 34)<sup>2</sup> since the character of rural areas is often nation-specific (Thissen et al., 2010, p. 429). Rurality is thus an “imagined entity” (Woods, 2011, p. 9) or “a category of thought” (Mormont, 1990, p. 4). What is constructed as rurality in discursive fields precedes the rural experience and shapes our understanding and practices, as well as influences the actual lives of rural people (Cloke, 2006, p. 22; Mormont, 1990, p. 40; McGrath, 2001, p. 482). When studying the rural, then, both conceptual constructions and local contexts should be taken into account, but also the interrelations between them. Places can become agents in power relations, and coming from a certain geographical location which has been marginalised in discursive fields can be a source of marginalisation for individuals as well (Schucksmith, 2012, p. 387).

Keith Halfacree (2006) has suggested that rural research should focus equally on representations of the rural, rural localities and the lived experiences of rural life (p. 51).<sup>3</sup> Otherwise, there is the danger of overlooking the complexities of rural sites and simplifying contexts: of contrasting rurality and urbanity (Bushin et al., 2007, p. 69; Schucksmith, 2004, pp. 9–10), and ignoring the possibility of the rural and urban coexisting in rural areas (Krange and Skogen, 2007, p. 215). Often contradictory and different meanings coexist in rural societies (Kloep et al., 2003, p. 93), and young individuals can have different aspirations that compete with each other. Thus, the contextualisation of their surroundings is important (Gibson and Argent, 2008, p. 138, Thomson and Taylor, 2005, p. 337; Rye, 2011, p. 177).

This paper tries to contextualise the discourses in the media as well as the “lived experiences” of youth workers, providing some background data on rural life in Estonia. It aims to contribute to filling the gap in post-socialist and Estonian rural youth research (see also Schäfer, 2007; Trell et al. 2012). Rural youth studies is a relatively young research field, having emerged on a broader scale only in the 1990s (Panelli et al. 2007, p. 6). One of the most covered topics in rural youth research has recently been young people's mobility: the considerations and mechanisms of young people's out-migration from their home regions (or, exploring the reasons for staying there) (Jones, 1999; Jamieson, 2000; McGrath, 2001; Kloep et al., 2003; Stockdale, 2004, 2006; Howley, 2006; Krange and Skogen, 2007; Gibson and Argent, 2008; Demi et al., 2009; Rye, 2011; Irvin et al., 2012; Schucksmith, 2012 etc.). In several of these studies it has been suggested that there are certain patterns in rural out-migration. In rural societies, social mobility and geographical mobility are often interconnected (Bjarnason and Thorlindsson, 2006, p. 290; Thissen et al., 2010, p. 428; Rye, 2011). Therefore, perhaps not surprisingly, those more likely to out-migrate are also those who are prone to experience upward social mobility or those from upper social layers. Migration tends to

be class-specific: young people from the educated middle class often leave rural areas in search of a better education or job opportunities (Rye and Blekesaune, 2007, p. 174). In addition to higher parts of the class pyramid, the lowest (least educated and at risk of poverty) group is inclined to out-migrate as well, also looking for better economic conditions (Rye and Blekesaune, 2007, p. 175; Demi et al., 2009, p. 326). Several studies have examined the out-migration patterns of other groups: women tend to leave more compared to men (they have higher educational aspirations, but they are also more annoyed by rural common characteristics, such as gossip and closed communities); the descendants of in-migrants leave more often compared to those of rooted members of rural communities etc. (Jones, 1999; Kloep et al., 2003; Bjarnason and Thorlindsson, 2006; Rye and Blekesaune, 2007; Drozdowski, 2008; Thissen et al., 2010; Irvin et al., 2012).

However, there seems to be more to the question of the urbanisation of rural youth than meets the eye, as these patterns are not always universal (Jones, 1999; Jamieson, 2000; Rye and Blekesaune, 2007; Stockdale, 2006). Even though quantitative surveys show that economic and educational reasons dominate in migration considerations among rural youth, at least some of the reasons may have to do with young people negotiating their transitions to adulthood in the contemporary world. Zygmunt Bauman depicts contemporary life as being constantly on the move, avoiding fixity (1998b, p. 76). The constantly changing society (not least in the rural context) weakens shared social norms and communities, leaving the world fragmented and individuals having to reflexively adjust and construct their identities, changing along with society and dividing their identities between different social groups and places (Jones, 1999). All this has led to individualization: the individual self and his/her needs are at the centre of social life (Beck, 1992, p. 135; Bauman, 1998b; Honneth, 2004, p. 466). Predefined life paths have been replaced by choice biographies (du Bois-Reymond, 1995), and the main keyword in planning one's biography has become self-fulfilment. Mobility is thus often seen today as part of the transition to adulthood, as this contributes to the “self” project by offering experiences and self-enhancement (Smith et al. 2002, p. 177; Thomson and Taylor, 2005; Cairns, 2008). This is also true of rural youth aspirations: out-migration can be a project of personal development (Stockdale, 2006, p. 360). In certain areas and discursive fields, there may exist what has been labelled a “culture of migration”, signifying the cultural meaning and ideas of out-migration as a positive and expected process (Easthope and Gabriel, 2008, p. 173; Bjarnason and Thorlindsson, 2006, p. 291; Rye, 2011, p. 172).

Individualization has many faces and takes many forms; it is “socially situated”: what may be freedom and possibilities for one, may be a burden for another (Roberts et al., 1994; Furlong and Cartmel, 1997; Evans, 2002; Skeggs, 2004; Côté and Bynner, 2008; Woodman, 2009, 2010; Grytnes, 2011; Nugin, 2013). Mobility, thus, can be a resource and lack of mobility can cause marginalisation (Bauman, 1998a; Schucksmith, 2012). In other words, such social determinants as class, race and geographical location still play a role in transitions (Thomson and Taylor, 2005, p. 327). While in upper social layers the chances for mobility and self-realization in different parts of the world are more available, for many social groups the range of choices and opportunities for self-realization is limited. Yet, the option not to choose is unavailable: the proportion of decisions that have to be made individually has grown in every social layer and one has to pay equally for decisions taken or not taken (Beck, 1992, p. 130). Hence, for rural youth, the decision to stay at home is as important as the decision to leave (Bjarnason and Thorlindsson, 2006, p. 292), and the decision to stay can also serve the purpose of self-fulfilment (Krange and Skogen, 2007, p. 219). In fact, the decision to leave or stay has become

<sup>2</sup> However, there have been several attempts to define rurality by measures of population density, distance from cities, dwelling types, availability of infrastructure or economic activity (with a predominance of agricultural production and a small number of white-collar jobs) (see i.e. Clout, 1984; Rural Household's..., 2007, pp. 101–116).

<sup>3</sup> Compare also: Matthews and Tucker (2007, p. 96), in regard to (a) perceived, (b) conceived and (c) lived rural space, based on Lefebvre (1991).

part of the transition process to adulthood for rural youth (Bjarnason and Thorlindsson, 2006, p. 291).

Along with complex social changes, the transition to adulthood has changed significantly as well, leading to the introduction of the term “yo–yo transitions” (Pais, 2000). The term signifies that the process of social integration (transitions from school to work, and from parental to individual household) has ceased to involve one-off events and young people negotiate their transitions for longer periods of time, moving back and forth during various life stages (working and studying simultaneously or in phases, moving back and forth from the paternal to the individual home, etc.; see: Holdsworth and Morgan, 2005; Valentine, 2003). Adulthood as a term is constantly constructed and reconstructed according to specific social contexts (Arnett, 2000; Nugin, 2010; Molgat, 2007). In terms of rural youth transitions, out-migration can be conceptualised as a process which is not final, but rather constitutes one phase that can easily be reversed.

In the current paper, I explore the discourses of these discursive fields rather than the agency or voice of the young. By doing so, I am not implying that youngsters are passive receivers of these discourses. I find it important to rely on theories that suggest the agency of young rural lives (Robson et al., 2007). Young people negotiate their transitions in complex discursive fields where they have to find their own way and there is not one rural youth transition but many possibilities (Bushin et al., 2007, p. 75; Smith et al., 2002, p. 171; Rye, 2011, p. 173). Therefore, providing context to their identities is one of the key issues in rural youth research (Panelli et al., 2007, p. 9; Schucksmith, 2004, p. 10; McGrath, 2001, p. 485). By examining the social constructions surrounding these young people we can reveal some background issues that may go unnoticed by policy developers and see how the message that young people should stay in their home parishes is communicated through different channels. The representation and the narratives of the context can be central in identity formation (Bushin et al., 2007, p. 76; Somers, 1994). Yet, it is important to note that the particular discourses discussed in this article are not equally distributed: probably the approaches of youth workers and media have the most effect on the more affluent segment of rural youth: those with more social and cultural capital (e.g. youngsters with active life styles, who participate in social activities and read newspapers). These young people are more prone to leave, but they are also the most useful segment in terms of rural development.

### 3. Estonian rural context

#### 3.1. Post-socialist transition and rural areas

Estonia is one of the countries in which rural areas have undergone transformation processes at two levels: from the communist legacy to a market economy, and the reconstruction of a rural economy based solely on agriculture (as part of the globalisation of economics, Woods, 2011). In academic literature, as well as in discursive fields, post-communist rural areas have been generally labelled as the losers in the transition and its inhabitants stigmatized as backward or inefficient (for discussion, see Pasieka, 2012, p. 73; Kay, 2012, p. 66; Kay et al., 2012, p. 55; Trell et al., 2012, p. 140). The transition processes (e.g. the privatization of collective farms, and the reconstruction of agricultural policies) have led to wide-spread neglect of arable land, bankruptcies, and sometimes even poverty for the rural population in many post-communist countries (Unwin, 1998; Alanen, 1999, p. 435). The reforms following the collapse of the Soviet Union have been characterized as having an urban bias (Johannsen, 2002; Gerry et al. 2008), and rural areas as facing “moral bankruptcy and deep crisis” (Alanen, 1999: p. 449).

However, the development of post-socialist rural areas has been highly uneven (Gorton and White, 2002; Johannsen, 2002; Rozelle and Swinnen, 2004; Spoor, 2005; Kovács, 2012, p. 110; Kay et al. 2012, p. 55). The most crucial differences in development involve the privatization of the land, dissolution of collective farms and the pace of these reforms. It is important to note differences in initial conditions (Spoor, 2005). In some post-Soviet countries (e.g. Ukraine and Moldova), the state control of land ownership was preserved (Gorton and White, 2002). The three Baltic states chose the route of rapid market-economy reform, involving the privatization of the land and restoring the pre-war single-farm production scheme based on the somewhat idyllic ideology of the inter-war smallholder (Gorton and White, 2002; Alanen, 2004; Värnik et al. 2011). The quick pace of the reforms in these states also meant that the decline in agricultural production was the steepest in these states, which was followed by relatively quick recovery (Spoor, 2005; Rozelle and Swinnen, 2004, p. 409, 413).

The reforms based on establishing a single-farm smallholder as a predominant model was not very effective. Five years after the dissolution of the Soviet Union, only 41% of the land was in individual farms in Estonia (compared to 81% in Latvia and 64% in Lithuania; Gorton and White, 2002). The drop in the population involved in agriculture was very steep: in one year alone (1992–1993), the number declined from 19.5% to 9.5% (Alanen, 1998, p.49). By 2012, it had dropped to 4.45% (Statistics Estonia).<sup>4</sup> The idea of small individual farms in due course turned out to be ineffective in terms of agricultural development (Alanen, 2004; Värnik et al., 2011). After this development led to a dead end, agriculture was gradually reconstructed again, concentrating mainly on gross production (e.g. in 2011, 20% of the farms produced 85% of the milk production; Ministry of Agriculture, 2012).

These numbers indicate that Estonian rural areas have indeed been subjected to significant changes and are on the verge of marginalisation. However, there is a danger in depicting rural areas monodimensionally, in homogenizing marginalities (Ruzicka, 2012, p. 87; Kay et al. 2012, p. 55, Murdoch and Pratt, 1997, p. 56). Marginality itself is heterogeneous (Cloke and Little, 1997, p. 272). Thus, it has to be kept in mind that statistics also indicate that while the population dealing with agriculture has fallen drastically, the productivity of agricultural production has risen. Though the level of poverty is higher in rural than in urban areas (in 2011, 21% and 16%, respectively), the gap is not as drastic as, for example, in Russia, where urban poverty has declined at twice the rate of rural (Gerry et al., 2008, p. 595). Severe poverty may have been avoided due to the small size of Estonia. Many rural problems have been solved by people either moving out or commuting to urban areas for employment. As the social mobility of young people was rather high in the 1990s (Toomse, 2004), many young people who out-migrated found good positions in urban areas. In fact, many influential people in the Estonian social scene have rural backgrounds. This may also influence rural youth to aspire to such positions.

#### 3.2. The Estonian rural context today

When discussing regional issues in Estonia, one of the crucial facts is the size of the country and its population. In an area of 45,227 km<sup>2</sup> there are only 1.3 million inhabitants, and the population density is one of the smallest in Europe. Nearly 1/3 of the population lives in the capital (Tallinn) and more than 60% of the GDP is produced in Tallinn and its surrounding county (40% of the population live there). According to the 2012 Estonian population

<sup>4</sup> Statistical data on Estonia is based on the Statistics Estonia homepage ([www.stat.ee](http://www.stat.ee)) if not stated otherwise.

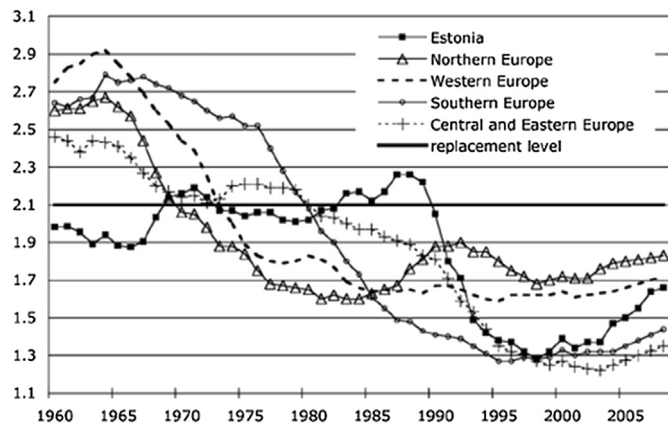


Fig. 1. Birth rates in Europe. Source: Klesment, 2010, p. 27.

census, in 327 villages there are three or fewer people, while 101 villages have no population. Urbanisation has been a process that has influenced the life of all rural areas, except for the areas around the larger cities of Tallinn, Tartu, Pärnu and Narva.

Another important issue is the decline in the birth rate in Estonia. Estonia is exceptional in the sense that the birth rate rose throughout the second half of the twentieth century, while it declined in other parts of Europe. The Estonian decline that followed the rise, however, was sharper than in any other country. This sharp decline has probably also been influenced by the size of Estonia, where small changes can lead to dramatic differences.

Fig. 1 shows that there were nearly twice as many births in 1990 as in 2000. Depending on the rural area, this means that while in some schools there are 20 youngsters in the average gymnasium class, there are only 10 in the first class. In some regions the numbers are even smaller. While youth workers still see a lot of youngsters aged 18–25 around, the situation may be drastically different in 10 years and their attitudes about the question of youth leaving may change then. As one can see from Fig. 2 below, the same situation holds in the parishes researched. Young people are not scarce at the moment, but in 10 years there will be an inevitable decline. In some places, the birth rate has risen again, but in some places where young people seem not to be returning the birth rate has declined. The population numbers of Tallinn (Fig. 3) show almost the same contrast among the age groups of 10–14 and 20–24, but the larger size of older age groups reflects the in-migration of working-age population to the capital (this is also illustrated by the larger number in the age group 0–4, as the in-migrants are often at reproductive ages).

During the last decades of the Soviet time (after 1970), secondary education was compulsory and, generally, it was common to acquire primary and secondary education in one educational institution unless a person chose to go to vocational school. After 1991, it has gradually become popular to change schools after primary education. The new gymnasium legislation (2012) presupposes the dividing of primary schools and gymnasiums in the future. Rural young people often study outside their municipalities in urban schools: over 50% of young people in rural parishes attend gymnasium<sup>5</sup> in towns and as many as 38% of rural youth choose

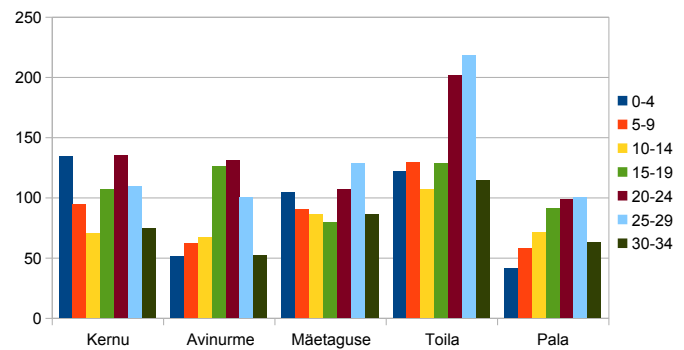


Fig. 2. Numbers of age groups in boroughs researched in 2012. Source: Estonian Statistical Office.

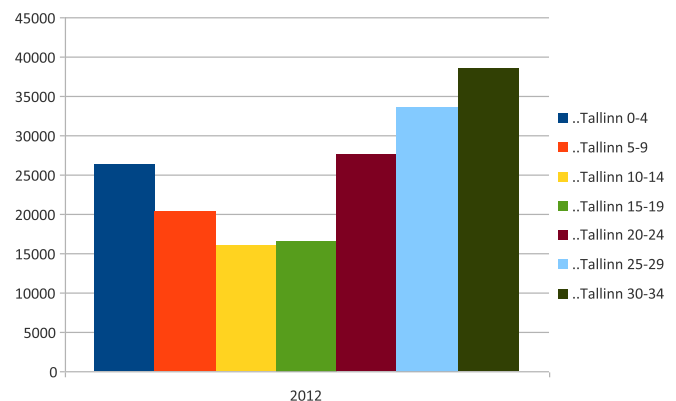


Fig. 3. Numbers of age groups in Tallinn in 2012. Source: Estonian Statistical Office.

gymnasiums in towns even if there is a gymnasium in the youngster's own parish (Värnik et al. 2011, p. 79). If we consider the diminishing size of the age group that will soon be in gymnasiums and the proportion of those preferring urban gymnasiums, we can see that in many places closing down gymnasiums in rural areas due to small numbers of pupils is inevitable. However, often functioning educational institutions are considered prerequisites for preventing the extinction of rural areas (Kovács, 2012; Haartsen and van Wissen, 2012).<sup>6</sup> As the employment conditions in rural areas are often insecure, young people's parents have to commute to work as well. According to a recent study, 380,000 people (almost a third of the population) actively work or study outside their home municipalities (Ahas et al., 2010).

#### 4. Data and methods

I have chosen to contextualise the discourses of rurality and youth in society by looking at the biggest newspaper in Estonia, *Postimees*, in 2010. *Postimees* is the largest of four nation-wide dailies.<sup>7</sup> *Postimees* also has one of the most popular news portals, and its circulation is greater than the print version. According to a recent survey, online users are almost twice the audience of the

<sup>5</sup> In Estonia, the most common form of secondary education is the gymnasium. In 2012, there were 214 gymnasiums with 9337 graduates, and 48 vocational education schools with 3564 graduating with diplomas in secondary education. The gymnasium is a form of secondary education preparing students for university. However, it is also possible to apply to university after graduating from a vocational school if the applicant takes state exams, in addition to the vocational school exams.

<sup>6</sup> During each of the past five years, around 3000 young people (0.9% of the age group aged 7–26) moved from rural to urban areas (in 2011, the number was 2956; Noorteseire). However, young people also leave Estonia, looking for better employment opportunities in other European Union countries. In 2011, a total of 2202 young people aged 15–29 left Estonia (0.8% of the age group).

<sup>7</sup> The circulation of its main competitor, *Eesti Päevaleht*, is a bit more than half of *Postimees*'s. The third daily, *Õhtuleht* is known mainly for its "yellow" character and celebrity news, and the fourth, *Äripäev*, concentrates on economic news.



paper version, and it is the most popular news portal among young people aged 15–29 (*Postimees*, 2013). There are local newspapers in many counties, and there is also a popular weekly, *Maaleht*, which focuses on rural issues. I deliberately chose a nation-wide newspaper targeted to a broader audience rather than media for rural audiences. Concentrating on nation-wide media made it possible to see the construction of rurality that influences the attitudes and perceptions of the urban population in interaction with rural youth in different contexts. The potential impact of the discourses presented in *Postimees* are thus two-fold: 1) the dispositions expressed in it influence young people's opinions about their own home regions, as well as out-migration, potentially shaping young people's self-identity and their perceived barriers (Rye, 2011; Irvin et al., 2012), and 2) they shape the perception of rurality in the environment young rural people tend to out-migrate to (urban areas) and attitudes towards the rural population there.

The year 2010 was chosen since that marked the beginning of my fieldwork in rural areas. The daily has both paper and online versions, the latter being renewed with news-feed around the clock. Not all of the content published online appears in the printed version, but most of what is published on paper is also available online (with some articles limited to subscribers). I concentrated only on the articles in the printed version. For analysis and coding, 157 articles were chosen. The selection criteria for the articles were based on their content: I chose articles dealing with rurality, regional policies, youth in rural areas and questions of young people's educational choices. I left out articles that dealt with events and problems happening in rural areas which did not thematise rurality.<sup>8</sup> I am aware that the selection process was arbitrary and the line between what article to choose and what to leave out was vague. However, as the number of the chosen articles was sufficient to demonstrate the saturation of certain schematic narrative templates (Wertsch, 2002) about rural areas, the danger of leaving out some potentially relevant article did not seem to be great enough to jeopardize the results of the analysis.

My aim was to look at what the memory researcher James Wertsch (2002) has labelled “schematic narrative templates” (p. 60–62). Wertsch suggests that in every cultural tradition there exist certain schematic templates according to which collective memory is organised. These templates do not so much organise the structure of the narratives as act as cultural tools forming abstract, generalized functions of stories. That means that every narrative offers templates that function in a way that enable certain cultural codes to be reproduced. Though Wertsch's concept has been used in memory studies, I found it useful to apply to media constructions concerning rurality as well. I found that the narratives in which the news stories of rural areas were constructed followed certain patterns. There emerged specific schematic types: victimized rural inhabitants, indifferent or stupid clerks, heroic and diligent peasants etc., each serving a particular function in constructing cultural codes. In other words, the narratives in media articles were constructed according to the functions that fit into certain schematic templates (for details, see Appendix I).

<sup>8</sup> Those not selected included, for example, the opening of a hospice for children with mental disabilities, a thematic park for children and the restoration of architectural heritage, where the topic of rurality did not come up (the opening of the theme park did not thematise its impact on the development of the rural region). Also, articles dealing with issues of nature (reportage on nature resorts) or natural disasters were not included, as well as accidents or crimes which did not touch upon social issues of the region. These types of articles were included when in some way the social aspects of rurality were covered as a topic in the story (when journalists associated the reasons for the accidents or crimes with the marginality of the region or rurality in general).

To detect the schematic narrative templates, I relied on qualitative content analysis principles (see Mayring, 2000). In the case of this particular research, the unit of analysis was one article. In the first stage of the analysis, articles were chosen and read. After reading them, I coded the passages that included meanings attached to rurality. I summarized the core passages (or sentences) of articles in one or two sentences, indicating the main idea of a passage (or article) constructing rurality. These summarizing sentences worked as codes for analysis. In the second stage, these codes were grouped together and homogenized, unifying codes that represented similar topics (e.g. scandals involving the finances of rural municipalities, and the relationship of the state with rural inhabitants). After that, I created broader categories, which grouped the codes according to the topic they represented (e.g. marginalisation or idyll). Then I analysed the codes from the perspective of schematic narrative templates, asking how these cultural codes functioned as cultural tools in constructing the discourses of rurality (e.g. rural inhabitants as victims of the state's indifference).

The qualitative interviews collected for this article were conducted in five separate fieldwork projects during 2010–2012. The interviews took place in the following Estonian rural areas: Mäetaguse in July 2010, Toila in August 2011, Kernu in October 2011, Pala in March 2012, and Avinurme in August 2012<sup>9</sup> (for a map, see Fig. 4). As is characteristic of qualitative research, the number of fieldwork sites was limited and, inevitably, this affected how representative the sample was. I chose to concentrate mainly on Ida-Virumaa, a county whose out-migration numbers are high and which has, compared to other counties, a higher proportion of Russian-speaking inhabitants, with ethnic Estonians as a minority group.<sup>10</sup> During the Soviet era, Ida-Virumaa was the most industrialized region; thus the dissolution of the Soviet Union hit the enterprises with gross-industrial output here most severely, resulting in high unemployment. It is also one of the most marginalised regions in discursive fields. The rural sites chosen, though, were mostly populated with Estonians. Also, despite the overall gloomy economic conditions, Mäetaguse Parish is, due to oil shale mines and the pollution quota system, one of the richest municipalities. Thus, the area offered many contrasts worth looking into. However, as the broader aim was to generalise at least some of the research conclusions to Estonia as a whole, two other sites were chosen. Pala (Jõgevamaa) and Kernu (Harjumaa) served the purpose of checking the validity of the data in order to see if the data should be interpreted as being characteristic only of Ida-Virumaa.

Youth workers ( $N = 17$ ; for details, see Appendix II) were approached through their public contacts and also by snowballing. It is important to note, though, that not all the youth workers were youth workers in the strict sense of the term. My interviewees included a headteacher, a sports coach, a mother of four, the manager of a rural cultural centre, and a cultural heritage official. However, most of the respondents were familiar with the youth situation and youth activities in their region and actively dealt with young people on a daily basis. Throughout this article, the term “youth worker” is used conditionally, to mark the group of adults dealing with young people. Four of the youth workers were young themselves, and three of these were interviewed separately, from

<sup>9</sup> The fieldwork of Mäetaguse, Toila and Avinurme took place with joint fieldwork of the Estonian National Museum (ENM). Most of the interviews were conducted with Jaanika Jaanits from ENM, and some were conducted solely by Jaanika Jaanits, according to the qualitative open-ended questionnaire I designed. The other fieldwork projects – in Kernu and in Pala – were my solo projects.

<sup>10</sup> Being a county with ethnic Estonians as a minority also raised multiple topics of integration and ethnic relations in the county. However, due to the focus of this particular article, these issues were deliberately left out.

the perspective of young rural lives. During the fieldworks, interviews with young people were also conducted ( $N = 52$ ). These interviews are not analysed in the framework of this article, but act as a backdrop for the data of this paper.

The interviews took place in various places – gardens, sports or cultural centres, offices, respondent's homes, cafes etc. – and lasted approximately one to two hours. The interviews were semi-structured with open-ended questions that allowed for follow-ups and narrative responses. Youth workers were asked about young rural life, about the perspectives for the young people in rural areas, about what was done in local municipalities to improve young lives, about the odds that young people would come back etc. Youth workers were mostly interviewed individually ( $N = 12$ , marked in the text as ID), with the exception of one interview in which three youth workers participated (marked in the text as GI). Two youth workers participated in an interview with two young people. Some interviews were conducted with my colleague Jaanika Jaanits and some by myself alone. The dynamics of the interview seemed not to depend on whether there were two interviewers or one, as in both cases only one interviewer took the lead in guiding the interviewee through the topics. The atmosphere was friendly and the youth workers were generally eager to talk about their work. The role of the interviewer was to guide respondents in their discussions of the topics, and the power position of the interviewer and the interviewees can be generally described as equal.

All the interviews were transcribed and coded following the qualitative content analysis method (Mayring, 2000). As described above, this method entailed passages reflecting the ideas of rural youth and their out-migration being coded according to the core meaning of the passages. Similar codes were then grouped together and homogenized.

## 5. Analysis

### 5.1. Media discourses

One of the titles of articles about rural areas reads: “Only a patriot can stay in a place which dies out”.<sup>11</sup> Even though the marginalisation depicted in this heading is not the only template that was used to depict rural areas, it seemed to be one of the key constructs in which rurality was reproduced in media. As pointed out by Michael Woods (2011), the rural has always been depicted through two powerful streams of thought: one depicting rurality as backwards and marginal, and the other as a pastoral idyll (p. 18). This trend was apparent in my research. In the following, I will try to reveal the patterns which were used to describe rural regions and youth transitions by examining the categories that emerged from my analysis.

I find the analysis of the construction of ruralities important, as representation and narratives about rural areas can be crucial in young people's identity formation (Bushin et al., 2007, p. 76) and discursive and symbolic constructions can be sources of domination or stigmatisation (Schucksmith, 2012, p. 387). As today being young involves the need to dynamically construct and reconstruct one's identity, young people look to their surroundings when reasoning about and reflecting on their choices (Thomson and Taylor, 2005, p. 330, Grytnes, 2011, p. 334). Though media are certainly not the only source for shaping the identity of the young, they can provide reasoning for life path choices during the transition to adulthood among rural youth. It is important to note that different or even competing constructions can become useful in

supporting the individual's life course decisions, as in different contexts different wishes and needs may come into play (Kloep et al. 2003, p. 92). Many articles presented and analysed did not directly touch on issues of youth transitions, but provided background for the context these individual decisions are made in.

#### 5.1.1. “Things could certainly get worse”: construction of marginalisation

In 2010 there was a sharp decline in the economy. The recession was preceded by years of economic boom, which made the fall more dramatic and painful for many. One of the topics that often emerged was dealing with financial problems in small rural municipalities ( $N = 11$ ). The leaders of the municipalities were frequently depicted as having no hope for better fiscal conditions, since the budgets of municipalities depend on the income tax paid by their inhabitants, and many were unemployed or did not earn enough to contribute meaningfully to the municipal budgets:

“The wallet is more full of holes than you can imagine”, said the governor of Vara parish, Väino Kivirüüt and repeated: “Very full of holes”.<sup>12</sup>

While some of the articles depicted the fiscal situation as inevitable (municipalities devastated by the cooling of the global economy), others indicated that some of the troubles were caused by unwise management decisions. Hence, two patterns emerged: rural inhabitants were described either as passive victims (see Kay, 2012, p. 70) or as unable to cope with ongoing changes (see Kay et al., 2012, p. 57), being incompetent and thus responsible for their conditions. As Agnieszka Pasięka (2012) has observed, post-socialist rural inhabitants are often stigmatized as “redundant”, “inefficient” and “backwards” (p. 73). In some articles, such claims were backed up by members of the national government or other experts who provided the audience with evaluations of the municipalities' (in)competence in their management skills. In some, the need for “professional intervention” in parishes' fiscal affairs in order to balance their budgets was expressed.<sup>13</sup>

Another type of article connected with municipal governments described the affairs of municipalities which had scandals or were involved in suspicious or ineffective activities. One example dealt with the Rõngu school, which needed to be renovated and the parish contracted with a construction company. Due to misuse of parish funds, the Ministry of Finance fined the parish. Paying the fine resulted in financial difficulties for the parish; the municipality was incapable of paying the constructor, who left the work unfinished. As a consequence, the leaders of the municipality were discredited and after a while new leaders were chosen, who started to deal with the problem anew. Meanwhile the pupils of the school had to use six different buildings, some of them several kilometres away from the parish centre. The general impression of this “Rõngu school affair” was the inability of the municipality to solve problems (financial, governing and organisational) and the schoolchildren were depicted as victims of the intrigues between the state and the parish (see also Panelli et al., 2007, p. 2). The interviewed pupils of the school expressed their discontent with the “mess” the parish had caused, but said “What can you do? We have to cope”.<sup>14</sup> The problem was not solved until 2011, and in 2010 a total of nine articles were published on the topic. There

<sup>12</sup> Kristiina Kruuse “Tartumaa omavalitsused siplevad võlgades,” *Postimees*, 14.01.2010.

<sup>13</sup> Nils Niitra “Vallavanemate laudadel kuhjuvad arved,” *Postimees*, 3.12.2010.

<sup>14</sup> Signe Ivask “Rõngu saab koolimaja ehituseks laenu võtta,” *Postimees*, 21.07.2010.

<sup>11</sup> Vahur Koorits, “Väljasurevas paigas püsib vaid patrioot”, *Postimees*, 14.05.2010.

were also other articles ( $N = 7$ ) describing similar intrigues in other parishes.

The articles depicting marginalization processes ( $N = 47$ ) in general varied in their topics and themes. Some were reportages describing the generally hopeless atmosphere of rural areas. The following is a passage from an article describing Laekvere, whose inhabitants feared that with the introduction of the euro things would get worse:

Rita Vee, who runs a second-hand shop in a wooden house with faded colours, does not agree with Välba about one thing [Välba is an inhabitant who said that things could not get worse]. In her opinion, things can certainly get worse. But indeed, even now the situation is not something to be happy about: some days, not a single kroon [Estonian currency in 2010] is brought to the shop. Even if one assumes that in economic hardship people will start to prefer used things to new ones, Vee thinks that many don't even have the money for second-hand items.<sup>15</sup>

The use of adjectives in the articles (“wooden house with faded colours”, and “half-burned shop building”) conveys the atmosphere of things fading away, being lost or forgotten. Some of the articles described some central change that painfully affected the normal life of rural people: the introduction of digital medical prescriptions that presuppose internet connection and computers in small pharmacies that cannot afford them and thus have to close down, the state-wide introduction of digital television that requires further investments by old people who do not have the money, etc. There were also articles that somewhat patronizingly described rural people:

“I have been drinking [alcohol] and therefore it's my day off,” said the man, explaining why he was not working in broad daylight. “I am drinking in honour of my grandfathers and relatives who died in the war [WWII]”, he said. Jegorov had started drinking already on Sunday and had not sobered up yet.<sup>16</sup>

This quote is from an article describing the extinction of a village, which used to have two shops, a school and a kindergarten, but now had “nothing.” The emotional reportage from this location was followed by a comment from an official who cold-heartedly stated that the process of extinction of this place was irreversible and its inhabitants needed to be offered opportunities to migrate to other places. This pattern of contrasting emotional and human interviews with locals with the emotionless and careless comments of officials using bureaucratic jargon was very common. The depicted Jegorov also represents a template often described in the articles: rural inhabitants being inefficient (i.e. in this case drunk), and at least partly responsible for their situation.

### 5.1.2. “What's wrong with life? Life is beautiful” constructions of the rural idyll

Though the picture seems gloomy so far, rurality was not always depicted negatively. There was a set of topics that can be described as the “rural idyll” (see also Matthews and Tucker, 2007, p. 95). Sometimes the articles categorized under this theme reflected the idea of marginalisation, while in others marginalisation was not directly brought up. In many articles ( $N = 25$ ), rural people were depicted as courageous, durable, hard-working, shrewd and clever (see also Korhonen et al., 2011, p. 55), yet their marginal position

was also somehow pointed out. The character of the marginality that was depicted varied from article to article. Sometimes the unfavourable position of people in rural areas was constructed in terms of extreme weather conditions (e.g. snow or floods):

[Article describing the flood in Soomaa] Then he sits in the canoe and mutters over his shoulder: so much water, who needs it all. But life doesn't stop because of the amount of water and so Arno pushes the canoe away with an oar and rows to a local hairdresser's shop. [...] “What kind of life is it? Right?” Silver asks Arno of the Hoolmiku farm. “What's wrong with life? Life is beautiful. It passes by like a pea in the palm of your hand,” answers Arno.<sup>17</sup>

At other times, marginality was constructed from the perspective of agricultural work being demanding:

Taavi's sleep is now hectic – the man wakes up every hour or hour and a half to keep an eye on the dehumidification process [of the crops]. He doesn't make a fuss about it, because he is used to it and, besides, one can sleep off and on. Gaile [his wife] tells us that last year during the harvesting season her husband slept in his own bed only one night. Right now, there is a bed waiting besides the dehumidifier.<sup>18</sup>

In many articles, there was a hidden agenda of constructing rurality, closely tied to national identity (see also Woods, 2011, p. 22; Juska, 2007, p. 239; Korhonen et al., 2011, p. 57), depicting it as rooted in traditional ways of living and a kind of “haven of primitive innocence” (Krange and Skogen, 2007, p. 215, Matthews and Tucker, 2007, p. 95). The template of an Estonian peasant who is stubborn, but diligent and witty was also common in the construction of the Estonian national history narrative (Tamm, 2009). This depiction of the rural in the framework of national history is common elsewhere, as well. As Michael Woods points out:

The problems of imposing a spatial order on town and country at an arbitrary point in time, together with the strong strain of nostalgia in preservationist representations of the rural, might lead us to consider the “time-spaces” of the rural. In other words, as well as asking “where is the rural?”, we might also ask “when was the rural?” Representations of the rural commonly construct the rural in terms of a link to the past (Woods, 2011: 28–29).

There were also positive articles ( $N = 14$ ) about rural communities and their activities. Many of those also depicted unfortunate rural conditions. These articles described communities getting together to repair the damages of a storm, or activities like holding a dance to restore the community open-air singing venue. There were stories of tiny schools, where teachers, children and parents knew and cared about each other even if the schools were on the verge of closing. Not all of the articles mentioned the unfortunate social circumstances of rural areas, but all of them presented a common notion of the rural community. Community as a concept has indeed been so tied to rural life that sometimes these concepts have been considered synonymous (Woods, 2011, p. 164; Tönnies, 1963; though this can be problematized, especially in a post-socialist context; see Annist, 2011, p. 16).

<sup>15</sup> Kaur Paves “Laekvere enne eurot: poodnikud rahul, lihtrahvas hirmul”, *Postimees*, 02.07.2010.

<sup>16</sup> Koorits.

<sup>17</sup> Kristi Leppik “Kuidas Soomaa Arno vetevälja kirudes juuksurisse kanuutas”, *Postimees*, 07.04.2010.

<sup>18</sup> Sirje Niitra “Eesti parim talu tekkis tühjalt kohalt”, *Postimees*, 29.07.2010.

The overall picture of rurality was not the promotion of the rural as economically appealing. The negative side was almost always connected with economic and structural marginalisation and the positive side with “soft” values: community, purity, “primitive innocence” and the like. This depiction is consistent with Estonia’s overall development of urbanisation, and population and economic decline in most rural areas. The discursive and economic fields are, however, interconnected, as these symbolic constructions influence class formation (Schucksmith, 2012, p. 388). Privileged and underprivileged classes can be constructed not only on economic grounds, but class struggles can be fought on discursive battlefields as well (Bourdieu and Wacquant, 2005), and thus geographical spaces can be sources of stratification in society if marginalised in discursive fields (Thomson and Taylor, 2005, p. 330). Migration decisions are often influenced by how the rural space is constructed (Rye, 2011, p. 174).

### 5.1.3. “Who needs those business managers produced in suspicious universities anyhow”. Constructions of mobility and transitions

As mentioned, my analysis also includes the topic of youth transitions to contextualise some discourses surrounding young rural people who face the dilemmas of educational and career choices. Altogether, twenty-six articles discussing the topic were chosen. One of the topics discussed concerning youth transitions was the choice of gymnasium. As previously mentioned, it has become common to change schools after finishing primary education. Those gymnasiums which are more popular than others, have established entrance examinations in order to be able to choose pupils. These developments indicate that the growth of individual responsibility and life course choices tends to begin at an earlier age than previously (gymnasium graduates are 19 years old, and primary school graduates 16). As secondary education is wide-spread (around 80% of the age group choose to continue their education there), and in rural areas sometimes secondary education is not available, the option “not to choose” is unavailable in most cases. However, not only the choice itself, but the implications of what that choice may bring are important here.

In *Postimees*, each autumn a list of gymnasiums listed in the order of the results on state exams is published; in 2010 there were debates ( $N = 6$ ) over whether such numbers revealed anything about the quality of schools. As expected, opinions were expressed defending the idea of lists and others pointing out that gymnasiums choosing their pupils by entrance examination had better results because of the quality of the students, not the teachers. These debates are important, because they normalise the discourse of the importance of individual choice: good results can ensure one’s access to university and ordering schools by results indicates that the choice of school matters. Thus, as Ulrich Beck has observed, the more an individual is liberated from communal norms and pre-defined life paths, the more he/she becomes dependent on institutions of education, consumption, social regulations, medical support etc. (Beck, 1992, p. 130). Educational institutions are presented as key to individual success. The fact that the local (rural) schools are not among the top of the list may mean that one segment of rural youth aims to attend schools higher on the list, thus migrating for educational reasons. Another implication is that these lists, based on numerical (“objective”) data, may also influence the self-perceptions of those staying in local schools and can influence the emergence of perceived barriers (Irvin et al., 2012) in educational and life course choices. These discursive and symbolic constructions can affect class formation in rural sites, as limited choices may become normalized (Schucksmith, 2012). Also, not all rural youngsters can afford to go to schools that have been labelled “elite” schools in those constructions.

As mentioned before, due to the decline in the rural population and the fact that rural youth choose gymnasiums in towns, many secondary schools have been closed recently. The topic of closing down schools was brought up in five articles. While in some articles the closing of gymnasiums was treated in a negative light (and even a threat to rural communities), others perceived the closing of schools as a process that was inevitable and normal. The latter focused on the idea of individualism: individual choice was inevitable, and it was also normal that schools function on liberal market principles (the stronger survive). Rather than being a natural life course phase, school was seen as a matter of individual choice.

However, responding to the cultural model of reflexive biography construction can be difficult (Grytnes, 2011, p. 334). The burden of individual responsibility may be hard: not many young people are ready for it and it is easy to make the “wrong” choice in the contemporary changing world. Six articles discussed the difficult social conditions for transitions for young people in Estonia in general. The ideas reflected in these articles suggested that the changing society and employment market put young people in a difficult position in choosing their professions. Often, they discovered after finishing their studies that a profession was no longer needed in the market or they lacked the experience required for the position:

Young people who cannot find jobs during a high unemployment period, and thus are living on unemployment benefits or are financially dependent on their parents, begin to vegetate, lose their homes, emigrate, or join the mafia.<sup>19</sup>

It is very hard for a young university undergraduate to get his foot in the door, because he has no experience. Many also have the wrong qualifications, and this is partly an outcome of the national education policy – who needs those business managers produced in suspicious universities anyhow.<sup>20</sup>

As expressed in these quotes, the hopelessness of the situation may lead to emigration. The notion of people leaving because the state does not care for its citizens was also the main theme in three other articles. All of these treated leaving the country in a negative tone, as a necessity rather than a personal choice.

However, the construction of life course choices as self-expression and mobility as self-enhancement were also present. Choosing to go elsewhere (either to study or to work) was presented in these articles ( $N = 5$ ) as a form of self-realisation:

Young people find that studying abroad can provide them with better education and language skills, in addition to interesting experiences, a broadening of world-view and the opportunity to become independent.<sup>21</sup>

Thus, leaving can be perceived as positive or negative. Locality (staying) and cosmopolitanism (leaving) can both be treated as resources helping to negotiate transitions rather than as ascribed parts of identity (Thomson and Taylor, 2005, p. 328). In other words, young people in the midst of these media discourses can choose the perspective from which to reflexively rationalise their own choices. Next, I will briefly look at which discourses are prevalent among youth workers.

<sup>19</sup> Arved Breidaks: “Kadunud põlvkond, veel leitav”, *Postimees*, 09.12.2010.

<sup>20</sup> Nils Niitra “Memmoegad taimelava”, *Postimees*, 28.12.2010.

<sup>21</sup> Sandra Maasalu “Jga kümnes abiturient pörutaks kohe välismaale õppima”, *Postimees*, 30.03.2010.



## 5.2. Discourses of youth workers

Commitment to place provides youth with a certain sense of regional identity and social connection (Howley, 2006, p. 63). Regional identity is socially constructed and dynamic (Haartsen and Strijker, 2010, p. 164), though attachment to a geographical location may be losing its importance in the contemporary world (Thissen et al., 2010, p. 429). In terms of creating an “aura” for a particular rural area, people dealing with youth often play a critical role. Other sources – family, friends and media discourses – also contribute to the perception (Demi et al., 2009, p. 311), and their role is complex: providing youth activities and the feeling of engagement in the home community makes young people happy to be there and contributes to their wish to stay in their home parishes for their adult years (or come back after studying elsewhere; Trell et al., 2012, p. 141). In addition, youth workers’ role involves shaping young people’s opinions by sharing their own sense of belonging (Bushin et al., 2007, p. 77), either through leaving or staying. The support of local communities is vital in staying connected with one’s rural home area or in wishing to come back (Trell et al., 2012, p. 146), even though both leaving and coming back are only partly connected to attachment (Drozdowski, 2008, p. 157).

In the following, I will take a brief look at youth work/activities and respondents’ opinions of the out-migration of youth.

### 5.2.1. “I prefer activity-centred youth work”: project-based activities and attitudes

Not surprisingly, youth work has not been a continuous and sustainable activity during the recent decades in rural areas. The fall of the Soviet empire brought about the dissolution of old institutional structures not only because of economic reasons, but also due to distrust in everything created by the old regime. There were attempts to restore or replace some institutions dealing with youth, but most of them failed because of transitional processes (big demographic changes, urbanisation and financial marginalisation in most rural areas due to the restructuring processes in agriculture). Therefore, there was a transitional character to all of the interviews conducted with youth workers in all five rural areas. This was perhaps most dramatically described by Kadri:

*Kadri (b.1964) ID: For you [as a researcher] it is not of course a lucky case, but you see, here’s the thing, since this youth work has been non-existent for... say... twenty years, this means that the generation that has been raised during the time is doing nothing. And those who have wanted to do anything left long ago. And those... the age group you are interested in [17–25 – R. N.] are just hanging around there. And I don’t see any particularly good way to prevent that except that you start raising them from grade one.*

This extract shows, on the one hand, the feeling that youth work has gaps due to the transitional character of the society. On the other hand, one can trace the sense of the phenomenon of the “train has left”, the hopelessness of being able to do anything about it. Also, there was a certain reluctance to deal with the young people who seemed long “lost” and so were “turned off” in terms of existing youth participation models (Smith et al., 2002, p. 175). Even though their “failure” to socialize was attributed to structural developments rather than individual failures, the responsibility of dealing with this shortcoming was laid on individual youngsters (Furlong and Cartmel, 1997; Jentsch, 2004, p. 238). According to these respondents, there was not much one could do with those who did not choose to be involved.

Another phenomenon that can be seen in this quote (as in some of the other interviews with youth workers), is the treatment of the

post-socialist change of the 1990s in rural areas as rupture. Due to the sharp decline in economic conditions and the cancellation of state support, the Soviet era was often perceived in these accounts as one of stability, followed by rupture or difficult times in the 1990s. The economic boom on the eve of the 21st century brought better times for rural areas, along with EU project money for youth work. This treatment of the 1990s as the era of rupture and the Soviet area as the one of stability should not be labelled nostalgia for the Soviet time or approval of its ideology (see also Pasieka, 2012). Rather, it reflects the dynamics of post-socialist rural development, which differed significantly from the urban.

The image of idle youth was not shared by all youth workers: many were eager to present the young people in their areas as good, active and caring. However, in all areas the emergence of youth work was described as being somehow accidental and recent. While in some rural areas there was a recently established youth centre, in other areas there weren’t any centres. The need for such centres was even questioned:

*Marika (b. 1983) ID: Many have asked us why we don’t have a youth centre. In our parish, we don’t have a paid youth worker. I myself am a volunteer. I personally do not approve of this youth-centre model. They are a bit... devalued. There are too many of them, they do too much for the young people [instead of letting them do things for themselves] and then the young depend on them... And then eventually the problem youth end up going there, those who don’t have anything else to do; they play their computer games and stroll home. I have seen enough youth centres from the outside and I do not find that there is any reason for them. You have to keep a place open, heat the rooms, and pay for the youth worker. There is not enough money in small parishes anyway. How many young people there would hang around anyhow? I prefer activity-centred youth work. I organise events where anyone can attend, instead of keeping alive a centre that only a few can benefit from.*

Most of the youth work is described as project-based. Not all youth workers share Marika’s enthusiasm about project-centredness, and many describe this model as annoying and prefer a stable financing scheme, but in most of the interviews the topic of the project-based financing was brought up. This structure of youth work is depicted as recently emerged, as these financing schemes did not gain dominance until recently. This type of youth work presupposes initiative and enthusiastic adults who take up the work voluntarily. This also means that human capital becomes crucial and, considering its scarcity in rural regions, this makes the character of youth work shaky and temporary.

Project-centred youth work is also one of the phenomena that can be connected to contemporary individualism, according to which self-realisation and finding one’s path is the responsibility of the individual (Beck, 1992; Bauman, 1998b; Jentsch, 2004, 238). Rather than presenting one’s life as a walk along a predetermined path, this approach presupposes choice as the responsibility of the young and the creation of opportunities the task of youth work. Toomas, a coach, presents a pretty typical response:

*Toomas (b. 1968), ID [after describing the sporting opportunities he was asked about the possibilities of other youth activities in the parish]: Ah yes... Well... I can’t really say... what else there is... Well, the school itself is good, you see. [Name of the parish] school is good. These activities that they can do in school... Like, well, there are dance and singing groups and... In addition, there is a music school in the school and... like this possibility is for them, who, say, are not interested in sports. But there are many who go dancing and do sports both. In my training*

practice, there are boys who are in my training for two hours and then go and do dancing for an hour. In short, someone who does a lot is able to manage a lot. In this sense, there are a lot of activities.... Well... there are opportunities, yes.

In other words, in most parishes youth workers believed that there were enough opportunities for young people to find activities, as long as they were interested in them. Youth workers acknowledged that there were always young people who did nothing. Some of them said that they chose to deal only with those who were interested and they did not bother to push those who weren't interested in activities. However, some youth workers claimed to make efforts to also involve those who initially stayed away. The perception of two counter-images was common: an active youngster who was engaged simultaneously in every possible activity and another who would rather sit on his hands.

Even though most youth workers presented their parishes as caring about youth and creating opportunities for them, a number of them admitted that there were limits to youth activities in small places, especially for older youths. A powerful stereotype presented was youth hanging around in bus stops and drinking alcohol. Hanging around public rural spaces is often interpreted as deviant and problematic in rural areas across the world (Laegran, 2007, p. 29; Haartsen and Strijker, 2010, p. 171), as rural space is predominantly adult space and youngsters are seen as intruders (Matthews and Tucker, 2007, p. 97). In all areas, my respondents mentioned some young people doing that and it often was explained by the fact that young people had few alternatives: youth centres were either non-existent or closed too early; many places did not have their own facilities. The need for "liminal space", providing opportunities to be away from adult supervision, is part of the process of becoming an adult (Haartsen and Strijker, 2010, p. 164–165). While some saw the absence of spaces for youth as something to be dealt with (e.g. by creating a youth centre or promoting the opening of a youth oriented space in the parish), Riina depicted this as a normal state of things:

Riina (b.1960) ID: I wouldn't say about my young people that there is too much of the "bus stop and bottle"... [...] Our parish doesn't even have our own pub to hang out in. Our young go to a pub in a neighbouring parish [name]... on Friday evenings people gather in cars and drive there [name] and well, this is part of being young...

Other structural limitations on young people's lives were mentioned. One of the obstacles of living in the countryside for young people is the low population density. Most of the parishes had small municipal centres with some residences (including blocks of flats) and public buildings (schools, libraries and cultural centres). However, a lot of young people lived in villages outside the parish centres. Therefore, even in primary school pupils had to commute to school from long distances daily by bus. That meant that many had limited opportunities to take part in social activities since they depended on the schedules of school buses, which left sometimes too early to provide opportunities for active participation in hobby groups. Even though this was felt at times to be a severe problem, none of the respondents thought that anything could be done about it. Commuting and mobility were considered to be aspects of young people's daily lives, beginning in primary school. This mobility (and sometimes the lack of it) was seen by many youth workers as normal (even going to a pub in a neighbouring parish was seen as "part of being young"). Others, while seeing the negative side of this arrangement, saw no way to

change it. All of this probably contributed to the normalisation of the practice of young people commuting to school and back, and this should be kept in mind when viewing young people's decisions about choosing gymnasiums outside their parishes. As commuting is an everyday practice, young people do not necessarily see this as an obstacle in choosing a gymnasium outside the home parish. According to some studies, the existence of educational facilities would not necessarily make young people more inclined to attend school in their home regions (Drozdowski, 2008, p. 159).

The increased mobility of rural populations is not merely an Estonian phenomenon, as the time required to get from peripheries to core regions has been dramatically reduced (see also Auclair and Vanoni, 2004; pp. 76, 87; Rye, 2011, p. 172). This mobility has stretched the spatial dimension of rural localities everywhere, constructing trans-local or transnational realities, as many rural migrant workers in towns and cities maintain local identities (Woods, 2011, p. 163). Mobility can be enhancing as well as constraining, and thus can symbolize independence or dependence (Auclair and Vanoni, 2004, p. 89), attachment or detachment (Thomson and Taylor, 2005, p. 330). Thus, geographical location can be a source of marginalisation even in childhood. As participating in hobby activities helps to build self-confidence, and enhance engagement and social cohesion (Trell et al. 2012), those left out of such activities from an early age may not become attached to their home communities later.

#### 5.2.2. "Somewhere else always seems better than here": youth workers' approaches to leaving or staying

Among my respondents, there was a general agreement that, at some point, young people tend to leave their home rural areas. The attitudes towards this trend varied (on a positive/negative scale), but there were some common understandings about young lives. Firstly, many pointed out that it was in the nature of the young to explore things that took place somewhere else. As Merje pointed out:

Merje (1968) ID: ... like I said, somewhere else always seems better than here. Also, young people think "I will go out into the wide world and make my way in it."

This courage of young people here is not condemned, although it is presented somewhat sarcastically. However, a number of youth workers saw young people who were actively searching for self-development outside their home areas in a positive light (Kadri even depicted those who stayed as losers who drank so much that their health was threatened). According to some studies, leaving can be depicted as a rite of passage to adulthood (see Punch, 2002), or a natural part of the migration culture (Easthope and Gabriel, 2008).

However, even though the youth workers did not thematise it, out-migration can be a class issue: the chance to act on self-development considerations may be limited only to privileged classes (Rye and Blekesaune, 2007, p. 174; Rye, 2011). Mobility is a stratifying factor (Bauman, 1998a, p. 2) and is therefore perceived as a resource (Thomson and Taylor, 2005). Often, moving away is presented as a "class-journey" and those who have left are perceived as achieving something (or being on a "life-style journey"; see Wiborg, 2004). Thus, coming back may represent a step back, or downward mobility (Stockdale, 2006; Kloep et al. 2003, p. 105). Such constructions may push some who would prefer to stay to migrate, as well as construct perceived barriers for others who wish to leave. All this makes young people negotiate between social mobility and geographic rootedness (Howley, 2006, p. 76; Thissen et al., 2010, p. 428).

A number of youth workers agreed with Marta, who admitted that the fact that young people left was clearly seen as a problem, but she also pointed out that:

Marta (b. 1974), ID: I think that they should go. Let them see something. I think I saw something before [I settled down], I went to university and then travelled around a bit, too.... I studied in Finland and in Germany and... this... actually broadens one's view on things a lot... and I could talk to kids... [...] I saw what was going on around the world, not like... you sit all the time in one spot. So, to my mind, one should live abroad a bit, in order to see...

This quote also indicates that many youth workers treated the issue from the perspective of their own socialisation and life courses. Marta herself was originally from Tallinn. It is noteworthy that out of 17 interviewees, nine had themselves been born and had lived in other areas before they began working in these particular rural areas. Four respondents were young people who had become leaders of youth work by chance in their home areas, but had not finished their studies yet and none of them excluded the possibility that they would leave their home areas. Only two respondents were working with youth in their home parish with the intention of staying there in the future. One of them (Marika) had actually left her home at the age of 15 to attend a gymnasium 250 km away, then university in Tallinn and, after marrying and having kids there, she came back with her family to lead youth projects in her home community. Most of her projects had an international character, promoting mobility: she organised youth exchanges with countries all over Europe and her intention was to teach young people to take the initiative in such projects. These projects can be interpreted also as localities in interaction with cosmopolitanism, with mobility operating on the level of culture and fantasy (Thomson and Taylor, 2005, p. 331).

In short, for youth workers the leaving of young people was not seen as “moving away”, but rather as “moving forward”, a “self-empowering strategy” that increased the opportunities for development (Schäfer, 2007, p. 130). Furthermore, not all who had migrated to these places were sure that they would stay: it was felt that one had to be flexible and prepared for possible changes in life (see also Auclair and Vanoni, 2004, p. 101). Perhaps the most vivid example of this was Priit, who had worked in particular rural area for eight years:

Priit (b. 1976), GI: Let's put it this way... I have similar thoughts myself. I am not chained here; definitely all doors are open, definitely. There's not much one can do; this is life. If something somewhere comes apart, then you have to think about it. I am *not old enough to sit comfortably. I am not from here. I lived in [neighbouring parish] [...]*. So in this sense life is as it is, as long as everything works out and everything is OK. If there's nothing wrong, fine, but I am still open to all possibilities. That is clear, and there is no sense in hiding it.

All this is not to suggest that youth workers ignored the problem of young people leaving. Rather, many pointed out that this was a problem and it would be nice if young people returned. However, many acknowledged that there were not enough jobs in the area (or in rural areas in general) and this was a big factor in young people's choices (see also Schäfer, 2007, p. 130; Schucksmith, 2004, p. 20). Many had themselves come from outside and their own socialisation experience made them hope that if some people moved away, other people would come to replace them. Research elsewhere has shown that often rural areas consist of people who have moved there from other places (Stockdale, 2006, p. 358), yet those

with the greatest attachment to a place are those whose families have lived there for generations (Thissen et al., 2010, p. 430).

As mentioned in the previous section, demographic changes are not yet highly visible in the youth scene: the sizeable cohort born in the 1990s still dominates in the population and the drastic decline in the young population has not hit yet. Also, many of these regions are close to bigger county centres that one can commute to. Commuting is something that is pretty common even in Pala, which is furthest away from the nearest town (50 km). In addition to these factors, while quite a few respondents had the impression that the young were prone to leaving, others pointed out that, in their view, young people were actually fond of their home areas and most of them wanted to come back. Indeed, the interviews conducted with young people indicate that many hoped to come back, especially after they had families of their own (see also Rye, 2006; Schäfer, 2007). Many youth workers shared the notion that their communities were in flux, and that they are open to include newcomers in their circles. Thus belonging could be also achieved besides being ascribed (Mackenzie, 2004, p. 285; Woods, 2011, p. 173). This was exemplified by several youth workers who had themselves come from other places.

Overall, even though the problem of young people leaving the countryside was not alien to the youth workers, particular respondents did not depict it in gloomy colours. Many had ideas of how to “get them back”, several believed that the young people would eventually return, a lot of them thought that if they left others would replace them, and some had accepted that their particular rural areas would slowly fade away.

## 6. Discussion and conclusion

Coming of age today means negotiating transitions via complex pathways, which involve representations, locations and resources. As traditional pathways have been gradually losing their significance, choice-biographies have gained importance (du Bois-Reymond, 1995) and the variety of individual choices and their consequences in life-courses has increased (Beck, 1992). Thus, reflexive self-construction becomes inevitable (Honneth, 2004). In addition to complex dilemmas of contemporary youth, the transition to adulthood in rural areas also involves negotiation between geographical rootedness and mobility. Though out-migration of rural youth is still pretty much influenced by such features as class background and gender, the discourses surrounding youth complicate these matters. The decisions made need to be reflexively reasoned, and thus constructions of rurality and transitions play a role in young people's choices. Rather than looking into young people's reasons for moving out, this paper has focused on these representations in media and the approaches of rural youth workers. By analysing media and through the interviews with youth workers in Estonia, this study has tried to contribute to post-socialist rural youth research, which has been scarce so far.

In the media, two powerful keys are used to depict rural areas: (a) marginalisation based on structural and economic matters, and (b) the rural idyll, relying on community values and national identity. These constructions may be enhancing, but also restraining (Auclair and Vanoni, 2004, p. 89): the marginalisation discourse can push some young people to leave, but create perceived barriers for others (Irvin et al., 2012), influencing the formation of negative self-identity. The construct of the rural community idyll, however, enables those who stay to reflexively construct the identity of staying as a self-realisation project (Krange and Skogen, 2007, p. 219). The media constructions concerning transitions are concomitant with individualisation theories (Beck, 1992; Bauman, 1998a,b), stressing the role of the individual choice-biography. The perception of a constantly changing society enhances the picture of the flexibility of the choices: in the rural transition context,



there is the impression that the choice of out-migration can be reversible and young people can always return to their roots.

Similar discourses are supported by youth workers. On the one hand, in terms of the individual choice biography, activity-centred and project-based youth work means that the responsibility for participation rests with youngsters, while youth workers create opportunities to be involved. On the other hand, workers promote leaving as a means of self-realisation (with the possibility of returning some day). Keeping these dispositions in mind, we can also assume that mobility as a strategy of self-realisation may be a resource not available to all rural youth, as rural areas are spatially spread out and involvement in activities may not be possible for all. Also, chances for self-enhancement in education may be available for only some social layers.

In Estonia, the post-socialist context probably contributes to the context of rural transitions as well. Since World War II, rural development in Estonia has been strongly influenced by changing ideological and political pressures, which have left social and economic spheres in rural areas largely neglected (Värnik et al., 2011; Annist, 2011). Up to today, heated debates about administrative reform and the reconstruction of municipalities have been going on. The transitional character of rural areas is perhaps more vivid than that of urban areas, as every little step (for better or for worse) matters more than in the city. While in the urban context, the closing or opening of a pub, school or pharmacy may go unnoticed, in rural areas these developments have huge impacts. A decline in the economy is probably also felt more strongly in rural areas due to rural people's vulnerability: smaller enterprises there have smaller cash flows; also, the effect of any unemployment in small parishes is more severely felt in the municipal budgets etc. This transitional character of post-socialist rural life and its vulnerability due to demographic composition probably also contributes to young people's

understanding of life as being constantly in flux. Due to the migration patterns of the Soviet era (people were assigned to different rural areas after university and had little individual choice in the matter) and recent urbanisation processes, young people negotiating their transitions today in rural Estonia know perhaps only a few people with stable and linear life courses spent in their home parishes.

As the lived experiences, representations and dispositions of rural life support out-migration as a normal part of the culture, the question remains as to how policies should address this question. Perhaps these policies should equally support young people's aspirations to stay in rural areas and to leave (Burnett et al., 2001; Kloepe et al., 2003; Jentsch and Schucksmith, 2004, p. 270), as it is hard to fight against living practices and discourses. One of the additional options for rural areas to survive is to attract young people from other areas with the appeal of change and self-realisation in a small community.

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### Appendix A. Supplementary data

Supplementary data related to this article can be found at <http://dx.doi.org/10.1016/j.jrurstud.2014.01.003>.

### Appendix I. Media codes

General category	Code	Topics reflected under this code	Schematic narrative templates
Marginalization	Lack of money/managing difficulties	Due to financial crisis or other structural reasons, the fiscal situation in rural areas is rather bad ( $N = 11$ )	Rural areas as 'losers' of the transition, victimization of rural inhabitants
	Intrigues in managing the municipalities	Rõngu school renovation, firing headmaster of school, closing down a museum, financial intrigues in managing a fund ( $N = 16$ )	Rural inhabitants as unable to cope with changes, inefficient and redundant; local people as victims of the clerks' narrow-mindedness
	General marginalization	General marginalization, people leaving, medical help inaccessible, schools are small and closing down, ageing of the rural population, unemployment, structural changes on national level marginalise rural areas further (introduction of digital medical prescriptions forces to close pharmacies, introduction of digital TV leaves rural inhabitants without television), closing down the schools, climate change affecting agriculture etc, alcoholism and lazy rural inhabitants ( $N = 47$ )	Rural inhabitants as passive victims of state policies and indifferent clerks, global economy, progress, demographical change; Rural inhabitants as passive and lazy losers of the change.
	State/big corporations versus small local community	Establishing or running mines ruining local inhabitant's health, building big highways, state national ordinances do not consider local particularities, state being indifferent towards distinction of rural areas, etc ( $N = 32$ )	Rural inhabitants as victims of indifferent state or big corporations, local communities fighting for mutual noble cause.
Rural idyll	Rural inhabitants are strenuous, and can cope with difficulties	Rural people always find their way, are hard-working and diligent, are in harmony with the nature, independent. Urban children do not know a thing about real life and nature ( $N = 25$ )	Rural people as bearers of national identity, witty and hard-working
	Rural community	Depiction of various rural events, celebrations of midsummer's night, organising different fairs, working together for mutual cause (repairing storm damages, gathering money for restoring open air singing stage), knowing and helping each other out (school bus driver or teacher caring for local children) ( $N = 14$ )	Rural people as bearers of traditional human values: caring for each other and working for mutual causes.



(continued)

General category	Code	Topics reflected under this code	Schematic narrative templates
	Pure food, agriculture	Articles about how the food that have been grown with love and dedication, is healthy ( $N = 5$ ), stories about agriculture ( $N = 4$ )	Rural people as the key back to the roots.
	Renovated institutions	Articles with positive undertone about the renovated schools, kindergartens, harbours etc. ( $N = 5$ )	Rural areas coming back to life

## Appendix II. List of youth workers interviewed

Number	Gender	Name (changed)	Profession
1.	F	Riina (1960)	NGO leader
2.	F	Carmen (1992)	Youth worker in local cultural centre
3.	F	Aivi (1970) (GI)	Mother of four
4.	M	Priit (1976) (GI)	Sports project leader in cultural centre
5.	F	Maie (1960) (GI)	Head of cultural centre
6.	F	Triin (1986) (GI)	Art project leader in cultural centre
7.	F	Linda (1975) (GI)	NGO leader
8.	F	Mari-Liis (1969) (ID)	Child protection official
9.	M	Toomas (1968) (ID)	Manager of Sport Centre
10.	M	Mihkel (1983) (ID)	Heritage Officer
11.	F	Eva (1988) (ID)	Leader of Youth Centre
12.	F	Kadri (1964) (ID)	Head of Cultural Centre
13.	F	Marta (1974) (ID)	Headteacher of the school
14.	F	Elo (1964) (ID)	Leader of School's Hobby Centre
15.	M	Aivo (1989) (ID)	Leader of Youth Centre
16.	F	Merje (1968) (ID)	Leader of School's Hobby Centre
17.	F	Marika (1983) (ID)	NGO leader

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