IMAGES OF THE PERIPHERY IMPEDING RURAL DEVELOPMENT?
Development Perspectives of Village Communities in Rural Estonia
WP 1: Evolution, Reproduction and Persistence of Centrality and Peripherality

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Abstract Concentrating on the social construction of the center-periphery and urban-rural divide, the project analyses, how rural areas are *constituted* as peripheries within a hegemonic discourse which naturalizes the socio-spatial ascription of development (non-)potentials. Moreover, focusing on the subjective relevance of such dominant ascriptions, it aims to further scrutinize the link between discourses, practices and materialities in (re-) producing and counteracting core-periphery relations. Therefore, it will (1) deconstruct, *how* (rural) peripheries are discursively made and subordinated to (urban) centers, (2) analyze, *who* has the power to speak and be heard in the discourse, (3) explore the subjective relevance of such ascriptions for people facing moments of peripheralization, and finally, (4) discuss the socio-spatial *consequences*.[1]

1. RESEARCH PROBLEM

Emphasizing the 'making' of the rural as periphery, my project follows a constructivist approach in order to analyze the meaning of space to different actors and how this is shared and contested. Thus, I want to shift the focus from objectivist classifications of centers and peripheries as pre-defined poles on a development scale to the process of *peripheralization* (Keim 2001 in Lang 2013). Unfolding in relation to centers, it is not only structured by hard materialities but also by hegemonic discourses. These are at the same time representative of and constitutive for a socio-spatial order in which the ascription of development (non-)potentials has been discursively naturalized (Bürk 2013, Lang 2011). Employing Political Discourse Theory (Laclau 1996), I treat periphery as an empty signifier, which is predominantly attached to rural areas (Fischer-Tahir/Naumann 2013). If rural areas are constituted as peripheries in the discourse, the question is, *how, by whom and with what consequences?*

Hence, the objective of my research is to complement dominant structural approaches by deconstructting, how (rural) peripheries are discursively made and subordinated to (urban) centers, as well as by analyzing, who has the power to speak and be heard in the discourse (Spivak 1987). Moreover, concepttualizing discourse as room for maneuver, it aims to explore the subjective relevance of (Meyer/ Miggelbrink 2013) and possibilities for reacting to such socio-spatial ascriptions (Bürk 2013). With its focus on the structure and subjective relevance of dominant peripheralization discourses in rural space, my project contributes to scrutinizing the link between discourses, practices and materialities in (re-) producing core-periphery and urban-rural relations as well as to the discussion on ways of dealing with peripheralization. Hence, it seeks to address the research gaps identified by Kühn/Bernt (2013) and Meyer/Miggelbrink (2013).

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[1] For an earlier and extended version of this paper, see: RegPol Wiki (1st ESR Colloquium)

2. THEORETICAL AND METHODOLOGICAL CONCEPTUALIZATION

If the knowledge on peripheries is (re-)produced discursively, it is important to understand how. Following Foucault (1999), peripheralization discourses are understood as embedded in power relations, defining and limiting the thinkable, expressible and, hence, doable. I employ Political Discourse Theory in order to deconstruct the inherent hierarchy in the center-periphery divide maintained in a naturalized discourse, which has become temporarily fixed through hegemony[2]. Therefore, I will treat 'periphery' as an empty signifier[3], which is filled with meaning, linked to the rural and subordinated to the urban via chains of equivalence and difference as well as by strategies of exclusion.

2.1. How? The making of peripheries

Identified in critical political economy studies, a prominent chain of equivalence links rural areas to *deficits and decline*. Thereby, it constitutes them as peripheries within a hegemonic discourse naturalizing the ascription of development (non-)potentials. Drawing on a neoliberal understanding proliferated since the 1990s, it tends to equate regional development with competitiveness and economic growth (Bristow 2005). By imposing the logic of regions as entrepreneurial place-sellers, this interpretation of development does not only narrow it down to a 'survival of the fittest', leaving regions with the option to either "be competitive or die" (Bristow 2010). It also sets the criteria for success or failure, as spatial polarization and social inequality are essentially explained by macro-economic performance indicators measuring productivity and innovation potential, which are in turn related to geographic indicators of accessibility and population density (Shearmur 2012). Compiled into indexes and rankings[4], these are used to compare regions and find out "who is winning" (Bristow 2005). Usually resulting in opposing prosper, strong, innovative, and active urban centers to poor, weak and passive rural peripheries lagging behind, this operationalization of development inherently privileges the urban and constitutes the rural as periphery *per se* (Kühn/Bernt 2013, Shearmur 2012). This urges one to critically scrutinize the selection of indicators, which does not only universalize a specific understanding while neglecting alternative criteria for and concepts of development (Bristow 2005)[5], so that the question "what kind of development and for whom" (Pike et al. 2007) is rarely being asked. But the objectification of development potentials by statistical 'facts' also runs the risk of localizing the causes of peripheralization by portraying peripheries as failing due to their own deficiencies (Meyer/ Miggelbrink 2013).

Moreover, following another chain of equivalence pointed out in studies on territorial stigmatization (Bürk 2013, Wacquant et al. 2014), these objectified development deficits are discursively related to *visible decay* in the physical environment of the periphery and to *social pathologies* of its inhabitants. Hence, focusing on the portrayal of crime, xenophobia, alcoholism, immorality and the neglect of the surroundings, which are linked to social properties of the population, a shift from (possible) symptoms to causes of peripheralization takes place. In consequence, the discourse portrays peripheries as underdeveloped due to the "inherent socio-cultural traits" of their inhabitants and not due to structural ill-beings (Wacquant et al. 2014). Even though Bürk (2013) and Wacquant et al. (2014) exemplify this on cities and "urban outcasts" (ibid.), I argue that linking peripheralization discourses to the notion of stigma (Goffman 1983) is fruitful for analyzing the construction of peripheries in general.

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[2] The concept of hegemony denotes the superiority of one naturalized discourse over competing others, see: Laclau (1996)

[3] Whereas signifiers denote an actual object in the process of signification, empty signifiers are voided of shared meaning and tend to absorb every meaning projected on them, hence are susceptible to political use, see: Lévi-Strauss (1987)

[4] See, for example: Annoni/Dijkstra (2013), Assembly of European Regions (2009), Hollanders/Es-Sadki (2014), Schürmann/Talaat (2000)

[5] As subjective well-being, quality of life, and life satisfaction, see: Hayo (2007), Peiro (2006), Shucksmith et al. (2009), Sørensen (2013)

Boundary-drawing[6] towards those that do not belong to us is also a central feature of the last chain of equivalence I want to discuss. Here, peripheries function as *internal other*, symbolizing the fringes (to use the geographical term) of national identity. The postcolonial othering concept particularly draws our attention to the discursive construction of peripheries *by* the core, using strategies of demonizing, exoticizing, feminizing and enemy stereotyping in order to construct and obtain normative divisions of west and east, progressive and backward, good and evil, authentic and artificial (Hall 1992, Jacobs 1995, Said 1995). This applies particularly to rural areas in post-soviet space facing negative images as the "biggest losers" of transformation (Leibert 2013) by being discursively placed on the downside of the urban-rural, west-east and progress-decline hierarchy (Editorial 2014). Moreover, othering studies make us aware that seemingly positive ascriptions as for example "rural idyll" (Halfacree 2006) do not break with the dominant hierarchy, because they are connected to notions of modernity and project peripheries as frozen in time (Hechler in Lang 2013).

The (by no means exhaustive) introduction of chains of equivalence shows that peripheries are related to topics of development, social properties of the population and national identity. By equating them with deficits and decline, social pathologies and decay as well as portraying them as internal other, they are subordinated to the center(s). Strategies of objectification, stigmatization and othering function to (re-)produce this hierarchical difference. Even though rural is not inevitably equated to peripheral in the discourse, the chains of equivalence discussed above indicate a relation between these two discourse formations that I would like to explore in more detail during the course of my research.

2.2. Who? The interpreting coalitions

Peripheralization discourses do not exist in a vacuum though. Therefore, it is important to also ask, who has the power to name, show, create and, hence, bring into existence (Bourdieu 1991)? Embedded in power relations, discourses are at the same time representative and constitutive of them (Foucault 1999). If understood as struggle for making one's voice heard and knowledge recognized (Lang 2013, Spivak 1987), it is power that determines who speaks in the discourse and whose constructions become manifested and internalized through the institutionalization in symbols (Jenkins 1996), categorizations (Brubaker/Cooper 2000) and institutional practices (Paasi 1986). Consequently, it will be crucial to carefully reconstruct what Bourdieu (1991) calls the "discursive field" and identify the "interpreting coalitions" (Bürk 2013) of core-periphery relations. Due to the embeddedness in power relations, actors in and from the center tend to dominate the peripheralization discourse. In opposition, those who are subjected to it are often portrayed as possessing particularly little discursive and material power.

Concerning this question, I would like to somewhat depart from the above discussed theories by (1) conceptualizing peripheralization discourses as structuration process (Pred 1984)[7], and (2) focusing on the formation of the subject (Meyer/Miggelbrink 2013), which enable me to break with the image of powerless peripheries and passive peripheral actors. As a process, structuration is always incomplete (Pred 1984). Discourses are therefore at the same time disabling certain forms of agency, while enabling others. Despite being hegemonic, they offer certain subject positions to which one has to relate (Laclau 1996). Hence, not only those who are subjecting, but also those who are being subjected to peripheralization have agency in the discourse and a certain room for maneuver (although to a different extent). Keeping the question in mind if the subaltern can speak (Spivak 1988), the work of Meyer and Miggel-

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[6] Boundary-drawing denotes the discursive distinction from us towards others, constitutive for collective identity making, see: Barth (1969)
[7] For more information on the theory of structuration, see Giddens (1984)

brink (2013) indicates that peripheries are not only constructed in the centers. They show that subjects "facing moments of peripheralization" actively relate to value-laden ascriptions and negotiate them in the discourse.

2.3. With what consequences? Images that tend to stick

This leads to the question of consequences. As Wacquant et al. (2014) show, negative and stigmatizing images of the periphery tend to "stick". They do not only effect individual thoughts, actions and decision-making[8], but also materialize in space, thereby further strengthening locational disadvantages. Moreover, they legitimize the status quo and further neglect of space labelled as peripheral by shifting the responsibility for the causes of and coping with peripheralization to the 'peripheries' themselves. Whereas the neoliberal equation of development with competitiveness strongly emphasizes non-intervention and self-reliance in dealing with the consequences, accentuating social pathologies shifts the question of guilt for the causes to the inhabitants themselves. How can subjects, faced with such discourses and labels, react? How do they relate to and co-construct or counteract them? Essential therefore is the question, if these ascriptions are relevant to those being subjected to them (Meyer/ Miggelbrink 2013). Only when recognized 'on the ground', can they induce and urge a response. Going a step further, Bürk (2013, relying on Goffman 1983), argued for possible responses to be divided into those confirming the discourse by internalizing it or relying on it when trying to prove the opposite or generate pity, and those, rejecting and actively resisting its basic assumptions.

The internalization of discourses, naturalizing the dominance of centers over peripheries, is what Bürk (2013) and Lang (2013) call "peripheralization in mind" or "mental lock-ins". It goes back to the notions of "self-stigmatization" and "voluntary subjection", hence to a (re-)production of one's own image as peripheral. But also when reversing it, actors essentially rely on the discursive hierarchy. The potential to overcome rural subordination by strategically attaching positive images to places labelled as peripheral in order to (1) externally engage in place-marketing (Jasso 2005) or (2) internally strengthen social capital[9] and place attachment[10] (Semian/Chromý 2014), has to be critically scrutinized. Despite being discussed as a new beacon of hope, place-marketing remains deeply in the logic of competitiveness (Fischer-Tahir/ Naumann) and runs the risk of commodifying and exotifying the rural to satisfy the urban gaze[11], while soft development factors as engagement and social capital have been coopted by the center-periphery divide, declaring urban centers to be highly active and labelling rural areas as passive peripheries. Also, utilizing negative images to generate pity or employing strategic essentialism drawing on existing images of otherness in order to achieve one's own objectives (Bürk 2013, Jacobs 1997), does not escape the hierarchy. Only when contesting the discursive framework itself, actors actively reject the center-periphery hierarchy constituted by it. This is the potential for resistance by breaking with dominant structures and discourses, which Soja (1999) and Halfacree (2007) describe as "thirdspace" or "radical rural".

3. RESEARCH DESIGN AND OPERATIONALIZATION

Applying this conceptualization to a largely rural country as Estonia seems particularly promising. On the one side, post-soviet rural areas and their inhabitants seem to face a particularly negative image as peripheral, marginalized, passive and somehow different (Editorial 2014, Petersoo 2007). On the other

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[8] A link that has been well researched in literature on residential decision-making, see: Ley in Cloke (2004), Kährik et al. (2012)
[9] For more information on the concept of social capital, see: Coleman (1988), Putnam (1993)
[10] For more information on the concept of place attachment, see: Lewicka (2010), Tuan (1977)
[11] For discussions on the 'need' to fulfill the urban demand for rural lifestyle, see: Kobayashi/Westlund (2013), Kašková/Chromý (2014)

side, positive images of the rural as "traditional way of life" (Berg 2002) and rural inhabitants as wo/men of action (*tegijad*) figure prominently in Estonian identity discourse and marketing campaigns[12]. While the latter appears to stand in stark contrast to the former, the preceding discussion also urges us to think about issues of potential commodification and instrumentalization.

Consequently, asking how is as important as asking who and with what consequences. As peripheralization discourses do not exist in a vacuum, they are interlinked with practices and materialities. Whereas they can be put in motion by the latter, those can in return also reinforce the discourse and vice versa (Meyer/Miggelbrink 2013). Even if the *problem of effect* or, in my case, the relation between peripheral images and rural development in Estonia, has been one of the most difficult to solve in the literature, I hope to tackle it by not only reconstructing the discursive structure and field, but also focusing on the question of agency when analyzing the interpreting coalitions and exploring the subjective relevance for and responses to discursive peripheralization. This will be done by using a qualitative multi-method approach, which entails discourse and context analysis as well as case studies incl. in-depth interviews and participatory observation.

The research is divided into two separated but interrelated phases. While the first one is devoted to the analysis of the discursive structure and field, the second one will explore the subjective relevance of and local responses to the analyzed discourse. As a result, the discourses retrieved from social artefacts (Phase 1) and interviews (Phase 2) are going to be juxtaposed with each other in order to analyze, how those facing similar moments of discursive peripheralization attribute different degrees of relevance to and employ different strategies for coping with them.

In the following, I will discuss my research design by focusing on questions of data collection and analysis, case study selection and conduction as well as the presentation of future results. For that, I draw on experiences from the exploratory phase, but these will not explicitly be made subject of discussion.

3.1. First Phase: Discursive Structure and Discursive Field

In the first phase of my research, I will focus on the discursive structure as well as the discursive field. Hereby, the aim is to analyze how rural areas are constructed as peripheries in Estonian discourse and who constructs them.

The discursive structure will be retrieved by using Political Discourse Theory. As PDT proceeds deductively from the theoretical background of discursive knowledge production to the deconstruction of one specific term, the above discussed literature review will guide but not determine me in identifying chains of equivalence and difference, situating the empty signifier 'periphery'. This will be based on a broad text corpus[13], which includes online newspaper articles[14] using the keyword 'periphery' (*ääremaa*) as well as grey literature, as for example consultancy and government documents[15] usually drawing heavily on statistical representation[16]. In order to account for the temporality and spatiality of the discourse, I will include texts on national and local level in the time frame from 2009-2015. The second step is the analysis itself for which I have considered a combination of frequency analysis (e.g. corpus linguistics)

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[12] For more information, see: "Kuidas me endast räägime?" URL: http://brand.estonia.eu/et/esileht/disain
[13] Images distributed in form of pictures, paintings and films will therefore be excluded from the analysis
[14] Mainly national and local print media, for a list of Estonian newspapers, see: http://www.w3newspapers.com/estonia/
[15] Mainly development and spatial plans, project reports, and working papers by initiatives and interest groups, see for example: Raagmaa/Noorkõiv (2013), Vihma/Lippus (2014)
[16] Mainly competitiveness and development indexes, for example: Kivilaid/Servinski (2013), Noorkõiv/Ristmäe (2014),Sõstra/Aru (2013)

and qualitative text analysis (incl. coding). The aim is to (1) reconstruct the discursive production of rural peripheries, (2) identify the "interpreting coalitions" and, (3) find two suitable case study areas.

My case selection will be based on the identification of those places which are predominantly linked to the term 'periphery' in the discourse. Therefore, I do not want to pre-determine the geographical scale of possible case study areas. Depending on the places figuring in the discourse, these could for example be villages, administrative counties or historical regions. Due to the framework and focus of my project, they are confined to rural areas though. I am aware of the potential drawbacks[17] of this selection criteria. Nonetheless, I found support for this choice in my print media analysis conducted during the exploratory phase[18], which shows that 'peripheries' are discursively primarily located in rural areas. It has to be methodologically problematized though that this approach for case study selection cannot account for 'peripheries' which are marginalized by not being part of the discourse at all.

The first objective for reconstructing the discursive field is to shed light on the context in which the discourse is situated, i.e. to account for practices and materialities. Here, I will draw on a database of academic texts[19] and statistical data[20]. As to avoid reinforcing statistically objectified discourses on peripheries, I have considered to also include (1) notes from field trips, participatory observation at local government development meetings and public events[21] as well as (2) local self-representations on muni-cipality and marketing websites. Moreover, I propose an extensive contextualization when presenting the results by describing the Estonian case in general and my case studies in particular on different dimensions, which go beyond statistical development analysis.

These could also include medial representations of the case study area, which leads me to the second objective. When conducting my exploratory case study[22], the analysis of print media articles on the one hand provided insights to the question, if the retrieved general discursive patterns are resembled on the case study level. On the other hand, it helped to identify and situate the local "interpreting coalition". To contextualize also those who are dominating the discourse, I pursued desktop research[23] on their functions and networks as well as background interviews[24] in order to better understand the role of key actors from different discourse positions in the (making of the) discourse. These could for example be local politicians, journalists, activists engaging in local initiatives and place-marketing campaigns.

3.2. Second Phase: Subjective Relevance and Local Responses

In the second research phase, my focus lies on the reception of peripheralization discourses by those subjected to it, hence on the subjective relevance and local responses. Methodologically, two different ways of pursuing can be distinguished. Researching Estonian boundary-drawing processes towards Russia, Aalto (2003) proposes the Q-method. This means to first retrieve dominant images from the

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[17] As it excludes counter-cases as for example the discursive (re-)production of the Lasnamäe district in Tallinn as urban periphery and Viimsi municipality as rural center

[18] Based on 183 freely-available online articles from Eesti Päevaleht, Postimees (daily) and Maaleht (weekly), time-frame: 2009-2015, keyword: 'periphery' (ääremaa), article categories: all

[19] Mainly focusing on peripheralization and othering processes in Estonia and the case study areas, for example: Leetmaa et al. (2013), Petersoo (2007)

[20] See, for example: Statistics Estonia: http://www.stat.ee/ppe-45400

[21] Kept in research diary incl. for example Rural Parliament, Geomedia consultancy meetings, public discussions on regional development

[22] Conducted from June-September 2015 in the South-Estonian region of Setomaa

[23] Based on initiatives' databases and online research in the fields of politics, culture, marketing, entrepreneurship and local engagement, see for example: Kodukant, Piirivere Leader, Seto Instituut, Rahvakultuuri Keskus

[24] Ten semi-structured interviews with municipality leaders, cultural/political activists, and place-marketing representatives were conducted

discourse and then confront respondents with these in a survey study. In my opinion, this approach runs the risk of not being able to study if these images are *meaningful* to the people concerned. As my focus lies on discourses and categories mobilized by locals, I will follow the approach developed by Meyer and Miggelbrink in their research project on shrinking regions in Germany[25].

This means that I plan to conduct semi-structured single and group interviews with local actors, asking them about their life and experiences in the case study area, its history and prospective future, as well as their attachment to and engagement in the place. By posing open questions and employing techniques such as mirroring and encouraging longer narratives, I hope to explore, which discourses local actors (re-)produce when talking about the area and which categories and images they themselves refer to. Following this logic, I have considered inductive methods of interview analysis (e.g. Grounded Theory), which would also imply to sample until theoretical saturation. But this is an issue I am still working on. Moreover, language plays an important role here, as it enables or limits ways of expression and understanding. I am able to conduct and analyze interviews in Estonian and have considered the support of a native speaker for transcription. As my knowledge is not at the respective level though, I won't be able to conduct interviews in Russian. Despite the opportunity to offer alternative languages to potential interviewees, I am aware of the bias this entails, which will have to be reflected upon in the analysis of my research results.

The main limit, though, lies in the artificial interview situation itself, making it difficult to retrieve 'everyday' discourse. I try to accommodate for this tension, by not only focusing on the question, how to interview, but also whom, when and where. During the exploratory case study, background interviews with local key actors have proven useful for entering the field, gaining a certain legitimacy as well as further contacts in the area. They also gave an overview of the 'scene' including the local domination and marginalization of certain groups (cf. Annist 2013). Relying only on snowball sampling from here on (as initially planned) therefore runs the risk of producing a selection bias by excluding those groups which are already marginalized. Hence, the problem whom to (be able to) interview has proven to be crucial, yet difficult to solve. For now, I have considered to approach the field from different sites, for example through initiatives, social workers, cultural clubs, but also personal contacts and would be happy for suggestions on this issue. Concerning issues of contextuality and temporality, Valentine's (2007) study on intersectionality shows that the way subjects relate to dominant discourses highly depends on the social role they perform as well the place and time they act in. Depending on the situation, local decision-makers could for example strategically employ positive images of the rural in place-marketing initiatives and negative peripheral images when applying for development funds. Also, the discourses locals draw on vary when being confronted for example with new development rankings or events figuring prominently in the media, but - in the Estonian case - also with the seasonality of life[26]. To accommodate for these factors, I employ participatory observation[27] and repeated field phases in the same case study areas. A longer field phase could also be considered, even though I am sceptic about its practicality.

Finally, I have to be aware of my own role as a researcher in the field, who is also part of the discourse. A central challenge is to avoid contributing to the peripheralization discourse. Therefore, paying attention to the concepts and categories I am referring to is crucial. Above, I have already discussed the issues of framing when conducting interviews and representation when presenting the results. Besides that, I

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[25] For more information see: "Diskurse und Praktiken in schurmpfenden Räumen" at IfL Leipzig
[26] Incl. the different perspectives of rural hosting and visiting second home population, see for example: Farstad/Rye (2013)
[27] On several cultural occasions and at local roundtable meetings

am convinced that this problem can only be tackled by addressing it openly and by working as transparent and reflexive as possible. Another challenge relates to the topic of positionality (cf. Hörschelmann/ Stenning 2008). Hence, it is important for me to reflect on my own subject position and the one that is ascribed to me as for example a foreign researcher from Germany who works with a consulting company connected to one of the most influential local capacity rankings (KOV). In the exploratory phase, this has on the one side proven to be an issue of legitimacy, which I want to illustrate on two examples. First, the control question *who* I am - urban or rural - figured prominently in all interviews. Second, a certain notion of suspiciousness became sensible after I (continuously) kept coming back. But, on the other side, it is also an issue of practicality. As I am extremely visible at a place on the countryside where people know each other, it results in a certain dependency on contact persons to provide (even physical) access to the place.

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