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Rescaling post-colonial approaches: The making of rural peripheries in Estonian media discourse

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Abstract: Recent studies on peripheralization discourses propose a rescaling of post-colonial frameworks to the regional and local level. This transfer does not only open the scope of analysis to the emergence of core-periphery relations on different scales, but also shifts the focus to the crucial role that centers play for (re)producing places denoted as peripheries. The paper attempts to make this approach fruitful for studying rural areas in post-soviet space. By being discursively placed on the downside of the west-east, urban-rural and progress-decline divide, they are not only labelled as peripheries, but also subordinated to centers setting themselves as the norm. Enwrap-ped in a neoliberal development and modernity discourse, Eastern Europe is therewith located in rural areas constructed as peripheries. As Europe has not yet given up ‘the need to have an East’, this resembles another instance of attempting to shift the boundaries of Easternness, but in this case internally. By being neither neutral nor innocent, such discourses are consequential as they co-constitute socio-spatial polarization and the politics involved in it. Following a critical discourse analysis approach, the making of rural peripheries will be discussed on the example of discourses in Estonian national print media. Despite being hegemonic, these can always be brushed against the grain in search for subaltern voices. Therefore, the illustrative analysis will deconstruct the dominant peripheralization discourse as well as its counter-discourses¹.

Keywords: peripheralization discourses, post-socialism, post-colonial approaches, internal *other*, rural Estonia

Post-socialist rural areas are often challenged with multiple forms of material deprivation and territorial stigmatization (Kay et al. 2012). Being portrayed as rural, peripheral and eastern *other*, they face an overlapping peripheralization discourse, which is based on the notions of development, modernity and Easternness. In order to better understand how peripheries are discursively made, recent studies propose an application of post-colonial conceptual frameworks to the regional level (Lang et al. 2015). On the one hand, this transfer seems particularly promising, as it does not only open the scope of analysis to the emergence of core-periphery relations on different scales, but also shifts the focus to the crucial role that centers play for (re)producing places denoted as peripheries. On the other hand, applying post-colonial approaches to the construction of rural areas in post-socialist space also poses multiple challenges. Firstly, urban-rural and center-periphery have long been used as fixed categories in geographical analysis, which has only started to be questioned in the course of the cultural turn. Secondly, a so-called “mutual silence” (Moore 2006, 17) led to a situation where neither post-colonial studies consider the post-socialist sphere nor post-socialist studies tend to think in post-colonial terms. And thirdly, in order to deconstruct the making of internal *others*, a rescaling of post-colonial approaches to the sub-national level is required.

In the first section of this paper, I will try to face these challenges by combining peripheralization, post-colonial and othering studies into a common theoretical framework. This allows me to make post-colonial approaches fruitful for peripheralization studies on the regional level. Moreover, by arguing for the *decolonial* option, it also aims to overcome the challenges of applying post-colonial theory to post-socialist space. In accordance with Koobak and Marling (2014), post-socialist space is used to denote Central and Eastern European countries in the former Soviet sphere of influence. Therewith, it is preferred to the Cold War era term Second World reflecting an inherent modernization narrative, which is essentially questioned in post-colonial approaches, as well as to the term post-communist in order to underline that “communism was never fully achieved” (Koobak & Marling 2014, 340). Despite being aware of the heterogeneity of post-socialist space, the term is used “to refer to the shared legacy of Soviet presence across the region” (ibid.). In the second section, following a critical discourse analysis approach (Jäger 1999), the theoretical framework will be applied to the making of rural peripheries on the case of discourses in Estonian national print media. Despite being hegemonic, these can be brushed against the grain in search for subaltern voices (Mills 1997). Therefore, the illustrative analysis will deconstruct the dominant peripheralization discourse as well as its counter-discourses

Peripheralization processes: The discursive dimension

With its focus on the discursive construction of rural peripheries, the paper builds on two hegemonic dichotomies in geographical thought: the center-periphery and the urban-rural divide. Based on the mathematical origin, periphery is commonly understood as “distant to the center” or “situated at the fringe” (Kühn 2015, 2). This categorization does not only imply a relational but also a hierarchical division of space. In order to move away from fixed dichotomies to the dynamics of their emergence, Keim (2006) introduced the concept of peripheralization. Combining theories of economic polarization, social inequality and (access to) political power, Kühn (2015), Fischer-Tahir & Naumann (2013) and Lang et al. (2015) define peripheralization as relational, multi-scalar and multi-dimensional polarization process. Hence, they conceptualize the making of peripheries as result of economic, political and social dynamics on

and between different scales and types of space. Peripheralization and centralization are seen as contingent processes that are conditional for one another. Despite their relative durability, they are temporal and therefore reversible. Consequently, the concept of peripheralization urges us to question how center-periphery hierarchies evolve and to which types of places they are applied to. Following this social constructivist notion, the dominant equation of rural with peripheral and urban with central needs to be critically scrutinized (ibid.). The research on urban marginalities and rural representations incl. the debates on peripheral ruralities and peripheralities has called this prevalent association into question (Cloke 2003, Cloke et al. 2006, Copus 2001, Paasi 1995, Wacquant et al. 2014).

By being neither neutral nor innocent, such equations show “real effects in practice” or become “true” (Hall 1992, 293). An analysis of peripheralization processes in rural areas therefore has to pay close attention to the discursive dimension. Following a Foucauldian understanding, discourses are conceptualized as inherent part of peripheralization processes due to their mutually reinforcing links with practices and materialities (Meyer & Miggelbrink 2013). As they do not exist in a vacuum but are embedded in societal power relations while at the same time (re)producing them, discourses are seen as rather constitutive of than representative for socio-spatial polarization (Jäger 1999). On the one hand, by institutionalizing legitimized and widely recognized interpretations of social reality, they define and limit the thinkable, expressible and, hence, doable (Jäger 1999, Schwab-Trapp 2006). They therefore exercise a form of power by those who know over those “who are known (i.e. subjected) in a particular way” (Hall 1992, 295). On the other hand, access to resources and positions of power determines who has the right to speak and be heard in the discourse or whose constructions become temporarily fixed through hegemony and manifested in categories, symbols and practices (Bourdieu 1991, Jäger 2008, Spivak 1988). In order to better grasp the discursive dimension, recent peripheralization studies propose an application of post-colonial conceptual frameworks to the regional and local level. With their focus on knowledge production and othering processes, they offer a deeper understanding of the mechanisms underlying the emergence and persistence of core-periphery relations. Hitherto, the mutual silence between post-colonial and post-socialist studies has formed as major obstacle though.

Post-colonial approaches in post-socialist space: The decolonial option

The “extraordinarily little attention” that has been paid to the “fact, how extraordinarily postcolonial the societies of the former Soviet regions are” (Moore 2006, 15) can be explained by the Western origin of postcolonial theory itself. Built on a Three-World modernization paradigm that was put on its head in order to scrutinize the dependencies evolving from it (Annist 2011), it is deeply embedded in a Western standard of North-South colonization. Due to its Marxist grounding, Second World socialism was seen as alternative to a hegemonic First World understanding of development as progress towards a Western democratic and neoliberal model, to which others have to catch up (Moore 2006, Tlostanova 2012). This made post-colonial theory blind for socialist coloniality or, put differently, “according to Western critical canon it [was] not possible to be both – a victim of Marxism and colonialism” (Račevskis 2002, 42). Moreover, due to the dominant transition paradigm and by treating the changes as ‘Return to the West’, post-socialist areas were generally framed as being uncritical of the West (Suchland 2011). Moreover, the Western model theorized colonization as being accompanied by orientalism, through which superior colonizers portray the colonized as passive, ahistorical, feminine and barbaric. Because Russia was seen as culturally inferior, there was a certain reluctance by post-socialist scholars and politicians to accept the parallel of Soviet power to the First and oneself to the Third World (Moore 2006).

Despite these reservations, there are strong arguments for applying post-colonial approaches to post-socialist space. Beyond the former territorial occupation, various levels of power coercion, multiple dependencies and the crucial role of place and displacement, important intersections lie in the psychology of colonialism and anticolonial resistance as well as in the implementation of modernity (Račevskis 2002, Tlostanova 2012). A post-colonial framework opens the analysis to a critique of the hegemonic notion of development as linear progress towards a Western industrialized, urbanized, and secularized modernity, which goes back to the modernization paradigm of enlightenment (Hall 1992, Koobak & Marling 2014). Therewith, it also questions the ongoing difficult relationship between benevolent donor and needy recipient that accompanies it (Annist 2011, Suchland 2011). By emphasizing the crucial role that centers play for (re)producing places denoted as peripheries, post-colonial theory reveals the functionality of the “the West and the rest” dichotomy as source of measuring and categorizing different societies against a Western yardstick (Hall 1992, 278). From a post-colonial perspective, the labelling of the changes since 1989 as transformation or transition can therefore be identified as yet another incident of projecting (post)socialist differences onto a Western norm and representing the changes thereafter as simple replacement of one ideology by another while neglecting the plurality, heterogeneity and asynchrony of experiences (Kay et al. 2012, Koobak & Marling 2014).

When uncritically applying post-colonial theory to the post-socialist sphere though, it runs the risk of posting another example for the universalization of contextualized Western knowledge frames. This is why Tlostanova (2012) and others have favored the decolonial option in order to achieve “true intersectionality” between post-colonial and post-socialist studies (Koobak & Marling 2014, 336). Their approach shifts the focus from colonialism to global coloniality as “indispensable underside” (Tlostanova 2012, 132) of the capitalist *and* the socialist modernity. On the one hand, coloniality effects people’s subjectivities - those of today’s ex-third-world, ex-socialist and western alike - that usually

become apparent in the form of self-colonization. As a concept, it can therefore grasp forms of imitating dominant culture during Soviet rule as well as the current self-constitution of post-socialist countries as periphery of the West (Koobak & Marling 2014, Moore 2006). On the other hand, coloniality crucially influences the production and distribution of knowledge. By critically addressing the situatedness of hegemonic development concepts and their normative timelines, the decolonial approach shows that it is the translation of spatial into temporal differences underlying both modernity paradigms that creates a “lagging behind” and “catching up” discourse at the first place (Koobak & Marling 2014, 333).

Rescaling to the regional level: The role of internal others

For the attempted deconstruction of rural peripheries in post-socialist space it is not only necessary to overcome the mutual silence, but also to rescale post-colonial approaches to the sub-national level. This transfer opens the analysis to discursive peripheralization processes on different scales. Hence, it shows that hierarchies and dependencies are not only globally established, but also internally produced and reproduced. In post-colonial terms, the phenomenon that Nolte (1996), Hechler (1975), Walls (1978), and Jansson (2003 in Lang et al. 2015) coin inner periphery or internal colony, can be related to the debate on internal *others*. Based on Barth's (1996) observation that discursive boundary-drawing processes towards externals are constitutive for collective identity-building processes, othering studies predominantly concentrate on the role of significant negative others of the national self. But as Said (1995 in Petersoo 2007, 118) established, “each age and society recreates its [own] others“. Therefore, the sole focus on significant *others* has to be questioned. Building on the multidimensionality and fluidity of identity constructions, Petersoo (2007) accordingly proclaims the existence of mutual *others* to the national self. These would not necessarily have to be external and negative, but could also be internal or even positive. Their role and connotation can vary and change over time.

Whereas external negative *others* are constructed through orientalism or enemy stereotyping, positive external *others* function as role models whom one tries to equal (Petersoo 2007). In post-colonial terms, the relation to the latter often constitutes a case of mimicry or of imitating dominant cultural forms (Moore 2006). Internal *others* are typically minorities (Hall 1992). Faced with negative othering, they symbolize the fringes of society or borders of solidarity. Therewith, they function as homogenizing force the national self. Conversely, positive internal *others* resemble cases of coopted or instrumentalized minorities that are still seen as different but not anymore as threatening to the majority society (Petersoo 2007). Peripheralization can therefore also be analyzed as case of internal othering.

Rural peripheries in the Making: Deconstructing Estonian Media Discourse

Applying this theoretical framework, the making of rural peripheries is explored through a critical discourse analysis approach developed by Jäger (1999, 2008) who bases his work on Foucault (1999) and Link (1982). The main focus lies on scrutinizing discursive threads and strategies. The basic unit of analysis are statements (*discursive fragments*) derived from print media articles, which are scrutinized for common patterns with special focus on the depiction of peripheries and the topics and stories they are associated with. Thereby, fragments referring to the same subject (*discursive threads*) are identified that create what Jäger (1999) calls a discursive effect by which particular interpretations of social reality (*truth claims*) are constituted as universalized knowledge. The universalization of truth claims is further fostered by discursive strategies, which can be separated into those regulating the participation in the discourse and those drawing limits to the content and ways of legitimate expression (Foucault 1999, Schwab-Trapp 2006). The analysis will focus on the latter, out of which legitimization strategies play the central role for hegemonizing truth claims. Common tactics are to depict particular interpretations of social reality as the only alternative or to relativize the risks involved in it (Jäger 1999). However, the stabilization of knowledge through the “repetition effect” (Foucault 1999, 60) figures most prominently. These strategies go hand in hand with strategies to silence or delegitimize alternative voices by either neutralizing their objections, denying their relevance or excluding them from the discourse altogether (Jäger 1999, Schwab-Trapp 2006). The combined analysis of discursive threads and strategies in the end allows to draw conclusions about the discourse formation or the limits of what can be legitimately expressed about rural areas in post-socialist space.

By following a post-colonial approach, the analysis on the one hand focuses on the deconstruction of hegemonic and consequential discourses, to which subjects have to relate to. On the other hand, it also accounts for subaltern voices in counter-discourses (Mills 1997). Said (1995) identifies conventional means of othering colonial subjects in the form of (1) dehumanization, by depicting them as barbaric or extremely passive, (2) de-historicization, by projecting spatial differences onto a temporal scale and portraying them as frozen in time, lagging behind or fallen out of modernity, and (3) exoticization in form of sexualized, feminized and authenticized representations. The different representation and cooptation techniques are used to assure one's own superiority over dependent *others* in order to legitimize the civilizing exertion of influence (Mills 1997). By shifting the focus of analysis from the colonizer to the colonized and thereby questioning the all-encompassing effect of hegemonic systems, Spivak (1988) initiated post-colonial discourse analysis. She urges us to brush the texts against the grain in order to detect subaltern voices. Those could appear in

form of self-colonization or what Bürk et al. (2012) and Lang (2013) call peripheralization in mind or voluntary subjection. Subaltern voices in form of counter-discourses typically consist of reversal strategies or strategic essentialism that put the established hierarchy on its head or instrumentalize it for one's own purposes. Some of them also question the system itself respectively the norm generating coloniality at the first place (Bürk et al. 2012, Jacobs 1996).

Due to this twofold aim, the illustrative analysis of public discourses on places labelled as peripheries in Estonia is based on freely available online articles published in the main rural weekly newspaper *Maaleht*, which was chosen due to its specific discourse position. Its focus lies explicitly on rural issues and it therefore resembles a culmination point for an account of the majority discourse as well as critical counter-discourses on rural areas in Estonia. Balčytienė and Harro-Loit (2009) denote the online versions of Estonian newspapers as national discussion forums or, using the conceptual framework above, as public arena for competing truth claims. Due to the continuous expansion of internet access, they have become ever more important. The online versions are characterized by a widespread readership, a high degree of interactivity and a considerable overlap between the online and the printed version (ibid.). Altogether, 51 articles in the time period from January 2011 until December 2015 were retrieved in the opinion column (*arvamus*) of the newspaper by using the keyword periphery (*ääremaa* or *perifeeria*) and consequently subjected to a discourse analytical review. For a higher transparency of translations, the original Estonian terms and phrases are continuously displayed in the text and the endnotes.

Distant and remote: The equation of rural with peripheral

Prior studies demonstrate that rural areas in post-socialist space are confronted with an overlapping peripheralization discourse by being displayed on the downside of the center-periphery, urban-rural and west-east divide. Thereby, they are not only labelled as peripheries and subordinated to urban centers, which set themselves as norm on a modernity timeline, but this discourse also resembles an othering of the socialist past or attempt to internally shift the boundaries of Easternness (Annist 2011, Kay et al. 2012, Suchland 2011). In the Estonian case, this negative discourse is met with romanticizing notions of the rural as “traditional way of life” (Berg 2002, 111) that figure prominently in national identity construction. The concurrence of images of decline and rural idyll in CEE countries in general and Estonia in particular is accompanied by an ongoing sub-/urbanization trend while simultaneously peripheralization processes in small towns and on the countryside deepen (Smith & Timár 2010, Lang et al. 2015, Leetmaa 2013).

While rural areas do not necessarily have to be peripheral, the analysis supports existing studies in showing that in fact peripheries are often associated with rural space. The discursive link is firstly ascertained by a repetition effect, as the majority of articles uses the terms periphery and countryside interchangeably while at the same time equating centers to urban space. Thereby peripheralization (*ääremaastumine*) becomes translated into a destruction of rural life (*maaelu hävimine*). Secondly, peripheral is linked to rural by the discursive threads ‘distance and remoteness’ and ‘smallness’ –

a tendency that has also been confirmed by other authors (Fischer-Tahir & Naumann 2013). By being located in distant corners (*kaugemas nurgas*), on the edge (*äärel*), at the border (*piiril*) or depicted as remote forest village (*kauge metsa-küla*), ascriptions to the rural and the peripheral are intertwined with one another. Although small towns (*väiksed linnad*) are characterized in the same way, they are usually put into a chain of equivalence with rural municipalities and villages. As non-city dwellers (*mittesuurlinlased*), they are then opposed to the bigger cities Tallinn and Tartu. Thirdly, the association manifests itself by the choice of exemplary locations labelled by the authors as peripheries. In most cases, the locations become present through a comparison of not closer specified peripheral counties (*perifeersed maakonnad*) to Tallinn and Tartu or through stories of emigration from the countryside to urban areas.

This prominent equation is counteracted by strategies reversing the urban-rural hierarchy, relativizing it or questioning who sets the norm for the hierarchy at the first place. For instance, by referring to the relatively short distances within Estonia and the national identity construction of Estonians as country people (*maarahvas*), the detachment from the countryside as well as full urbanization are deemed impossibleⁱⁱ. Moreover, the prominent translation of peripheral into rural is relativized by pointing out the peripheral status of Estonia as a wholeⁱⁱⁱ: in relation to the former Soviet Union, the European Union, as player in world politics or on the global market. The same also goes for Tallinn that is in one case portrayed as having to fight itself with peripheralization^{iv}. In post-colonial terms, this can be seen as exemplifying a national inferior complex. Occasionally the hidden norm-setting behind the periphery label is questioned when for example pointing out that in the Tallinn context even Kopli and Kalamaja, two (formerly) stigmatized inner-city districts, are seen as areas lagging behind^v.

Lagging behind? Stories of loss and decline

Whereas the linkage of peripheral to rural does not necessarily imply a hierarchy, the subordination of rural peripheries to urban centers takes place by enwrapping the dichotomy into a neoliberal development discourse.

Proliferated since the 1990s, it tends to equate regional development with competitiveness and economic growth (Bristow 2005). By imposing a logic of regions as entrepreneurial place-sellers, this interpretation of development narrows it down to a survival of the fittest, leaving regions with the option to either “be competitive or die” (Bristow 2010). Also in Estonia the governments since the end of the Soviet era followed an innovation-driven development paradigm, “surfing on the waves of consumerism and economic optimism” (Lauristin & Vihalemm 2009, 18). The hegemonic discourse on growth (*kasv*), competitiveness (*konkurentsivõime*), effectiveness (*tõhusus*) and added value (*lisaväärtus*) evolves around the discursive threads ‘emptiness’, ‘poverty’, ‘unemployment’, and ‘innovation’. It unfolds in form of a narrative of decline, which goes as follows: Missing employment opportunities (*töökohtade puudumine*) result in massive inhabitant losses (*suured kaotused*) and leave the countryside exposed. Using an organic metaphor, they are described as drained out of blood^{vi}. This shows consequences in practice as it leaves only the elderly behind in a retirement home (*vanadekodu*) faced with working force problems (*tööjõu probleemid*) and impoverishment (*rahva vaesumine*). This causes the regions to be less competitive (*konkurentsivõimeline*) and attractive (*atraktiivne*) manifesting for example in a bad state of the real-estate market^{vii} and enforcing the emigration even more.

The development discourse 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, which are in return related to geographic indicators of accessibility and population density (Shearmur 2012). Compiled into indexes and rankings, these are used to compare regions and find out “who is winning” (Bristow 2005). As it usually results in opposing prosper, strong, innovative and active urban centers to poor, weak and passive rural peripheries, this operationalization of development inherently privileges the urban and constitutes the rural as periphery per se (Shearmur 2012). Also the depressing situation of peripheries^{viii} or declining regions (*hääbuvad piirkonnad*) in Estonia is objectified using statistical indicators and indexes. This is supported by a strategy declaring Northern Europe as role model that places labelled as peripheries are inclined to follow. In post-colonial terms this exemplifies an “act of self-colonization” (Koobak & Marling 2014, 339), mimicry or a local reproduction of catching-up discourses. The objectified development deficits are furthermore underlined by strategies of territorial stigmatization (Bürk et al. 2012, Wacquant et al. 2014). Thereby, peripheries are for example described as pretty desolate (*üsna trööstitu*) places with grey Soviet time housing (*hallid nõukaegsed elamud*) and the youth languishing in boredom^{ix} or as municipalities regularly vegetating at the border of coping with urgent distress^x. In one case, the reasons of decline are explicitly shifted from structural ill-beings to a development inability (*arenguvõimetus*) caused by public officials’ disbelief in new technologies^{xi}, hence by the locals themselves.

The majority of authors in *Maaleht* take a rather critical stance to these mainstream representations and challenge the hegemonic discourse by opposing the narrative of (self-induced) decline to a narrative of loss since the end of the Soviet era, which saw the downgrading of former centers in kolkhozes or mono-functional settlements (*monoasulad*) to today’s peripheries. The Soviet time also functions as reference point to tell the story of vanishing importance for Estonia as a whole, which used to be an envied (*kadesdatud*) and desired (*ihaldatud*) place and now resembles a fameless province (*kuulsusetu provints*) of the West. This shows a critical awareness of one’s own peripheral status, which has also been suggested by other authors (Runnel 2003). Moreover, reversal strategies are applied by for example relativizing the inhabitant losses as being typical for all industrial societies (*töötusihiskondadele*). Finally, authors attempt to replace representations of desolateness and development hostility with images of rural idyll (Halfacree 2006) and stories of active coping. Reversing positive and negative connotations, the city made of concrete (*kivilinn*) is portrayed as hostile living environment from which people flee like from a horrible accident^{xiii} to a better environment (*paremasse keskkonda*) full of peace and quiet (*väikus ja rahu*). The enumeration of own efforts are used to shake off the blame for the ongoing peripheralization process. These counter-strategies are often characterized by a certain norm conformity. Coping efforts are for instance presented in a neoliberal logic as the encouragement of entrepreneurship and growth or performance achievements are illustrated with reference to rankings and league tables. Referring to the notion of self-reliance, this is accompanied by an imperative to extricate oneself from the provincial status^{xiii}, hence by emphasizing the necessity to cope. In some cases, these counter-discourses are also coopted again by counter-counter discourses. While some strive to commodify the established rural idyll for recreational peripheries offering active holidays (*aktiivne puhkus*), others built on it to fight against changes on the countryside altogether. Moreover, the attempts to overcome the dichotomous depiction of active urbanites and passive rural inhabitants (Kay et al. 2012) get revised by establishing community initiatives in Tallinn and Tartu as role models for raising real-estate prices (*tõstnud kinnisvara hinda*) and luring people to live there (*meelitanud inimesi elama*).

Scrutinizing the established hierarchy, other authors question its normative framework. Neoliberalism critical accounts turn the logic of non-intervening and self-responsibility on its head by pointing out how Estonian austerity policy produces additional savings at the expense of peripheries (*lisakokkuvõid ääremaade arvelt*) and how the project-based development strategy deepens peripheralization processes. They cast doubts to what extent centralization, contraction and reorganization three times^{xiv} show the desired results and compare the current focus on so-called centers of gravities (*tõmbekeskused*) to Soviet top-down centralization policies or to drawing lines on a map with a ruler^{xv}. The reference to the modernization attempts of “the soviet other” (Kay et al. 2012, 57) is used as a strategical argument against current trends in regional policy. It is questioned if project-based development fulfills actual needs or rather

creates situations where the money just has to be spend^{xvi}. Another strategy is to expose the materialism behind the common accusation that peripheralization is caused by the backwardness (*tagarlus*) of its inhabitants while the progress of the centers is the result of success orientation (*edumeelsus*). Consequently, building on post-materialism as desirable value orientation, the urban consumer society (*tarbimisühiskond*) is discursively subordinated to the rural coping society (*toimetulekuühiskond*). The norm rejection is supported by challenging the relevance of and benchmark against which peripherality is measured. Aware that discourses on peripheries also create “national definitions of deservingness and visibility of needs” (Kay et al. 2012, 61), the responsibility for peripheralization is discursively shifted back to the centers. It is proclaimed that regions are not lagging behind (*mahajäänud*) but were in fact left behind (*maha jäetud*) and that the future of peripheries is also a question of life and death for Estonianness^{xvii} or the country as a whole. Hence, fighting peripheralization is presented as the only liable alternative.

Frozen in time? De-historicization and strategic essentialism

The hegemonic, though strongly contested lagging behind discourse resembles a case of projecting urban-rural spatial differences on a temporal scale. This is accompanied by a de-historicization and exoticization of peripheries through the discursive threads ‘culturally peculiar’ and ‘being sealed off’. The inhabitants are portrayed as different (*teistmoodi*) and troublesome (*tülikas*), their culture as non-understandable (*arusaamatu kultuur*) and the place itself is characterized by historically lower living standards (*ajalooliselt madalam elatustase*). Furthermore, they are described as self-isolated (*eneseisoleeritus*), lacking tolerance (*tolerantsust puudu*) or being uninformed because (self-evidently) news reach the peripheries with delay^{xviii}. Hence, we find common colonial representation techniques subordinating the others to one’s own norms (Hall 1992).

This non-modern depiction is met by traditionalist discourses, emphasizing the authenticity of life on the countryside. In counter-discourses the ancient rural roots of Estonians and the role of rural areas for preserving heritage culture and an environmentally friendly traditional agriculture are put against the equalizing forces of globalization. By building up an image of authenticity on the existing orientalist and pre-modern representations, which is then mobilized for own purposes, this counter-discourse resembles a case of strategic essentialism (Jacobs 1996). It draws on a reversal strategy against rural othering in urbanized Soviet times that Kay et al. (2012), Moore (2006) and Rausing (2004) detect for Central Eastern European countries in general and the Estonian countryside in particular. Resurrected against nowadays’ centralization policy, the reference to ancient village communities (*muinasaegsed külakonnad*) is for example used to counteract a national amalgamation reform. Rejecting the core-periphery hierarchy altogether, it is moreover questioned why it would be so backward (*tagurlik*) and narrow-minded (*kitsa silmaringiga*) after all if Estonia(ns) would just be satisfied with their provincial status (*rahul oma provintsis*).

Politically dependent? Stories of incapacity and neglect

But peripheries are not only depicted as lagging behind and frozen in time, but also by their missing political capacity, relative unimportance and inflicted local democracy. By reducing the role of local governments to a question of political capacity, not multi-level governance or democracy, the centralization policy and political dominance by the centers are justified. This legitimization strategy is mirrored by the discursive threads ‘access’ to and ‘deficiencies’ of the technical and social infrastructure, ‘local democracy’ and ‘political decision-making’. The capacity (hence, reasons for existence) of local municipalities is measured against the yardstick of public services provision on the fields of education, especially schools and libraries, social and medical services as well as maintenance of public order. On the one hand, the high outward-migration and consequently missing revenue base (*tulubaas*) for the municipality is used to explain a lack in infrastructure, especially public transport and internet access. On the other hand, in a vicious circle, the outward-migration is ascribed to the same institutional thinness and incapacity of rural municipalities. Especially the impossibility to finance specialists^{xix} resulting in an unsatisfying service quality^{xx} are pointed out. Moreover, the political dependency of peripheries is legitimized by their relative unimportance as they represent only a small percent of the electorate^{xxi} and by the inhibited democracy due to missing political competition and persisting local conflicts.

The image of self-inflicted incapacity is counteracted by opposing it to narratives of powerlessness – or the impossibility to be capable – and neglect by the center. Resembling a case of self-victimization, peripheries and their inability to participate in political decision-making are compared to running them over with a road roller^{xxii}, an ungrounded reliance on the good czar^{xxiii} or to a dependence on the indifference of the central government^{xxiv}. In one case, the inequality in decision-making is inferred directly to an urban-rural divide: “We can think three times in which direction the life in rural areas develops when a city person voted by the majority of city people decides upon it”^{xxv}. The neglect is determined by lacks in infrastructure and vanishing public institutions. Due to this neglect the inevitableness of a center-periphery hierarchy is relativized by questioning why country people are treated as not being wholesome people^{xxvi} and demanding that the state must not run away from his people^{xxvii}. Additionally, reversal strategies emphasize the higher transparency (*läbipaistvam*) of local democracy. There are also several incidents of challenging the dependency and centralization itself, by pointing out for example that local governments have to be a

counterweight to Tallinn^{xxviii} or that the sub-/urbanization policy has resulted in a paradoxical situation (*paradoksaalne olukord*) where not only the service provision capacity of the peripheries but also of the places people move to (*kuhu nad kolivad*) is inflicted. Again, strategically referring to the Soviet time, it is questioned why it was easier back then to successfully protect one's environment and if the Estonian state was not founded to protect its people.

The need to have an East: Rural Peripheries as Internal Others?

The making of rural peripheries in Estonia was analyzed by applying post-colonial studies to post-socialist space. In linking peripheralization, decolonial and othering theories, a common conceptual framework was created and then combined with a critical discourse analytical approach. The analysis shows that peripheries are related to rural areas and subordinated to urban centers by representing them as lagging behind, frozen in time and politically dependent. Through objectification, stigmatization, de-historicization, exoticization and legitimization strategies, peripheries resp. rural areas are constructed as non-modern, underdeveloped and lacking capacity. In a complex intersection of centralized know-ledge production and self-colonization, the "lag discourse" (Koobak & Marling 2014, 339) is on the one hand locally internalized and on the other hand shifted from Estonia as a whole to rural space in specific.

Yet, as the analysis of subaltern voices proves, despite its hegemony the peripheralization discourse is not all-encompassing. The articles in *Maaleht* resemble a variety of counter-discourses, which range from (1) the reversal of the center-periphery hierarchy and its various connotations over (2) the shifting of responsibility back to the centers by opposing stories of decline and incapacity to stories of loss and neglect to (3) strategic essentialism by using established images for one's own purposes. As occasional cases of self-peripheralization, also these strategies stay within the established norm, trying to fight the system with its own (in some case literal) measures, which run the risk of being coopted again, as exemplified by the counter-counter discourses of peripheries as declining regions. Beyond that, the analysis demonstrates a set of counter-discourses that challenge the hierarchy itself. By critically scrutinizing the underlying values and success measurements of the neoliberal system, enumerating its shortcomings and undesirable side effects as well as de-problematizing the status as periphery altogether, they question the norm producing the hierarchy at the first place. Interestingly, the Soviet past as reference point is less used to degrade peripheries and more as counter-strategy by the peripheries themselves to discredit current centralization tendencies in regional policy. Even if centers try to shift the borders of Easternness to rural areas by denoting them as internal other, this image is contested, reversed and challenged in multiple ways.

Bio-note on the author

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- ⁱⁱ Siin polegi ju kusagil linnastuda
- ⁱⁱⁱ Eesti ongi tervenisti üks ääremaa
- ^{iv} Peab ääremaastumisega võitlema
- ^v Tallinna kontekstis on isegi Kopli ja Kalamaja mahajäänud piirkonnad
- ^{vi} Verest tühjaks jooksnud
- ^{vii} Kinnisvara turu halva seisu
- ^{viii} Masendav olukord ääremaal
- ^{ix} Noored kes vaevlevad igavuse käes
- ^x Pisivald, mis vegeteerib reeglina vaid hädapärase hakkamasaamise piiril
- ^{xi} Ametnike umbusk uute tehnoloogiate vastu
- ^{xii} Nagu põgeneks hirmsa õnnetuse eest
- ^{xiii} Provintsi staatusest välja rabelda
- ^{xiv} Koondumine, kokkutõmbamine ja kolmekordne reorganiseerimine
- ^{xv} Maakaardile joonlauaga jooni vedama
- ^{xvi} Raha tuleb ju ära kulutada
- ^{xvii} Eestluse elu ja surma küsimus
- ^{xviii} Ääremaale jõuavad uudised muidugi hilinemisega
- ^{xix} Pole spetsialiste võimalik palgata
- ^{xx} Nõutava tasemega teenuseid
- ^{xxi} Valijate hulgas nii väike protsent
- ^{xxii} Sõidetaks lihtsalt teerulliga üle
- ^{xxiii} Põhjendamatu lootmine Heale Tsaarile
- ^{xxiv} Sõltuda keskvalitsuste suvast
- ^{xxv} Mis suunas läheb elu maakolkas, kui selle üle hakkab otsustama linnarahva enamusega valitud linnainimene
- ^{xxvi} Maainimene ei olekski täisväärtuslik inimene
- ^{xxvii} Riik ei tohi rahva eest ära joosta
- ^{xxviii} Oleksid vastukaaluks Tallinna kesksusele