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The Countryside as a Space of Double Peripherality for Youth from Central and Eastern Europe

Abstract

Rural youth in Central and Eastern Europe (CEE) experience double (or multiple) peripherality. This phenomenon arises from the unique position of CEE countries in the European Union, the shared trajectory of their transformation – which disproportionately burdens vulnerable or previously marginalised groups – and the neglect of rural youth in development planning, including agricultural, rural development, and youth policies. This study explores the extent to which rural youth perceive and experience their own peripherality, how this perception influences their career aspirations, the role of schools and the quality of education in this context, their attachment to local communities, and the freedoms associated with EU membership. These questions were investigated through two international research projects, culminating in publications that address these themes.

Keywords: rural youth, transition countries, looping effects of peripheralisation

The concepts of peripherality and double peripherality have been integral to sociology since the 1970s, largely due to the theories of Immanuel Wallerstein. In his analysis of capitalism's history, Wallerstein noted that this economic system evolves at varying rates across different regions, resulting in

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significant inequalities. In the capitalist core, capital accumulates and enterprises that are both capital-intensive and innovative thrive. A strong state is established in these areas, allowing society to benefit broadly from economic growth. Conversely, the periphery primarily supplies the core with simple, unprocessed goods that require intensive labour rather than capital and innovation. This economic dependency limits the periphery's ability to negotiate favourable terms of exchange. Between these two extremes, intermediate areas emerge, exhibiting characteristics of both the core and the periphery. Wallerstein posits that peripheries can simultaneously depend on two competing core centres, thus introducing the concept of 'double peripherality'.

The authors of the book 'EU Citizenship Beyond Urban Centres: Perceptions and Practices of Young People in East Central European Peripheral Areas'¹ draw on Wallerstein's concept of double peripherality in their analysis of rural areas in Central and Eastern Europe. They argue that peripherality can be understood more broadly than Wallerstein initially suggested, encompassing not only geographical aspects (as Central European countries are situated in the geographic centre of Europe), but also developmental conditions, political representation, and the lack thereof. In this context, peripherality is a multidimensional phenomenon, reflecting both the external peripherality of Central and Eastern Europe within the European Union², and, on the other, 'internal peripherality', which manifests in varying rates and scopes of development within countries or the region as a whole. The authors identify developmental disparities, characterised by poorer economic conditions (such as GDP, income level, unemployment rates) and, more broadly, inferior material and non-material living conditions for the inhabitants.

From this perspective, the Central European countryside is 'doubly peripheral' because it differs from cities, particularly large urban centres, in

¹ Lorenz A. and Lisa H. Anders (eds.) (2023). *EU Citizenship Beyond Urban Centres. Perceptions and Practices of Young People in East Central European Peripheral Areas*, Ed. Springer, access: <https://link.springer.com/book/10.1007/978-3-031-29793-9>

² The continuing disparity in the positions of member states in this part of Europe is reflected, among other things, in the fact that only a few key positions in the European Union are held by people from Central and Eastern European countries, as well as in the relatively weak democratic mandate of representatives from these countries, due to low turnout in European Parliament elections in our region.

terms of living conditions and the pace of local development. Various aspects of exclusion intersect here, further intensifying processes of marginalisation, including political exclusion. This leads to consequences that Ian Hacking calls ‘looping effects’.³ According to him, overlapping marginalisation processes in various spheres elicit two types of reactions: individuals labelled as peripheral or marginal either adapt to this label by adopting the behavioural patterns expected of socially and politically excluded groups, becoming withdrawn and apathetic, or they reject such a label, often by excluding themselves or migrating from the area that has imposed this burden. Migration is selective in nature (brain drain), which triggers a slippery slope – growing demographic challenges diminish the prospects for infrastructure development and lead to a further decline in the quality of life.

The authors of the aforementioned work focus on rural youth from Central and Eastern Europe, who are victims not merely of double, but of multiple peripherality, as they find themselves on the margins of margins – that is, on the fringes of doubly peripheral communities. The initial question for the research team, whose members authored the book, was to what extent the double peripherality of rural areas and rural youth from Central and Eastern Europe might influence their perception of the European Union and their own rights and freedoms within it. The study also aimed to provide recommendations for decision-makers at local, regional, national, and European levels on how to prevent rural youth from this part of Europe from succumbing to peripherality. The underlying assumption was that the lack of civic engagement among young people, stemming from experiences of marginalisation, will have lasting consequences for the quality of democracy and the functioning of the European Union.

The study included young people from Poland, the Czech Republic, Slovakia, Hungary, and Romania. Four focus group interviews were conducted in

³ Hacking, Ian. 1995. The looping effects of human kinds. In *Causal Cognition: A Multidisciplinary Debate*, ed. Dan Sperber, David Premack, and Ann James Premack, 351–394. Oxford University: Oxford University Press, from: Rebecca Pates, *Peripheral Futurities. Emigration Plans and Sense of Belonging among East Central European Youth*, in: Astrid Lorenz and Lisa H. Anders (eds.), *EU Citizenship Beyond Urban Centers. Perceptions and Practices of Young People in East Central European Peripheral Areas*, Ed. Springer, Cham 2023, p. 25.

each country, supplemented by a small quantitative survey of the interviewees' school peers. The study focused on young people aged 16-17, and the interviews were conducted in communities with populations of 20,000–30,000 (small towns). These towns were selected because small towns offer upper secondary education (usually vocational), which is widely accessed by rural youth. Additionally, the study included six leaders of youth-focused projects initiated and financed by the EU. The research examined, among other aspects, what peripherality means for rural youth; how they perceive their citizenship in the European Union from the perspective of double peripherality; what the European Union and the rights of EU citizens signify to them; their views on the European Parliament elections; and how perceptions and practices related to European Union membership differ between countries.

This book summarising the research consists of three parts: a report on the youth research findings, a report on the study of organisations that activate and create opportunities for youth, and recommendations divided into those pertaining to regional, national, and European levels. The authors provide a detailed report and analysis of the youth research data, presented separately for each country studied. Here, we will summarise the findings in general terms.

Regardless of their country of origin, young people express significant dissatisfaction with their local environment. In all five countries examined, respondents highlighted a lack of educational, professional, and employment opportunities, inadequate public transportation, and often a scarcity of recreational facilities and leisure activities. This situation compels them to emigrate in search of better education and well-paid work. Whether planning permanent migration from rural areas (domestic or international), the respondents struggle to accept the living conditions available in these regions.

Moreover, many of them experience considerable uncertainty. For those wishing to emigrate, this uncertainty is tied to fears about whether such a move will enable them to achieve their aspirations and whether they will possess sufficient resources – social, material, and mental – to advocate for a change in their circumstances, given their awareness of the disadvantaged position from which they are starting. This group also strongly stigmatises those who refuse to migrate from the countryside: 'they are people with no future, stuck in the swamp' (as one respondent puts it) – all the more reason for their fear of potential failure. For those who decide to stay (or must re-

main), the dominant emotion is also fear of an uncertain future and a sense of abandonment.

Young people attribute the challenges faced in rural areas and the uncertainty about the future to the authorities of their respective countries and local decision-makers. The authors suggest that this may indicate a lack of explicit scepticism towards the European Union. However, the study reveals that the youth surveyed possess limited knowledge of the European Union and the rights and freedoms afforded to its citizens. They rarely receive information about EU initiatives aimed at including this demographic socially and politically. This gap stems from project-oriented activities – generally intended for a specific, relatively short duration – and the lack of organisational and financial stability of the entities responsible for these projects in EU countries. The authors argue that the potential for active European citizenship among young people in the dual peripheries of Central and Eastern Europe is currently underutilised. This is attributed to a lack of understanding of the EU itself and the ambiguity surrounding the concept of EU citizenship. They propose that giving it a ‘rooted and real’ character, alongside simultaneous educational and informational initiatives, could unlock this potential for active citizenship.

Given both the attitudes of young people presented in the book and the broader political processes occurring in Central and Eastern European countries, hopes for active citizenship within the European Union appear both premature and unfounded. The 2022 International Civic and Citizenship Education Study (ICCS)⁴ shows that young people in Central and Eastern Europe identify as European and take pride in living in Europe to a similar extent as their peers elsewhere in Europe. Young people from this region exhibit greater enthusiasm for their country’s membership in the European Union. However, this enthusiasm does not necessarily translate into a robust sense of identity; in Poland, Romania, Slovakia, Latvia, and Lithuania, young people are less likely than their counterparts in other countries to see themselves as citizens of Europe, and even less likely to perceive themselves as citizens of the world (the average for Europe is 78%; for these countries, the agreement with this statement is 73%, 72%, 71%, 73%, and 79%, respectively). This finding sup-

⁴ Wasielewska O. (ed.) (2023). *Młodzi w demokracji. Wyniki Międzynarodowego Badania Kompetencji Obywatelskich ICCS 2022* [Youth in democracy. Results of the International Civic Competences Survey ICCS], IBE Publishing House.

ports the authors' thesis that young people from Central and Eastern Europe are not particularly sceptical of Europe itself. The research presented in the book does not adequately address the fact that young people feel alienated by it. Despite their support for democracy as a political system, young people emphasise that their democratically elected representatives not only fail to represent their interests effectively but also do not meet their expectations, despite wielding excessive power compared to others. Young people from the 'new' member states are clearly more critical than their Western peers.

Around the same time, rural youth became the focus of interest for another research team, whose work culminated in the book 'Rural Youth at the Crossroads'.⁵ Here, as in the first, the authors examine the challenges faced by rural youth from several Central and Eastern European countries, including Serbia, Croatia, the Czech Republic, Hungary, Romania, and Russia. They also incorporate a historical dimension, which serves as an important element in differentiating the countries within the region. The authors note that although these countries are situated in Central and Eastern Europe, they have followed different paths of systemic transformation, which have progressed at varying paces. What unites them – regardless of their transformation paths – is a shared legacy of the political and economic peripheralisation of rural areas during the socialist period. This process has been exacerbated by the transformation and subsequent integration into the European Union. Acknowledging the region's internal diversity, the authors highlight the commonalities among them. They particularly emphasise that it is the most socially vulnerable who bear the brunt of the costs associated with transformation. Rural areas have been disproportionately affected by selective migration, loss of human capital, ageing populations, and the economic challenges posed by deindustrialisation, agricultural recession, and global economic integration. This combination of factors is generating new uncertainties in the rural landscapes of Central and Eastern Europe.

In both projects, researchers concentrated on rural youth. One reason for this focus is the already described dramatic socioeconomic situation and future prospects of this demographic. Another reason is that this group is often overlooked as a target for political action – youth problems are rarely consid-

⁵ Schafft, K. A., Stanić, S., & Horvatek, R. (2020). *Rural Youth at the Crossroads*. Taylor & Francis.

ered in agricultural policy and only marginally in rural development policy. Conversely, where youth policies are developed (for example, those related to their entry into the labour market), young people are treated as a monolithic group, with the specificity of rural areas largely disregarded.

As the authors argue, in post-socialist societies, the common denominator of the transition to adulthood is the erosion of relatively structured and predictable career paths. Youth socialisation takes place in an environment where the institutions, processes, and social norms that previously guided the transition to adulthood have either disappeared or are undergoing significant transformation. In rural areas, declining perceptions of quality of life, coupled with uncertainty regarding personal development paths and aspirations, as well as the lack of opportunities for their realisation, inevitably lead to increasing frustration among young people. This frustration is not alleviated by the openness of borders, prospects for mobility, and opportunities that, from their perspective, often seem unattainable. Such conditions create fertile ground for far-right nationalism and xenophobia, as well as anti-democratic tendencies – although this thesis is contested by the findings of Renata Horvatek (Chapter 4), who emphasises the diversity of political attitudes among rural youth. According to the authors of the discussed work, a remedy for these implications for democratisation and open societies is to foster a sense of prosperity and well-being among rural youth. Youth migration from rural areas is identified as a key determinant of future demographic changes in these regions and is likely to exacerbate issues related to social and economic development. Consequently, the research team focused not only on assessing the extent to which young people feel connected to their schools and communities but also on identifying actions that should be taken to enhance this connection and, ultimately, their sense of well-being, thereby reducing the risk of youth migration from rural areas.

Researchers examining the plans and aspirations of rural youth in Croatia (Sanja Stanić, Kai A. Schafft, Sanja Klempić Bogadi, and Sonja Podgorelec) highlight, on the one hand, the disparities within the country – specifically, the differing conditions in coastal and island regions, which largely depend on seasonal tourism, compared to those in the interior. On the other hand, they address the issue of gender differences in migration processes, a problem often overlooked in rural development policies, noting that young women are more likely to formulate migration plans. Furthermore, rural youth

express a willingness to migrate despite their strong ties to the local community, although this inclination is linked to the socio-economic characteristics of their respective communities. Objective socio-economic conditions, such as access to education, permanent employment, and the level of public transport, appear to be more significant than sentiment; however, this conclusion is not explicitly drawn in the study.

Similar findings apply to Czech youth, where rural youth perceive their life chances differently based on their place of residence – young people from border areas have different aspirations than those from the Prague metropolitan area. Czech researchers (Dominik Dvořák, Silvie R. Kučerová, Jaroslava Simonová, Petr Meyer, Zdeněk Kučera, and Jan Šmíd) provide additional insights into the situation of rural youth, emphasising that youth aspirations are influenced by both the broader social environment in which they grow up and the quality and type of education available. They point out that the organisation of the secondary education system makes vocational and technical education more accessible to rural youth, which limits their chances of pursuing higher education. Ultimately, the type of education received significantly influences the assessment of their life opportunities. Russian researchers (Dominik Dvořák, Silvie R. Kučerová, Jaroslava Simonová, Petr Meyer, Zdeněk Kučera, and Jan Šmíd) have reached similar conclusions, noting that the quality of education available to young people shapes their life choices. They highlight a paradox: while offering higher-quality education can enhance quality of life – potentially anchoring young people more firmly in their local communities – more effective educational practices also make opportunities outside rural areas more accessible, which may result in a greater outflow of young people. These aspirations, dependent on educational effectiveness, ultimately influence not only their transition to adulthood but also the future of rural areas. Similar conclusions emerge from research conducted in Serbia (Dušan Mojić, Irena Petrović, and Vera Backović).

Research by Hungarian (Tibor Farkas, Emese Bruder, Dóra Kolta, and Ilona Gerencsér) and Romanian (Tibor Farkas, Emese Bruder, Dóra Kolta, and Ilona Gerencsér) scholars corroborates the findings regarding the significant role of schools in shaping youth aspirations, as well as in fostering a sense of empowerment and assessing the likelihood of achieving their goals. Both studies examined Roma youth and how educational institutions may contribute to the perpetuation of social exclusion.

An intriguing addition to the volume is the text by a Vietnamese researcher Chi Nguyen, who presents the case of a village that, through administrative decision, became part of Hanoi. This change exacerbated feelings of marginalisation and inequality between Hanoi's old and new residents, while simultaneously reinforcing the educational system through reduced school autonomy. This, coupled with underfunding, deepened the gap between urban and rural youth. As in Central and Eastern European countries, schools profoundly influence the shaping of young people's life plans and assessments of their potential for full social inclusion.

The research results presented here were collected – unlike the first project described – using a variety of sources, including both primary (individual interviews, group interviews, questionnaire surveys, case studies) and secondary (statistical data, published research findings). Despite the diverse research methods and approaches, a relatively comparable picture of rural youth across the studied countries has emerged.

Both research teams confirm that rural youth – though diverse and not monolithic within their countries – constitute a community that is not only marginalised but also aware of its marginal position. Their coping mechanisms and perceptions of opportunities to reduce this marginalisation within their local communities, given the lack of systemic solutions that fail to address the specific needs of this group in youth and rural development policies, are influenced by the often limited socio-cultural resources of their families and the quality of education provided by rural schools. The cited works do not offer recommendations on how this latter fact can inform political or strategic solutions. Nevertheless, given the limited empirical evidence illustrating the challenges faced by rural youth in Central and Eastern Europe, it is essential to consider both of these works to understand the issue of the repeated peripheralisation of rural youth and the importance of initiatives aimed at fostering greater social cohesion, as well as the democratisation and openness of societies.