



## 'It's good to live in Järva-Jaani but we can't stay here': Youth and belonging in rural Estonia<sup>☆</sup>

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In the broader context of post-socialist transition and rural decline, we examine the everyday lives of young people in rural Estonia. We focus in particular on key places of belonging for youths and the practices and experiences through which rural young people develop a sense of belonging to their local places. Our aim is to identify links between the everyday context and broader changes influencing young rural lives in Estonia. The findings indicate that in contrast to the mostly negative portrait that the statistics paint of rural Estonia, a focus on the everyday level reveals significant places and practices which can provide encouraging and supportive bases for young people to negotiate and respond to global changes. In addition, the results indicate that it is fruitful to focus on the everyday context, as a more nuanced picture of continuities and discontinuities associated with post-socialist transition may be revealed.

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### 1. Introduction

The collapse of the Soviet Union marked the beginning of a rapid change in its former republics. After the long rule of the communist regime and the reliance on a planned economy and controlled societal life, most post-socialist nations have witnessed a swift and radical shift towards democratic government and a market economy. The extensive economic transformations and social dislocations that accompanied post-socialist transition have marked a 'fundamental reorganization' of the fabric of life (Smith and Pickles, 1998: 4–5).

Considering the extent of the transformations, it is not surprising that much research dealing with post-socialist transition has focused on the political and economic macro-structures of change (Musil, 1993; Sachs, 1994; Åslund, 2002). However, as Smith and Pickles (1998: 1–2) pointed out when comparing the influences of transition on different post-socialist countries, and as the case of Estonia presented in this paper illustrates, transition implies more than a 'relatively unproblematic implementation of a set of policies'. The starting point from which transition commenced was different for each nation (Smith and Pickles, 1998). Similarly, the outcomes of transition differ significantly by region (Van Hoven and Pfaffenbach, 2002), or even at the level of social groups

depending on, for example, gender (Hörschelmann and Van Hoven, 2003), ethnicity (Thelen et al., 2011) or age (Nugin, 2008). Nugin (2008), for example, illustrates that depending on their age, people in Estonia perceived and experienced the uncertainties created by post-socialist transition as either opportunities or risks. Similarly, Kay's article in this issue (Kay, 2012) discusses the ways in which age (in this case old age) intersects with experiences of vulnerability and social security in post-socialist rural contexts. Research by Hörschelmann and Van Hoven (2003) has shown that women in the former GDR experienced a particularly acute sense of disenfranchisement as a result of radical alterations in their social, cultural, economic and political positions after the unification of Germany. Therefore, as Hörschelmann (2002) has argued, the grand transition narratives may not do justice to the various ways in which people experience, negotiate and deal with transition in their everyday lives.

In this paper we focus on exploring the outcomes of transition, or 'actually existing post-socialism'<sup>1</sup> (Stenning and Hörschelmann, 2008: 314), as experienced and negotiated by young people in rural Estonia. We show that although large-scale processes of transition have placed rural Estonian youths in a vulnerable position, susceptible to social exclusion (Saarniit, 1999), their local everyday context provides young people with opportunities for belonging

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<sup>1</sup> This wordplay intentionally echoes the commonly used terms 'actually existing socialism' (Bahro, 1979) and 'actually existing/occurring transition' (Pickles and Smith, 1998).

and inclusion, as well as for negotiating and responding to the uncertain times. In doing so, we focus on key places of belonging for youth in rural Estonia. We analyse on which grounds and through which practices and experiences young people develop a sense of belonging to their local places and what impact these places, in turn, have on young people.

The paper starts with an overview of Estonia in transition, with a particular focus on the influences of broader changes on the living conditions of youth in rural Estonia. We will then explore how everyday places shape individuals' lives, and how a sense of belonging can be grounded in the 'everyday'. After introducing our research location, participants and methods of data collection, the paper focuses on key places and practices of belonging for rural Estonian young people.

## 2. Estonia and transition

Lugus and Hachey (1995) argue that Estonia has followed one of the most determined paths towards capitalist modernization of all the states of the former Soviet Union and Eastern Europe. Following independence in 1991, strong neo-liberal transitional strategies were adopted, with the establishment of the free-market economy being a 'strong (and only) priority of the ruling right-wing government coalition' (Trumm, 2006: 3; see also Unwin, 1998). Initially, a bewildering variety of new opportunities were created for people in terms of work, study and travel, for example. The economy, foreign investments and trade grew rapidly (World Bank, 2008). Compared to the conditions in other post-socialist countries, Estonia has therefore often been characterized as a 'success story' (Panagiotou, 2001; Lauristin, 2003; Gylfason and Hochreiter, 2009). This success is further emphasized by Estonia's inclusion in the European Union in 2004 and the Euro zone in 2011 (European Commission, 2011). However, opportunities to benefit from the choices and options as well as the risks associated with new economic, political and social conditions were not distributed equally. The process of transformation has enabled some social groups and geographic areas to prosper relatively rapidly, while forcing others to fall into poverty (see also Pickles and Smith, 1998), thus causing significant inequalities between the so-called 'winners' and 'losers' of transition (Unwin, 1998; Saar, 2008). Large differences in the standard of living and competitive ability between Estonia's urban and rural regions illustrate the increasing social and spatial differentiation within the country (Estonian Human Development Report, 2009; Statistics Estonia, 2010a). In 2008, for example, 60% of Estonia's GDP was produced in Harju county (out of a total of 15 counties) and its urban core, Estonia's capital city Tallinn (Statistics Estonia, 2010a; see also Unwin, 1998).

Rural areas are often considered among the greatest 'losers' of the post-socialist transition. Statistics indicate that people in rural areas of Estonia have fewer opportunities for education or work, and are restricted in mobility due to the limited availability of public transport (Estonian Human Asset Report, 2010; Estonian Ministry of Agriculture, 2007). Unwin et al. (2004) describe the effects of transition on rural life as 'overwhelmingly negative' (p. 121). The human cost of the collapse of rural economies and life is evidenced by high levels of alcoholism, deserted buildings and settlements and in the once cultivated landscape, rapidly being 'recolonised by scrub and woodland' (Unwin et al., 2004: 121–123; see also Gorz and Kurek, 2000).

In view of such developments, it is not surprising that urban living has provided a significant pull factor, resulting in the depopulation of many rural areas. The national migration trend in Estonia is out-migration from the rural periphery and small towns to regional urban centers, in particular into the two biggest cities – Tallinn and Tartu and their hinterlands (Statistics Estonia, 2009).

In 2010, more than half of the population of Estonia was living in Harju<sup>2</sup> and Tartu counties, with 30% of the population residing in Tallinn (Statistics Estonia, 2010b; Tooming, 2010). Young (and ambitious) people are among the most active movers from rural areas to bigger towns and cities (Statistics Estonia, 2009). In 2007, for instance, nearly 40% of young people in Estonia changed residence, and it was the rural periphery of counties that lost the largest number of young people (Statistics Estonia, 2009; see also Jõeveer, 2003). In other post-socialist countries similar tendencies can be noted. In particular young people, as White (2010) and Walker (2010) have argued, see migration as the only option left for making the most of the new opportunities, increasing their social status, or sometimes simply for survival (see also Walker and Stephenson, 2010).

Young people who migrate to the cities may find new opportunities, but they are also exposed to new risks as they enter a 'dynamic yet equally unreliable space' (Habeck, 2009: 200). Those young people who remain behind in rural areas, however, experience different risks arising from the lack of income opportunities, facilities and recreational outlets. Rye (2006) termed the outcome of rural decline and changes for youths the 'rural dull'. In some areas, this has led young people to indulge in pastimes such as alcohol, smoking, or (unprotected) sex (Estonian National Institute for Health Development, 2004).<sup>3</sup>

Whereas the lack of opportunities evidently influences young people's lives in rural Estonia, in this paper we emphasize that opportunities and meaningful places do exist in the rural context, albeit on a smaller scale. It is precisely these local places, in which people spend their *daily lives*, that have the potential to support individuals by providing an anchor point and a basis for belonging in changing times (Fried, 2000; Bonnes et al., 2003). For example, in their research on youth citizenship in Moldova, Abbott et al. (2010) found that whereas youths in Moldova were disengaged from the formal economy and political system, they were socially integrated in their local community, which gave them a sense of belonging in Moldovan society in general. They argue: 'Those [youths] who lacked even this kind of support [at the local level] were particularly unfortunate' (2010: 583). Everyday places of belonging can thus become especially relevant for rural young people and their well-being.<sup>4</sup>

## 3. Everyday context and the sense of belonging

Our everyday places, places where we are 'first of all and most often' (Felski, 1999:29), are places where most of our experiences unfold and where the greatest part of our social interaction occurs. By means of experiences, activities and interaction, and with time, a sense of belonging to particular locales develops (Rubenstein and Parmalee, 1992). A sense of belonging implies the feeling of being included and of being a part of a place or group (Pretty et al., 2003). In addition, belonging involves a certain fit with and being acknowledged as a member in a place and by the other members (Benedicto and Moran, 2007).

A sense of belonging is associated with many positive outcomes for individuals. Osterman (2000) states that young people who experience a sense of belonging in their everyday context have a 'stronger supply of inner resources,' they 'perceive themselves to

<sup>2</sup> Tallinn is located in Harju county.

<sup>3</sup> Rural youths around the globe face similar problems (see, for example, Atav and Spencer, 2002; Leatherdale et al., 2007; Valentine et al., 2008).

<sup>4</sup> See also Nakhshina (2012) in this special issue, who shows how specific everyday practices and attitudes to local resources mitigate aspects of identity and belonging in rural Russia.

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