

Working across the East-North divide: experiences from a research project on European fringe areas

Laura Assmuth

Professor of Social and Public Policy, University of Eastern Finland

Abstract: The paper presents a study (2007–2010) on transformation processes of peripheral rural communities in four countries in the northern and eastern Europe. The comparative study was based on the participating researchers' long-term ethnographic fieldwork in Finland, Estonia, Russia and Ukraine. The research group approached rural transformation from the perspectives of gender and age, perspectives which have been less used in studies dealing with the so-called transition countries than in western Europe and elsewhere. The researchers also questioned the validity of a rigid division between "countries-in-transition" and "Western countries" by comparing cases and localities across this divide, on thematic grounds such as the rural dwellers' relationship to the European Union, sustainable livelihoods, and relationship between the state and its peripheries. All rural locations studied share a peripheral position, geographically and/or economically, in relation to their national centre, but the national and international contexts of which they are part are very different. However, the European Union is a key factor that affects rural people's lives and life prospects in all the research areas.

The general research question was: how do people who live in peripheral rural areas react and respond to recent changes in their lives brought about by post-socialism and/or European Union membership? In accordance with the decline of agriculture and its possibilities to offer a livelihood in rural areas, people are faced with serious questions concerning their future in their home area. The reverse of the downsizing of the welfare or socialist state is the activity of people themselves, and the initiative they take. What is the role of culture and local traditions in this? What kinds of guidelines does the local way of life offer for living in the periphery? What are the dimensions of well-being in the peripheral rural localities studied?

Keywords: European Union eastern border, peripheral rural areas, rural futures, ethnography

Global and local at the peripheries of eastern and northern Europe

The research project *Rural futures: ethnographies of transformation from Finland, Estonia, Ukraine and Russia* (Academy of Finland, 2007–2010) explored local perspectives on transformation and globalization in four

different northern and eastern European countries, both inside and outside the European Union. The research team, led by the author, purposefully took a grass-roots view of the complex processes of transformation by asking: how do people who live in rural fringe areas, far from political and economic centres, experience the huge changes in their lives brought

about either by the end of socialism or participation in EU institutions and policies, or both? In the local people's own view, how does the future look like in the villages and for the villagers?

The study discusses the interaction of macro and micro, global and local, by focusing on life strategies of communities, families and individuals in six different peripheral contexts. We argue for the utility and importance of studying peripheral areas to reveal and make explicit the everyday workings of the state (cf. Donnan & Wilson 2003). The presence and role of the state in the peripheries are changing dramatically in all the contexts studied. To take Finland, the most stable and affluent of our country cases as an example: previously the Finnish state considered it important to keep peripheral areas settled and provide the same standard of living there as in other parts of the country. Currently it is debatable whether the states will continue to provide services in their peripheries. How will this affect people: are they ready to stay in their home villages or move to central villages or towns with services? Is the local way of life in familiar surroundings more important than functioning services? Thus, we also took seriously the existence of a local way of life and a local identity, a sense of belonging to one's location.

The comparison of transformation processes in peripheral rural communities was based on the participating researchers' ethnographic fieldwork in six different contexts: northern Finland, eastern Finland, south-eastern Estonia, north-western Russia, northern Russia and south-western Ukraine. The team looked at rural change from the perspectives of gender and age,

perspectives that have been less used and developed in studies dealing with the so-called transition countries than is the case in western Europe and elsewhere. Such perspectives can yield important new insights about local circumstances and prospects in former socialist contexts as well. We also explicitly questioned the validity of a rigid division between "countries-in-transition" (Estonia, Ukraine, Russia) and "Western countries" (Finland) by comparing localities across this divide (see de Haan 2000; Assmuth 2005), on thematic grounds such as the rural dwellers' relationship to the European Union and Europe; meanings of a border location; well-being and identities; sustainable livelihoods; in- and out- migration; and relationship between the state and its peripheries.

Research locations within European regions, North and East

All the locations studied share a peripheral position, geographically and/or economically, in relation to the national centre, but the national and international contexts of which they are part are very different. Northern and eastern Finland are two different fringe areas in an established western democracy with a high standard of living. In Finland, government regional policies have been implemented since the 1960s to prevent and fight regional disparities in wealth, services and opportunities. Still, there is widespread migration from the outlying rural areas into cities and towns and high levels of un- and underemployment among those who have

stayed. Northern and eastern Finland are both culturally rich and symbolically important regions in the Finnish context and local tourism and tourism-related activities have benefited from this.

South-East Estonia is a poor region in a post-Soviet state which has had a remarkable but very uneven economic growth since independence in 1991. Government efforts to alleviate regional disparities and rural poverty have been few. Estonia's membership in the EU (2004) has meant an influx of investments from the cohesion and regional funds. Portrayed frequently as exotic natural, cultural, linguistic and religious "Other" in the national context, South-East Estonia has a lot of potential for tourism despite out-migration. The region's proximity to state borders facing Russia and Latvia could become an asset in development, instead of another burden of a peripheral location.

The study regions in Russia are the Nenets Autonomous *Okrug* (Region) in the Russian North and multi-ethnic villages close to the border with Finland in the Leningrad district, including Karelian Isthmus. The two regions share the post-Soviet reality of a sharp decline of earlier key social and economic structures. In comparative terms, however, the Russian study contexts show interesting continuities: the Russian North continues to be the mythical treasure trove exploited and valued for its raw materials (oil, natural gas) as it was in Soviet times, and the Karelian Isthmus still bears the mark of a neglected, restricted border region next to capitalist Finland. Leningrad district shared the fate of many areas where the Soviet policy of forced industrialization was conducted. The

economic map of the late Soviet period shows the existence of key industries developed in the region: forest and wood processing industries, arms factories, power plants. Simultaneously agriculture, organized in the form of *kolkhozes* (collective farms) and later *sovkhozes* (state farms), was not prosperous, particularly in comparison with the southern regions of Russia and Ukraine. Leningrad district was not regarded as promising in the sphere of agriculture because of its location in the northern part of Russia. These two factors seriously disturbed the development of areas beyond industrial towns.

South-western Ukraine near the Romanian border is part of the famous black earth area of Ukraine, once an important producer of wheat, maize, sunflower oil, meat, wine, fruits and vegetables. Villagers with the most diverse ethnic identities, Ukrainian, Russian, Moldavian, Bulgarian, Roma and Gagauzi, make their living on private farms and plots or as members of cooperatives. Due to favourable climate conditions villagers of this area have a much wider spectrum of opportunities in agriculture than rural people often have in rapidly changing circumstances. The Ukrainian province felt the influence of industrialization and urbanization processes during the Soviet times. However, the Soviet version of industrialization caused a "converse effect": it destroyed small provincial townships which had been self-regulating social organisms and this led to a ruralisation of the area. Thus an important part of the economic structure of the Ukrainian province has been disrupted.

The European Union is a key factor that affects rural people's lives and life

prospects in all the areas studied. Finland has been member of the EU since 1995 and membership has brought far-reaching changes to the Finnish countryside in the form of new agricultural, rural, regional and fringe area subsidies, controls and programs. Estonia joined the EU in 2004 and before that had already received substantial amounts of support from the organization. EU requirements have also forced Estonia to start paying at least some attention to its growing regional disparities. A clearly negative effect of EU membership on Estonia, at least in the short term, is international emigration, and its influence is biggest in poor rural areas. Whole villages are becoming empty as rural Estonians seek temporary or permanent employment in richer member states. Since 2004 Estonia's eastern borders are also the EU's new borders with Russia. Further, with the 2004 eastern enlargement, Ukraine became a neighbour of the EU, and the question of whether to continue to depend and rely on Russia or "turn westwards" has become a crucial question in Ukrainian society and politics. From the EU's point of view, Ukraine is a central player in the *New Neighbourhood Policies*. It is important to encourage a "westernizing process" of Ukraine and thus prevent Russia's possible intervention into Ukrainian politics and economy. Russia is an extremely important neighbour and strategic partner of the EU, but at the same time the direction of its social, economic, political and legal development is a matter of great concern. Research questions arising from these actual macro-level situations include: How do local inhabitants in the different peripheral contexts understand Europe? Where do

the borders of European-ness and Europe lie? Who is European, who is not? Can Russians ever be or become Europeans? And what about Nenetsia, in the North of European Russia, where do its people feel they belong?

The theoretical framework: having, loving, being in the periphery

As our key analytical tool to understand village communities under study, we have used the framework developed by the Finnish sociologist Erik Allardt, who compared people's experiences of well-being and happiness in the Nordic countries in his classic study *Att ha, att älska, att vara* ('Having, loving, being') (1975). According to Allardt, an individual's well-being consists of three interlinked dimensions: material (having), social (loving) and personal-cultural (being). Having is about basic human needs like housing, food and an adequate standard of living; loving is about close mutually supportive social ties and networks; and being is about personal fulfilment, and development as a person. In our village study, Allardt's framework helps us to understand why residents in some relatively well-off rural areas describe their home as 'a dying village' or 'a village without hope' whereas inhabitants of some objectively poorer areas feel much more optimistic about their future and the future of their village. The 'loving' and 'being' dimensions are the significant factor in these different perceptions. In short, there are different opportunities for social and personal well-being, self-fulfilment and

the development of one's capacities in villages or other types of rural communities (cf. Allardt 1973). Although Allardt's framework was originally designed for and used in a survey, it can be applied equally well to a qualitative, ethnographic approach. The insights of his 'having, loving, being' framework are still highly topical and valid in research and public discussion into

the relationship between well-being and happiness on the one hand and to economic growth and sustainability on the other. In the study contexts all three dimensions of welfare, 'having, loving and being' are needed if a peripheral community and a local way of life are not only to survive but to flourish (Figure 1) (Uusitalo & Assmuth 2013).



Figure 1. Having, loving, being: neighbours helping each other in south-western Ukraine. Photo: Eeva Pääkkönen.

Far from the centres

The study villages are all located in different fringe areas, in the northern and eastern Europe. The terms in which such places come to be defined by outside agents show that peripherality is not just about remoteness, being situated on the fringes and far away from the centres, but also about being (considered) poor and backward. Indeed, since a periphery only exists in relation to a centre, its qualities are constructed in opposition to those of the centre, and the defining criteria become negative (Knudsen 1992). However, in the globalised world the successful future of peripheral regions does not rest solely or even primarily on material resources like jobs, funds and subsidies. On the one hand, a material (natural) resource like forests or lakes can have multiple meanings and uses. On the other hand, a non-material entity like local identity can be seen and understood as an important resource in its own right, not as an impediment to development.

As an anthropologist I feel it is of the utmost importance to study and take seriously local understandings of peripherality; in fact, different levels and kinds of counter discourses to the dominant view are evident in all the study locations. For example, when I complained to a villager during my first fieldwork trip in 2008 about how far the Koli village in North Karelia was from the capital city Helsinki (and consequently how arduous her travel had been), the villager quickly challenged me by ironically turning the issue the other way round: 'Yes, Helsinki is indeed far from here; isn't it unfortunate that you have to live so far

from Koli'. Another way to deconstruct the meaning of remoteness is to turn it into a series of positive, desirable conditions, namely a good quality of life, peace and quiet, beautiful unspoiled nature or an independent way of life. Such ideas and meanings of peripherality and geographical remoteness can also be turned into effective tools for tourism; the imaginative and apt tourist motto of Salla municipality in Finnish Lapland is 'Salla: in the middle of nowhere'. Likewise, regional actors in eastern Finland have tried to change the negative association of peripherality that closeness to the Russian border entails into a positive opportunity for cross-border tourism and have been quite successful in this regard. Many ordinary people living in peripheral areas have become keenly aware of the unique subjective worth of their culture and location. They have realized that local traditions, landscapes and livelihoods constitute valuable resources. At the same time, products and services based on the notions of 'local' increasingly form the backbone of entrepreneurial activities that allow people to make a living in the periphery (Figure 2).

I end with a reminder of the importance of Allardt's three dimensions of welfare in a local context: 'having, loving and being' are all needed if a peripheral community and a local way of life are not only to survive but to flourish. The village is integrated with the world, but at the same time living its own local way of life. Aspects of globality have been integrated into local life for a long time. Rural areas are in no way immune to transformations. Continuity overlaps with change, global is intertwined with local. Today, people living in remote areas are



Figure 2. Having, loving, being: Ice-fishing village event in Salla, northern Finland. Photo: Tuula Tuisku.

part of the world in motion, are affected by global flows and witness the ways in which ‘the global’ works in a local context.

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