



*Routledge Advances in Sociology*

# **RURAL YOUTH AT THE CROSSROADS**

**TRANSITIONAL SOCIETIES IN CENTRAL EUROPE  
AND BEYOND**

Edited by

Kai A. Schafft, Sanja Stanić, Renata Horvatek,  
and Annie Maselli



ROUTLEDGE



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# Rural Youth at the Crossroads

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Featuring chapters by an international group of scholars and academics, *Rural Youth at the Crossroads* discusses the challenges and contexts facing youth from rural communities in countries with legacies of socialism undergoing social, political, and economic transition.

The chapters employ a variety of sources and approaches to examine rural youth outcomes and the well-being and sustainability of rural areas. The book focuses particularly on career and educational goals, the often contradictory relations between rural schools and communities, majority-minoritized group relations, community engagement, and political attitudes. Individual chapters examine these questions and dynamics within Croatia, Czechia, Hungary, Romania, Russia, Serbia, and Vietnam. In total, the volume represents a unique and timely comparative discussion of the relationship between youth and rural development within transitional societies, and the challenges and opportunities for enhancing the well-being and sustainability of rural communities.

Aimed at informing strategies to revitalize rural social space, the book is targeted towards social scientists with interests in sociology and rural sociology, demography, education, youth development, community/regional development, rurality, public policy, and identity formation in transitional contexts. As such, the book will have international appeal to researchers, educators, and policy-makers in transitional countries, and to those interested in these topics, regions, and communities.

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Edited by Kai A. Schafft, Sanja  
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# Introduction

## Rural youth and societies within post-socialist and transitional contexts

*Annie Maselli, Kai A. Schafft, Sanja Stanić,  
and Renata Horvatek*

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This book is motivated by questions regarding the social and developmental circumstances of rural youth in politically and economically transitioning countries. Born out of an ongoing collaboration between scholars and researchers in Croatia and the United States, this volume primarily focuses on the social upheavals that brought democratic change to citizens of Central Europe and beyond, who had been living under state socialism for half a century. Democratic transition has not been a particularly smooth process, as countries face challenges associated with the economic integration of the European Union (EU), rising nationalism, demographic aging, out-migration, and the continued economic stagnation of rural areas (Bernard, Contzen, Decker, & Shucksmith, 2019; Bieber, 2018; Rupnik, 2016).

There is some amount of scholarly debate regarding whether “post-socialism” continues to be a meaningful term given the several decades since the collapse of communism in Central and Eastern Europe, the diverse political and economic trajectories of countries in the region, their adoption of neoliberal governance, and their incorporation into multinational organizing bodies such as the EU and the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) (Chelcea & Druță, 2016; Müller, 2019). We are sympathetic to these arguments but note that the legacies of socialism—and post-socialism—stubbornly remain in the form of gendered norms, political and economic peripheralization, spatial inequalities, uneven democratization, and varying patterns and incidences of corruption and clientelism (Chelcea & Druță, 2016; Gille, 2010; Gradska & Morales, 2018; Haramija & Njavro, 2016; Nagy & Timár, 2017; Rupnik, 2016; Vuković, 2019).

While some scholars have focused their work on youth development within post-socialist and transitional contexts (e.g., Kovacheva, 2001; van Hoorn, Komlosi, Suchar, & Samuelson, 2000), rural youth within Central and Eastern Europe have largely been outside the scope of recent research and scholarly focus (see, however, Chakhaia, Andguladze, Janelidze, & Pruidze, 2014; Ćikić & Petrović, 2015; Nugin, 2014). This volume seeks to address the paucity of research in this area and better understand how rural young people respond to the challenges of transitioning rural communities. Specifically, our motivating question is how rural youth have responded to recent socioeconomic, demographic, and political shifts within transitional countries, and what this means for the future of rural people in these places.



The chapters included in this volume, written by scholars from a wide range of disciplinary and social science backgrounds, are similarly motivated by our shared concerns regarding the roles and fates of rural societies.

How do schools and communities support young people as they develop plans for adult lives? As Nugin (2014) notes, “in addition to the complex dilemmas of contemporary youth, the transition to adulthood in rural areas also involves negotiation between geographic rootedness and mobility” (p. 61). What, then, are the potential intersections and disconnects between rural education and rural development, especially if the implicit or explicit messaging received by young people is that success lies elsewhere beyond the (rural) home community (Corbett, 2020)? How do rural youth negotiate the crosscurrents of identity; place-attachment; transitions to adulthood; the economic calculus of shifting local, regional, national, and indeed global labor markets; and educational, occupational, and residential aspirations? Focusing on Croatia, Czechia, Hungary, Romania, Russia, Serbia, and Vietnam, this volume explores rural youth identities and aspirations, institutions that shape such aspirations (e.g., educational institutions), and how these aspirations in turn may shape rural futures. As youth are considered to be a “barometer of social change in the village” (Šušar, 1988, p. 23), rural youth aspirations and orientations can provide further insight into how local contexts create or undermine possibilities for civic engagement and democratic citizenship (Tereschenko, 2010), and what they may mean for the continued well-being and socioeconomic sustainability of rural places (Figure 0.1).



Figure 0.1 Map of focus countries

Source: Map developed by Annie Maselli, The Pennsylvania State University

Given the increased role of right-wing nationalism across Central and Eastern Europe, questions of political identity and engagement are also salient given evidence of youth political marginalization (Gvozdanović et al., 2019; Sloam, 2014), the turn towards conservatism and radical right politics in new democracies (Bluhm & Varga, 2018; Bustikova, 2019; Schafft & Ferkovics, 2018), the spatial dimensions of these phenomena (Mamonova & Franquesa, 2020), and the implications for the continued political and institutional integrity of the EU (Börzel & Schimmelfennig, 2017). The role of the rural vote in Brexit and the rural-associated “yellow vest” protests in France provide recent examples of the need to understand the relationship between rural underdevelopment and youth aspirations and (dis)enfranchisement,<sup>1</sup> and how such underdevelopment may fundamentally shape national, regional, and global sociopolitical and economic outcomes (Brooks, 2019; Carreras, Irepoglu Carreras, & Bowler, 2019; Jetten, Mols, & Selvanathan, 2020). As an introduction, we begin by discussing the processes of social, political, and economic transitions undertaken by the countries within this volume and the implications for young people. We conclude with a brief overview of the chapters that follow.

## Changes and challenges in transition countries

While socialism<sup>2</sup> in Central and Eastern Europe did not provide possibilities for the same degree of political participation or individual freedoms as in Western Europe, it provided citizens with important social benefits, ensuring a relatively good standard of living with free education, health care, affordable housing, employment security, consistent income and solid pensions. By the middle of the 1980s, European socialist countries found themselves in the midst of an increasingly pressing economic crisis caused by internal economic circumstances, the transition from planned and centralized production, and increased debt service to multinational lenders. Assessing capitalism from a distance, often with idealized expectations, many people living in socialist countries hoped that by the act of rejecting socialism, their countries would quickly experience increased wealth

1 The 2016 presidential election serves as an additional example within the US context. That is, it is increasingly clear that patterns of spatial underdevelopment, youth aspirations, development of political ideology, and regional, national, and indeed *global* political outcomes are interconnected in ways that had previously been underestimated (Rodden, 2019).

2 Although throughout the chapter we use the word *socialism*, we want to acknowledge that the countries that are the focus of this volume were under a *de facto* communist regime during the period between the end of World War II and 1989, when the USSR collapsed and the Berlin Wall was demolished. Czechia, Hungary, and Poland were under the heavy influence of the USSR, whose military forces ended attempts in both Hungary and Czechia to gain independence from Soviet control. On the other hand, Croatia and Serbia were part of the Socialist Federal State of Yugoslavia that was independent of the USSR and was more open to influences from the West. Yugoslavia was one of the founders of the non-aligned movement, that attempted to maintain neutrality as tensions grew between the US and the USSR during the Cold War.

and heightened living standards. In fact, many of the challenges and contradictions of Western capitalism were reproduced in transitioning countries, including rising inequalities and the dismantling of social safety nets that had been in place for generations (Havel, 1999; Kalb, 2019).

The primary burden of economic transformation principally affected the lower economic classes (e.g., working people, peasantry, pensioners, and the unemployed), while new social strata of political and economic elites emerged (Tomić-Koludrović, & Petrić, 2007). The wealthy increased their capital by appropriating newly created material values (Malenica, 2007),<sup>3</sup> and the main winners, represented by the technocratic strata of the social elite, took advantage of privatization as an unprecedented means of capital accumulation, turning public property into private hands. Thus, emerging patterns of social stratification became readily apparent and societies became increasingly divided into a wealthy minority elite, a modest middle class, a majority just able to survive, and those facing direct poverty, a condition non-existent under socialism (Chelcea & Druță, 2016; Mahutga & Jorgenson, 2016; Malenica, 2007; Županov, 2002). Instead of the expected high standard of living that capitalist countries appeared to exhibit, many citizens of transition countries found themselves under chronic economic strain and increasing social and spatial inequalities (Kalb, 2019; Mojić, 2014; Nagy & Timár, 2017; Županov, 1995).

## Rural society in socialism and post-socialism

While similar patterns may be seen across national and regional contexts, neither socialism nor post-socialist transitions across the countries represented in this volume have by any means experienced the same trajectories over the past several decades. Periods of intense metropolitan expansion either marginalized and/or assimilated many rural spaces across the global landscape as Nguyen describes in her case study of Hanoi, Vietnam, and the surrounding rural areas (Chapter 10). In countries such as Hungary, Farkas and colleagues (Chapter 8) describe how late socialism was marked by urbanization and the demographic emptying out of rural areas (see also Brown & Schafft, 2002; Dumitrache, Zamfir, Nae, Simion, & Ilinca-Valentina, 2016). Meanwhile, vast areas of rural Russia face severe depopulation, land abandonment, and emptying out of villages (Ioffe, Nefedova, &

3 According to Malenica (2007), the social structure of Croatian society consists of three basic layers: (1) political and economic elite (political nomenclature, capitalist class, managers); (2) middle class (small entrepreneurs, craftsmen, professionals [judges, attorneys, physicians, university teachers, senior military officers, scientists, artists, managers without a permanent contract, etc.]), lower professionals (educators, nurses, social workers, technical and humanistic intelligence), and lower middle classes (officials and administrators, salespeople); (3) working class (unqualified, semi-qualified, qualified and highly qualified workers in industry, construction, transport, tourism, trade, farmers), semi-employed (industrial workers—farmers), pensioners, unemployed, and homeless persons (2007).

Kirsten, 2012; Wegren, 2016; see also Zvyagintsev et al., Chapter 6), a phenomenon that has distinct regional effects and profound impacts on community institutions, including rural schools. Wegren (2014) notes that the rural population in Russia declined from 55.3 million in 1960 to 37.2 million in 2013, with a projected continued decline for an anticipated loss of an additional 5 million rural residents between 2014 and 2030. Rural communities in formerly socialist societies have experienced different trajectories based on the general level of country development, economic policy, politics, ideology, and above all, by state policy towards rural development (Hodžić, 2006). Rural decline in transition countries should therefore be understood in the context of the different systems and policies that had shaped rural development for nearly half a century, along with industrialization within urban areas.

Hungary, Czechoslovakia, and Romania were, to varying extents, under the direct influence and regulation of the Soviet Union as de facto satellite states, which, along with Bulgaria, Poland, and Albania of the Warsaw Pact, formed the “Iron Curtain.” Croatia and Serbia, on the other hand, being a part of Yugoslavia, existed under so-called liberal communism, (Boduszyński, 2010) which meant greater economic freedom and opportunities to travel (including to Western Europe), while still heavily controlled by the state apparatus. The transition to democracy and marketized economies for the Warsaw Pact countries (Hungary, Czechia, and Romania) involved a somewhat protracted but comparatively uneventful accession to EU membership. For Croatia and Serbia, however, the first five years of transition were marked by internecine military conflict, ethnic cleansing, and intense struggles over regional political and geographic control. The results left citizens of both countries (and in particular within rural areas) in conditions of isolation, displacement, and utter economic and social disarray. The social, political, and economic legacies of these conflicts continue to shape rural life and well-being in that region of Europe.

Rural Russia, meanwhile, after the collapse of the Soviet Union, instituted a number of reforms to marketize its economy which included decollectivizing agriculture in the rural areas. This resulted in the disbanding of collective farms, with land divided among former collective employees. Without financialization or any real support for smaller-scale agricultural producers, land was bought up by outsider investors who initiated large-scale private agricultural production. Bankruptcies and poverty spiked, and by the late 1990s, the income of rural residents was only half that of Russian urbanites. In 1999, more than 73% of rural residents in Russia lived on below subsistence-level incomes (Mamonova & Visser, 2014). These developments increased social and spatial inequalities and led to a pronounced rural exodus as people left for better opportunities in urban areas (Zvyagintsev et al., Chapter 6).

Finally, Vietnam, the focus of Nguyen’s contribution to this volume (Chapter 10), remains a communist regime to date. However, its *Doi Moi* economic reforms moved the country from a centrally planned to a market-oriented economy, and several decades of political, economic, and institutional transition have

arguably made Vietnam a political economic hybrid, combining a one-party bureaucratized socialist government strongly resistant to political liberalization with a planned market economy (London, 2014). Vietnam, nonetheless, experiences many of the same challenges of countries in Eastern and Central Europe, including corruption, rural-to-urban labor migration, growing spatial inequalities, and an underdeveloped civil society (Croissant & Lorenz, 2018; Pham, Do, Bui, & Nguyen, 2018; Roberts, 2010; Tromme, 2016).

While generalizations must be cautiously offered, the well-being—and in some cases, the very existence—of many rural communities in post-socialist and transitional spaces are in serious jeopardy. Faced with severe economic hardships during the global economic recession of 2008, Croatia, similar to other countries in transition, was faced with critical problems of rural and agrarian underdevelopment, a process described in literature as the “ruralization of rural areas.”<sup>4</sup> In some regions (e.g., Slavonia, in eastern Croatia) the agrarian sector has undergone significant contractions, while rural populations have aged and shrunk in size. Rural out-migration in Croatia occurred at higher rates after the accession into the EU, a scenario other transition countries represented in this volume experienced as well (Tomić & Taylor, 2018).<sup>5</sup>

In 2016, more than 9 million working-age EU citizens of lived in a country other than their home country—and mostly in other EU countries. Not surprisingly, many of the more recent countries to join the EU also had the highest percentages of working-age residents living abroad. Out of 28 countries, Romania had the third highest percentage, Hungary the fifth, and Croatia the eighth (Oğuz, 2020). In the past decade, Hungary has experienced record emigration levels, a consequence of Hungarians seeking economic and other opportunities outside Hungary’s borders. The International Organization for Migration reports that in 2013, 7.4% of Hungarians between the ages of 18 and 49 lived abroad, a percentage which has since continued to increase (International Organization for Migration, 2018). This has led to severe labor shortages within the Hungarian economy, a factor that was behind recent legislation passed, derided as the “slave law,” allowing corporations to demand as much as 400 hours of overtime from workers and deferring payments for up to three years (Alderman & Santora, 2019). Ironically, during this time of pronounced Hungarian emigration, Hungary’s ruling party politically used the refugee crisis in 2015 as political leverage to resist EU refugee resettlement mandates, stoking anti-EU and anti-foreigner

4 This can be seen through the demographic, social, and economic deterioration of villages and rural areas. In literature, urban-rural relations are described through “ruralization of urban areas,” “urbanization of rural areas,” and “ruralization of rural areas.” The last occurs as a result of the young population, when they reach working age, leaving their villages, because the economic and other situations in rural areas are worsening.

5 These processes have been uneven, however. For example, Šimon (2014) has documented processes of counter-urbanization—net rural in-migration—in Czechia. See also Farkas, et al.’s discussion, Chapter 8.

sentiments (Kallius, Montrescu, & Rajaram, 2016). Clearly, EU accession has had not only significant and sometimes contradictory economic and political implications for accession countries, but demographic ones as well, that certainly have shaped how youth—rural and otherwise—make sense of their options and opportunities as adults.

## Rural youth in transition

This volume approaches “youth” less in relation to a fixed chronological age than as a highly fluid socially and culturally constructed category. In the chapters that follow, “youth” as a category varyingly spans in age from teens through the 30s. “Youth” is understood in relation to and in transition between age and generation-related categories, in which individuals are able to make particular choices about their own futures (Worth, 2009). In the process, they negotiate webs of critical life transitions, notably those from study to work, living with parents to creating their own families, and more widely, from childhood to adulthood (Corijn & Klijzing, 2001). This transition is understood not as a single act but as a dynamic process—a set of interrelated movements and changes in education, employment, family, and housing—embedded within particular social, spatial, and historical contexts (Schoon & Silbereisen, 2009). The lives of rural youth within transition countries are marked by both urban and rural pushes and pulls over and across space in a “complicated interplay between mobility and fixity,” (Milbourne & Kitchen, 2014, p. 326–327; see Bell & Osti, 2010; Bock, Osti, & Ventura, 2016).

Both rurality and the uncertainties of political and socioeconomic transitions directly shape the calculus by which young people understand the structure of opportunity, the value of education, their relation to place, and how they make sense of what their future may hold. This is especially the case when the spatial peripherality of rural places is matched by political and economic peripheralities. In a study of five Eastern European countries, Chykina and colleagues (2016) find that young people whose parents have completed college and are wealthier than average are more likely to have formulated post-secondary educational plans than their peers. Given that poverty and lower educational attainment tend to concentrate in rural areas, this puts rural youth at a particular disadvantage. Even beyond these structural factors, the study finds that within rural contexts, parental educational attainment appears to have a far weaker influence on rural youth educational aspirations (Chykina, Chung, & Bodovski, 2016; see Chakhaia et al., 2014). While the results are correlational and should be interpreted with caution, they remain suggestive of the ways in which spatial differences may reproduce inequalities.

In Bosnia and Herzegovina, a country situated between Croatia and Serbia, about 50% of the population lives in rural areas or in small settlements where the poverty rate is 80%, compared with a 20% poverty rate among urban populations (Mijanović, 2007). While rural-specific data are not available, Turčilo and colleagues (2019) show that increasingly large numbers of

youth plan to leave the country, rising from 49.2% in 2015 to 61.8% in 2018. The motives for migration are predictable: a better quality of life (47.6%), better job opportunities (20.8%), higher income (16.8%), and better education (7.7%). Meanwhile, according to Eurostat data from 2012, in Romania, 45.5% of the population lives in rural areas (Harpa, Moica, & Rus, 2016). However, since 1989, Romania's rural population has been steadily decreasing and aging (Guran-Nica & Rusu, 2015), with a steady out-migration of rural youth. Research conducted in Romanian villages shows, first and foremost, that migration is a taken-for-granted dimension of the new social organization of labor. For decades, household economies rested on commuting to work in urban industrial centers and subsistence farming at home, while new migration to external labor markets has replaced internal mobility to domestic industrial jobs (Horváth, 2008, p. 783).

While this volume is not solely focused on migration, at the same time, disparate structures of opportunity across the rural-urban continuum, coupled with the global integration of national economies and neoliberal reform, means that the youth transition to adulthood is increasingly reshaped by the economic imperatives of global capital. Further, and specifically in the transitional contexts we discuss, global capital has systematically positioned rural people and places at consistent disadvantage. Under such circumstances of life insecurities, demographic changes, and democratic and institutional deficiencies, we seek to understand youth "choice" and the way such choices are framed, constrained, structured, and presented given particular geographic, social, class, and cultural contexts (Nugin, 2020). Moreover, when a locally embedded community anchor, such as the rural school, can function to reinforce the "'mobility imperative' or the idea that a successful life requires a move out of the community, probably into some form of urban space either for education, employment, or both" (Corbett, 2020, p. x), how is the purpose of rural education understood? And, in turn, what do these questions imply for the well-being and continued sustainability of rural people and places?

## Chapter summaries

This book features the work of regional scholars and academics intimately familiar with the countries at the center of their inquiries. In many cases, but not all, their work has had little exposure outside of national and regional circles of academics. This volume not only provides an opportunity to illuminate this work to a broader audience but also provides an important comparative perspective as the contributors employ a variety of disciplinary perspectives, methodological strategies, and empirical approaches.

The first several chapters have a primary focus on the Croatian context. In Chapter 1, Stanić and Schafft examine the residential aspirations of rural young people in Split-Dalmatia County, an area characterized by widely divergent rural contexts. Rural communities within this region are located on the islands,

dependent on both seasonal tourism and agriculture; coastal areas, which are highly developed with through-roads connecting major cities such as Split and Dubrovnik; and mountainous inland communities, which are isolated and lack a strong tourism base. Using recent youth survey data, the authors consider how place as a variable shapes youth future plans. Results suggest that, at least in Split-Dalmatia County, a continuation of rural emigration towards urban centers in Croatia and beyond is to be expected in subsequent years. Further, these patterns appear to be highly gendered, an insight that bears further attention, in particular with regard to rural development policies and socioeconomic opportunities for women. Young people, despite their thoughts about leaving home areas as adults, have generally positive attitudes and associations towards both their local communities and schools. The authors discuss these findings, particularly with regard to the implications for rural and youth development and the perception of opportunity structures across multiple rural contexts.

In Chapter 2, Klempić Bogadi and Podgorelec provide a historical overview of migration processes within Croatia, from the socialist period to the recent transitional period, focusing on the migration of rural youth. Migration processes within and away from Croatia in the past decades have significantly impacted the contemporary demographic status of the country. The authors use demographic, geographic, and sociologic scholarship coupled with statistical data to analyze the consequences of various types of migration on the uneven demographic and social development of rural and urban areas. The authors argue that depopulation and aging will remain the main determinant of the future demographic development of rural areas and Croatia as a whole, pointing to numerous potential problems in social and economic development.

In Chapter 3, Horvatek examines political attitudes and engagement among students attending rural and urban schools. Drawing from recent literature related to political participation of youth in post-socialist countries, Horvatek examines factors associated with the political socialization outcomes in rural schools, in particular. Evidence from the 2016 International Civics and Citizenship Education Survey shows that attitudes, aspirations, and political engagement of youth in rural and urban schools still differ significantly, but rural students are not a homogenous group and in many respects show similar variations of attitudes and political engagement as their urban peers. While preconceived notions associated with rural spaces are usually perceived as nativist, and conservative, with youth less motivated to be civically engaged, this study challenges some of these assumptions.

In Chapter 4, Lončar, Šuljug Vučica, and Bandalović examine sociocultural capital among rural youth. Using the same survey data as Stanić and Schafft (Chapter 1), they examine school and community attachment among rural youth through the lens of sociocultural capital, examining young people's connection to their local community and school, feelings of security, and finally their commitment to their local communities. They detect modest gendered differences, with females in particular showing stronger school-valuing both at the time the survey data were gathered, as



well as in thinking about the characteristics of desired future adult residence. However, stronger locational effects were discerned, with students from both inland and island communities reporting strikingly higher levels of school and community attachment than students residing in coastal communities. Overall, this discussion suggests the importance of youth perceptions of school and community, the significance of place, and sociocultural capital as an important potential asset in enhancing the well-being and sustainability of rural places in Croatia and elsewhere.

Chapter 5 shifts national focus as Dvořák and colleagues investigate rural youth aspirations, attitudes towards education, and how these aspirations and attitudes are embedded within and shaped by variations in social and educational contexts across the Czech countryside. The authors lay out three goals using a multi-method approach. First, using quantitative socioeconomic indicators, they describe and provide a social and institutional context for educational provision of education across rural spaces in Czechia. They discuss the regional differentiation of rural space, emphasizing the divergent conditions between the interior and borderland areas, identifying the social, economic, and political tensions that play out across core and peripheral areas. They then describe the Czech secondary education system as a means of suggesting that, in part, the environment shapes adolescent aspirations and decision-making and, in particular, the tracking mechanisms that slot young people into technical/professional or vocational academic tracks. Last, they use qualitative data to illuminate the career decision-making processes and aspiration formation of rural 15- to 16-year-olds. In so doing, they compare two areas—an isolated rural area located near the Czech borderland and a second region within the broader metropolitan reach of Prague—from the standpoint of rural youth, their perceptions of their current school, their home communities, and their broader life satisfaction. They find that youth in more rural areas are disproportionately dissatisfied with their life situation and often express a desire to live in a more urban setting. This is particularly the case with rural youth not born in rural areas. Some study participants identified local conservative political orientations with underdevelopment and backwardness, making their positive identification with rural places more difficult. Overall the chapter suggests how youth aspirations and identities are embedded within the specificities of rural place and how the specificities of place may shape educational trajectories.

Chapter 6 turns to rural Russia as Zvyagintsev and colleagues examine the characteristics of high- and low-performing schools. The chapter first provides a historical context of the persistent spatial inequalities that differentially shape opportunities for rural youth, with a specific focus on the differences in academic outcomes and opportunities for rural and urban graduates. The last section of the chapter describes a qualitative study conducted in rural schools in two differing regions of the Russian Federation: the Tomsk Oblast region and the Republic of Sakha (Yakutia). The chapter identifies both effective and ineffective school

practices used by schools and educational leaders within such communities, noting that in the context of rural depopulation and economic decline, “effective” education that enables young people to access urban opportunities may simply hasten the abandonment of rural villages. Their analysis strongly suggests that compensatory strategies provided by schools can make a crucial difference in a student’s individual life trajectory.

In Chapter 7, Mojić and colleagues examine the case of Serbia and the rural youth transition to adulthood. This chapter discusses how the changes brought by the political and economic transition have also introduced new uncertainties for most of the population in terms of education, employment, and overall social position. These uncertainties have been especially severe in the countryside, given the rural population’s lower economic, cultural, and social capital in relative comparison to the urban population. Drawing upon empirical data from a study conducted in 62 Serbian municipalities using a sample of 1,627 respondents, the chapter analyzes the structural context of Serbian rural youth at the beginning of the third millennium. This chapter finds that post-socialist Serbian rural young adults’ orientations and aspirations can be understood as key indicators of the complex interplay of structure and agency within their life course transitions.

In Chapter 8, Farkas and colleagues examine the factors that determine aspirations of rural youth in Hungary and the influences of local governments and schools. They discuss how selective patterns of geographic mobility and immobility exacerbate micro-scale spatial economic differentiation, especially as Hungary faces net out-migration, a continuous decline of the working-age population, and the concomitant rise in the number of economically inactive citizens. Following national-level descriptive statistical analyses, they provide a case study examining the connection between the role of a rural school, local attempts to preserve the ethnic identity of the original town (the *Bunjevci*), and the simultaneous social exclusion towards local Hungarian Roma. The case study illustrates the complex ways in which racial and ethnic identities can work to alternately build and/or undermine the sustainability of rural communities.

In Chapter 9, Czesznek and Schafft provide a further perspective on rurality, education, and Roma youth in Romania. This chapter discusses the historical context for Roma education policy formation, especially in connection with the transition from socialism in the early 1990s and the accession to the EU in the 2000s. They then turn to a discussion of two recent studies examining how national policies are enacted within rural settings, drawing from two data sources. The first source includes interviews with rural educators working directly with Roma students. The second source are reports compiled by school mediators, paraprofessionals who provide a link between the school and community, to help increase student educational outcomes and reduce school attrition. They find that educators, none of whom were of Roma background, tended to frame their understandings of Roma disadvantage and educational outcomes as a consequence of behaviors and cultural practices of Roma students and families. School mediators, the majority of whom were of Roma ethnicity, tended to frame their understandings of Roma

student outcomes as a consequence of structural disadvantage. The study suggests that “culture of poverty” perspectives held by educators constitute an important element in reproducing disadvantage and exclusion of Roma students.

Nguyen’s Chapter 10 departs from Central and Eastern Europe to examine youth development in Vietnam. Responding to political and socioeconomic changes that led to the dissolution of the Soviet Union, Vietnam transformed itself from a centralized to a market-oriented economy. Transforming the traditional culture and society of rural communities, this transition blurred the social, cultural, and spatial boundaries between rural and urban areas. Rural-urban assimilation rhetoric has risen as a center of public discourses since 2008 when the borders of Hanoi, the capital, were extended significantly and merged with several nearby rural districts. Using a case study of Xuan Ha (a pseudonym), a rural high school located in one of the newly added districts, Nguyen explores the school and community’s changes after 2008. Drawing on 27 interviews with 55 school leaders, teachers, and students of seven non-urban high schools, this study addresses how Hanoi’s 2008 administrative boundary extension influenced the sense of place, educational opportunities, and socioeconomic and cultural values of youth, schools, and communities in the non-urban, newly added districts. The findings reveal that, while the extension of Hanoi’s administrative boundaries has not replaced the symbolic meanings of Hanoi, it has created rapid economic and sociocultural changes in rural communities and simultaneously delayed school improvement. These factors have shaped how youth think about their home places and make decisions about their post-secondary education and career opportunities, as well as how school leaders practice and overcome challenges inherited from their geographic locations.

Rural space has often been treated as an undifferentiated non-urban “other,” socially and spatially homogenous and containing populations that are often understood as anti-modern with politically conservative leanings, and with little agency—often the “losers” within larger social, political, and economic processes (Brown & Schafft, 2019; Kay, Shubin, & Thelen, 2012). Without denying the reality of how social and spatial inequalities intersect, our hope is that these chapters help to suggest the diversity of rural experience, as well as the way in which rural life is in turn embedded within a diversity of cultural, historical, and institutional circumstances. As well, we hope to suggest rural youth as not only agentic in their own right, but also a critical element in the future well-being and sustainability of rural areas in transitional societies.

## **Conclusion**

Just as rurality occupies the spatial margins of the global metropolis, it also all too often occupies the social, political, and economic peripheries. This marginality is further reflected in the scholarship focused on rural issues, which are frequently understood as marginal to the main disciplines to which these studies belong. Rural areas remain under-prioritized, under-resourced, and misunderstood—plagued by

inefficiencies that create persistent social and economic lags, especially when compared with urban spaces. These perceptions directly strengthen already existing social divides along economic, political, and spatial lines. Rural studies, and certainly the chapters contained within this book, concern the lived experiences of significant proportions of national populations and concern the fates and welfare of entire regions.

While rural space and national context are heterogenous, many of the broader challenges we describe in this volume have marked similarities elsewhere. Rural areas across and beyond transition countries have disproportionately struggled with selective out-migration, loss of human capital, aging rural populations, and economic challenges associated with deindustrialization, contractions in the agricultural sector, and global economic integration (Bock et al., 2016; Brown & Schafft, 2019; Čikić & Petrović, 2015; Corbett, 2020; Makkai, Máté, Pirisi, & Trócsányi, 2017; Tomasik & Silbereisen, 2012). This web of factors creates new uncertainties across transition regions in rural areas. As Mojić (2014) argues, in post-socialist societies, a common thread across the transition to adulthood is the:

disappearance of relatively strongly structured and predictable paths of life transitions . . . youth socialization is taking place in conditions where institutions, processes and social norms that previously used to channel transition in the world of adults now vanished, or they are also in the process of substantial transformation.

(p. 211)

While the open borders of the EU create new mobilities, networks, and opportunities, once coupled with economic strain exacerbated by spatial inequalities and the failed promises of Western capitalism, these dynamics create fertile ground for exclusionary and anti-democratic sentiments (e.g., Schafft & Ferkovics, 2018; Varga, 2014). The past decade has seen disturbing increases in far-right nationalism and xenophobia, as well as anti-democratic tendencies. Youth will be forced to inherit and confront these challenges, as the implications for democratization, the fostering of open societies, and national economies are clear. Consequently, rural youth aspirations, the perceptions of opportunity (dis)associated with particular space, and the degree to which young people feel attached to their schools and communities serve as critical indicators for the well-being of rural people and places.

As this volume was being finalized in the spring of 2020, the world was hit by the COVID-19 coronavirus pandemic. While preliminary data suggest that many countries in Central and Eastern Europe have so far fared relatively well compared with their Western neighbors with regard to overall infection numbers and

rates<sup>6</sup> (Walker & Smith, 2020), the longer-term social, demographic, and economic impacts (as well as the potential effects on rural communities) will likely be profound. These events will deserve close attention in the years ahead, especially considering the uncertainties regarding international mobility (labor and otherwise), economic impacts, shifts in workplace standards and conditions, educational access, and possibly new forms of rural gentrification, as affluent movers leave urban residences to take advantage of temporary or permanent refuge in more socially isolated rural places.<sup>7</sup>

We hope that this volume will spur debate and discussion, while offering new insights for scholars, policy-makers, and rural development practitioners interested in strategies and programs to support rural youth, rural revitalization, and regional development. Understanding the circumstances under which rural youth come to make sense of their positions and possibilities in the world, specifically within the intersection between social and spatial inequities, will be critical for understanding democratic transitions and the future well-being of rural people and places.

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6 As of June 25, 2020, the European Centre for Disease Prevention and Control reported 1,529,484 confirmed cases of COVID-19 in Europe, with the most cases in Russia (606,881), the United Kingdom (306,862), Spain (247,086), Italy (239,410), and Germany (192,079). By contrast, Croatia reported (2,388) cases; Hungary, (4,114); Romania, (24,826); Serbia, (13,235); and Czechia (10,777). Even accounting for the differences in population size between countries in Eastern and Western Europe, of the countries listed here, the infection rates in Western European countries ranged from 2.3 (Germany) to nearly 5.3 cases per 1,000 (Spain). Of the Eastern European countries listed, infection rates ranged from about 1 person per 2,500 individuals in Hungary, to about 4.2 cases per 1,000 persons in Russia. See: [www.ecdc.europa.eu/en](http://www.ecdc.europa.eu/en).

7 The *Washington Post* and other media have reported on this phenomenon in the US in relation to the COVID-19 pandemic. Urban-to-rural movement as wealthy urban residents leave cities for rural areas to flee the virus has caused tensions, especially as rural dwellers fear not only housing shortages and gentrification, but also the increased risk and spread of the pandemic (Fisher, Schwartzman, & Weissenbach, 2020).

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## Conclusion

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