



Studying European margins in the illiberal turn: a spacio-normative approach

Sandra Fernandes & Andrey Makarychev

To cite this article: Sandra Fernandes & Andrey Makarychev (2019) Studying European margins in the illiberal turn: a spacio-normative approach, *Journal of Contemporary European Studies*, 27:4, 389-393, DOI: [10.1080/14782804.2019.1643705](https://doi.org/10.1080/14782804.2019.1643705)

To link to this article: <https://doi.org/10.1080/14782804.2019.1643705>



Published online: 17 Jul 2019.



Submit your article to this journal [↗](#)



Article views: 293



View related articles [↗](#)



View Crossmark data [↗](#)

ARTICLE



Studying European margins in the illiberal turn: a spacio-normative approach

Sandra Fernandes^a and Andrey Makarychev^b

^aDepartment of International Relations and Public Administration, University of Minho, Braga, Portugal; ^bJohan Skytte Institute of Political Studies, University of Tartu, Tartu, Estonia

ABSTRACT

The aim of this special issue is to look at challenges to the EU and NATO and their relations and policies with both member states and neighboring countries, in particular, how recent developments contribute to the new dynamics of center–periphery relations in a wider Europe and the space of Euro-Atlantic institutions. We stem from a need to understand in what sense weaker countries today might be central to European governance, security and identity. What is a matter of utmost interest for the contributors to this special issue is the question of how countries that are (perceived as) non-central and thus weaker try to present and position themselves as belonging to Europe’s core, especially in security domains. Inspired by the concept of marginality developed by Noel Parker and a group of his colleagues – as part of post-modernist/post-structuralist scholarship in the sociology of international relations – we move the concept further on by expanding the empirical base for the scholarly expertise on centrality and marginality. In the context of the illiberal turn, we test two main hypotheses. First, we claim that the core/margins relationship is not unidirectional, and margins are increasingly capable of reshaping Europe in one way or another. Secondly, we argue that the phenomena of centrality and marginality can be conceptualized as both normative and spatial concepts.

KEYWORDS

Centrality; marginality; comparative analysis; space; normativity

Europe is undergoing serious transformations that involve all European countries. In the last decade, many conflictual phenomena have erupted in the continent and put serious pressures on what was perceived as achieved stability and prosperity since the Second World War and the end of the Cold War. From the EU perspective, internal and external crises have come to a paroxysm with the 2016 Brexit and the massive inflows of refugees. On the North Atlantic Treaty Organisation (NATO)’s side, in the aftermath of the annexation of Crimea there is a need to reassure countries of the Eastern flank. This new environment is a serious challenge to the EU and NATO and their relations and policies with both member states and neighboring countries.

The aim of this special issue is to look at how recent developments contribute to the new dynamics of center–periphery relations in a wider Europe and the space of Euro-Atlantic institutions. From a realist perspective, centrality is determined by the distribution of material power capabilities; the liberal perspective suggests to look at the institutionalization processes securing margins’ convergence towards the core. However, the current changes have elucidated new, more nuanced and less academically studied facets of centrality and marginality as complex and under-researched phenomena that leave open important questions. How, for instance, shall we explain a ‘paradoxical centrality of peripheralised subjects’ (Hörschelmann et al. 2019, 5), exemplified, in

particular, by a non-EU and a non-NATO country – Ukraine – appearing nevertheless to be central in terms of security dynamics for the whole Europe? How to explicate that Greece, a relatively weak EU member state, was a source of influence on and changes in the governance of Eurozone? Or how to interpret Hungary's bid for centrality in Europe by means of actively portraying itself as the gate of Europe (a center) in face of the refugee inflows?

We start from a need to understand in what sense weaker countries today might be central to European governance, security and identity. As Bertrand Badie (2014, 2016) put it, it is not possible anymore for the powerful states to rule in a 'concert' exactly because of the power of the weak. Yet the notions of strength and weakness are contextual and depend on the structure of the dominant system of meanings.

Usually, two sources of weakness are given primary attention in geopolitical scholarship – size and location. In other words, being small and peripheral seems to be, in a traditional understanding of space, two major explanations of actors' disadvantages in the international scene. However, a more nuanced look at both concepts might significantly change this reductionist perspective. First of all, the juxtaposition of the two criteria – of size and location – might give us a complex set of four different role models:

- (1) large countries that are central to the existing political order, such as France and Germany in/for Europe;
- (2) large countries that are overwhelmingly perceived as either peripheral or/and inimical to Europe's core (Russia or Turkey);
- (3) small countries that are located at Europe's fringes, like Estonia or Portugal;
- (4) small countries that are centrally located (Switzerland), are deeply integrated with Europe's core (Luxemburg) or are centers in their own right (Vatican).

What is a matter of utmost interest for the contributors to this special issue is the question of how countries that are (perceived as) non-central and thus weaker try to present and position themselves as belonging to Europe's core, especially in security domains. The papers collected in this issue apply different methodological approaches to center–periphery relations which might shed light on redefinition of relations that have an impact on security perceptions in each specific case, and on governance of European security in a more general sense.

Many of the contributors were inspired by the concept of marginality developed by Noel Parker (2008) and a group of his colleagues, as part of post-modernist/post-structuralist scholarship in sociology of international relations. From this perspective, the key characteristic of the margin, as opposed to structurally disadvantageous periphery (Weissenbacher 2018), is in-between location: margins are in a sense simultaneously 'in' and 'out'. As opposed to peripheries, margins might (re) negotiate their belonging to the space controlled by 'their' core and demand advantages for loyalty, bearing in mind that there is always an alternative to their current 'regime of belonging'.

Being highly sympathetic with this general approach, we, however, deem that at least three points deserve to be tackled. First, the idea of marginality was empirically tested on a rather limited number of cases that include Nordic Europe (as a region), Poland (as a country) (Makarychev 2010, 299–315), and Pskov (Makarychev 2005, 481–500), Kaliningrad, Gibraltar, and Jerusalem (as cities). To move the concept further on we definitely need more illustrative examples and case studies, and this issue is meant to expand the empirical base for the scholarly expertise on centrality and marginality.

The second note is more conceptual: in Parker's interpretation marginality mostly remains a spatial characteristic, and is not necessarily related to the normative foundations of EU's political subjectivity that became a particularly prominent issue in the context of the current debate on the transition from the liberal to a post-liberal international order. Within the frame of this discussion, the European core is usually associated with a set of normative characteristics – from principles to values – constitutive for the post-Cold War European identity-in-the-making. The accession criteria, known as Copenhagen criteria, resume the core normative set and include 'stability of institutions guaranteeing democracy,

the rule of law, human rights and respect for and protection of minorities; a functioning market economy and the ability to cope with competitive pressure and market forces within the EU; ability to take on the obligations of membership, including the capacity to effectively implement the rules, standards and policies that make up the body of EU law (the “*acquis*”), and adherence to the aims of political, economic and monetary union. For EU accession negotiations to be launched, a country must satisfy the first criterion.’ (Eur-Lex n.d.)

Within the normative interpretation of the well-researched process of social and cultural construction of relations of centrality and marginality (Vincze, Bartha, and Virág. 2015) some key spatial notions might turn normative. In particular, distance can be reinterpreted not as a matter of pure geography, but rather as a matter of compliance (or a lack of thereof) with EU regulations and principles. By the same token, for countries with multiple identities, such as Estonia (national, European, Euro-Atlantic, Baltic, and Nordic simultaneously), the identification with external poles of influence and power is not a matter of geography, but rather of cultural and – again – normative belonging. Of course, marginality strategies always include renegotiation, rearticulation and resituation of conditions for this belonging, which in many cases might have practical effects: thus, Estonia’s predilection for embracing Nordic – rather than Baltic – identity implies a symbolic association with a group of countries that might be more EU-skeptic and US-wary (Parker 2002, 359, 372) than Estonian mainstream attitudes.

Thirdly, the concept of marginality, as introduced in the academic debate by Parker, Joenniemi and Browning, was a post-modernist part of the post-Cold War liberal hegemonic discourse open to interpretations of political space ‘beyond sovereignty’, with the margin being treated ‘as an exception to a modernist conception of territorial politics’ (Browning and Joenniemi 2007, 7). Within this logic, quite popular in the 1990s and the 2000s, it would be fair to anticipate that ‘margins have most to gain precisely by playing on a postmodern discourse of marginality ... In contrast, telling more modernist discourses of marginality will likely be unhelpful to the margin’ (Browning and Joenniemi 2004, 708).

Nowadays, with the debates prompted by the shift towards a post-liberal international order, the question is whether the previous conceptualizations still hold, or might need some readjustments. Arguably, the much discussed post-liberal turn might be seen as a peculiar combination of re-modernization of spatiality, on the one hand, and the continuing post-modernist progression, on the other. For instance, the phenomenon of ‘small states’ imperialism’ existing in political discourses of Belarus, Slovakia, Montenegro (Fabrykant and Buhr 2017, 103–122), and Hungary might be viewed as re-actualization of some basic concepts of modernist *Realpolitik*. Yet in the meantime, a growing self-positioning and self-promotion of Europe’s margins as defenders and protectors of the entire Europe (in its conservative and traditionalist understanding, of course) re-articulates – perhaps paradoxically – the idea of core’s dependence on margins, rooted in a post-modernist theorizing.

Against this backdrop, the illiberal momentum in Europe implies the extension of political space for EU-skeptic identities that challenge the dominant normative core and are eager to modify it. Ultimately, the prospective – and still hypothetical – post-liberal international society might blur the concept of the core as a normatively dominant center of Europe, which promises less certainty and more discursive struggle over the idea of Europe in the nearest future. In this context of discursive re-signification of Europe, margins become increasingly visible, and employ different strategies – from reimagining Europe as a space of revived national sovereignties (Hungary, Poland, Italy) to politically investing into preserving/maintaining the liberal understanding of Europe (Slovakia, most of the Baltic and Nordic states, as well as Portugal). By the same token, non-EU margins in Eastern Europe and the South Caucasus – and most notably Ukraine and Georgia – wish to join the core from geographically peripheral positions through taking normative commitments and associating themselves – both symbolically and, when possible, institutionally – with the EU and NATO.

In this context, there are two main hypotheses we test in this special issue. First, we claim that the core-margins relationship is not unidirectional, and margins are increasingly capable of reshaping Europe in one way or another. Secondly, we argue that the phenomena of centrality and marginality can be conceptualized as both normative and spatial concepts, for which the table below might serve as a general guidance.

Table 1. Spacio-normative approach.

	Spatially central	Spatially marginal
Normatively central	Germany, France	Most of the Baltic and Nordic states, Slovakia, Portugal (within the EU) also Ukraine, Georgia and Armenia (outside the EU)
Normatively marginal	Right-wing parties (AfD, Rassemblement National -former Front National)	Hungary and Poland (within the EU), Armenia and Russia (outside the EU)

What stems from this vision is that EU-supported liberal international order is grounded in the double centrality – both spatial and normative – of France and Germany. In the meantime, there are influential political parties in these countries that wish to detach them from EU's normative core, while simultaneously safeguarding France's and Germany's geopolitical prevalence in Europe. When it comes to actors located at EU's margins, two major groups might be singled out. In the first one, we place EU member states in the Baltic–Nordic Europe that sustain and invest in EU's normativity, and non-members (such as Ukraine and Georgia) that consider themselves belonging to Europe and wish to be accepted in this capacity not only symbolically, but also institutionally. A different group is constituted by non-central EU members whose political leaders intentionally and consistently dissociate themselves from EU's 'normative power' and therefore relegate their countries into a normatively marginal category that, however, aspires to become central with the anticipated decline of Brussels' rule.

The cases collected in this special issue might be instrumental in bringing new dynamics into this scheme. More specifically, the contributors identify a number of 'couples', i.e. countries that might be compared with each other in terms of either past legacy that they share, or – which is of even greater interest and importance – common agendas. These countries might be EU member states (such as Portugal and Estonia, or Czech Republic and Slovakia), as well as actors external to the EU (for example, Ukraine and Georgia). By singling out these pairs we open up new perspectives for comparative analysis with the purpose of better understanding of how two different countries might tackle similar issues defined politically, economically, culturally or in security categories. Therefore, we intend to scrutinize different patterns of centrality and marginality, and different policies of identification with Europe as 'imagined' political community, which implies a redefinition of the notions of inclusion/exclusion, and bordering/de-bordering in Europe.

Thus, Czech Republic and Slovakia, making a single state only two decades ago, now find themselves facing a set of common challenges related to the consequences of the refugee crisis, the rise of right-wing, Euroskeptic populism and pro-Russian inclinations. *Aliaksei Kazharski* discusses a self-marginalizing tendency in the Czech political discourse about Europe, which is different from a more pronounced EU-optimism in the neighboring Slovakia. *Sandra Fernandes* and *Andrey Makarychev* explain how Estonia and Portugal, two geographic edges of Europe, transform their marginality resources into a set of policy tools aimed at close normative association with the set of rules and principles central for the EU and NATO as dominant institutions in European and Euro-Atlantic spaces. The (perhaps, unexpected) comparison of Portugal and Estonia is grounded in their policies of escaping political and normative peripherality through attaching themselves to European and trans-Atlantic institutions and the concomitant principle of solidarity. *Marko Kovačević* unpacks policies of Croatia and Serbia towards the EU as a core actor in the Balkans and unveils political complexities stemming from security repercussions of the Russia–Ukraine conflict. *Alexandra Yatsyk* juxtaposes two countries, an insider to EU (Poland) and an outsider (Russia), comparing them from the viewpoint of the dominant conservative discourses contesting the liberal paradigm central for EU's hegemony. *Laure Delcour* looks at patterns of centrality and marginality in the South Caucasus and demonstrates a contrast between Georgia's commitments to the European choice articulated during the Rose revolution and then becoming the mainstream discourse in this country, and Armenia's careful balancing between Russia and the EU. *Volodymyr Dubovik*, *Kornely Kakachia* and *Bidzina Lebanidze* add to the Georgian case an

example of Ukraine as another in-between country struggling for a political subjectivity through attempts at institutional attachment and self-identification with the EU normative core. The two post-Soviet countries also have comparable experiences of military conflict with Russia and the loss of territories, and develop parallel or similar policies towards the EU through Association Agreements, Deep and Comprehensive Free Trade Areas and visa-free regimes, thus looking for their niches in the EU-centric normative order.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the authors.

References

- Badie, B. 2014. *Le temps des humiliés. Pathologie des relations internationales*. Paris: Odile Jacob.
- Badie, B. 2016. *Nous Ne Sommes Plus Seuls Au Monde*. Paris: La découverte.
- Browning, C., and P. Joenniemi. 2004. "Contending Discourses of Marginality: The Case of Kaliningrad." *Geopolitics* 9 (3): 699–730. doi:10.1080/14650040490478747.
- Browning, C., and P. Joenniemi. 2007. "Gibraltar, Jerusalem, Kaliningrad: Peripherality, Marginality, Hybridity." *Report from the Åland Islands Peace Institute* 1.
- Eur-Lex. n.d.. "Accession Criteria (Copenhagen Criteria)." https://eur-lex.europa.eu/summary/glossary/accession_criteria_copenhagen.html
- Fabrykant, M., and R. Buhr. 2017. "Small States Imperialism: The Place of Empire in Contemporary Nationalist Discourse." *Nations and Nationalism* 22 (1): 103–122. doi:10.1111/nana.12148.
- Hörschelmann, K., C. C. Studemeyer, P. Hopkins, and M. Benwellc. 2019. "Special Issue Introduction: Peripheral Visions: Security By, and For, Whom?" *Geopolitics*. doi:10.1080/14650045.2019.1593965.
- Makarychev, A. 2005. "Pskov at the Crossroads of Russia's Trans-border Relations with Estonia and Latvia: Between Provinciality and Marginality." *Europe-Asia Studies* 57 (3): 481–500. doi:10.1080/09668130500073514.
- Makarychev, A. 2010. "Where the North Meets the East. Europe's Dimensionalism and Poland's Marginality Strategy." *Cooperation and Conflict* 39 (3): 299–315. doi:10.1177/0010836704045206.
- Parker, N. 2002. "Differentiating, Collaborating, Outdoing: Nordic Identity and Marginality in the Contemporary World." *Identities: Global Studies in Culture and Power* 9 (3): 355–381. doi:10.1080/10702890213973.
- Parker, N., ed. 2008. *The Geopolitics of European Identity: Centers, Boundaries, and Margins*. London: Palgrave Macmillan.
- Vincze, E., A. Bartha, and T. Virág. 2015. "Theoretical Potential of Addressing Production of Marginality at the Crossroads of Spatial Exclusion and Development." *Intersections* 1 (4): 2015. doi:10.17356/ieejsp.v1i4.174.
- Weissenbacher, R. 2018. "Peripheral Integration and Disintegration in Europe: The 'European Dependency School' Revisited." *Journal of Contemporary European Studies* 26 (1): 81–98. doi:10.1080/14782804.2017.1302875.