

Small towns wanna be forever young - how to
keep young people in small towns, include
immigrants and become desirable place to live



Siksali Development Centre, Estonia

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Estonian results from free-format local debate on the topic, held on March 07, 2022

Please see the following slides for the results!

General context/background in Estonia

- As our NGO is from a rural area, we are **focusing on rural areas** in approaching the subject, but it is applicable also for smaller towns, townships, settlements etc.
- The topic of keeping young people in the rural areas / young people wanting to leave rural areas is **directly related to the wider situation in rural areas** – which would give them either **motivation to stay or push to leave**
- In the debate we have encouraged participants also to **look into the history** (starting from the time Estonia re-gained its independence in 1990ies) as well as the **current political choices** being made, to highlight key points that have led to the current situation regarding rural areas
- Participants were also **welcome to express their worries, concerns etc – as it shows which obstacles should be overcome**, to make rural areas a desirable place where to live in

1990ies, 2000s

- 1) The **job positions of local forest rangers**, who lived on the spot, were **liquidated** in the 90ies. As a result – lots of forest theft, both in state and private forest + no information on the local situation of forest (diseases, insects etc). People did not feel safe and rather sold their farm's forest to big companies who cut down the forest. The natural forests were replaced by planted forests, the natural diversification was lost.
 - 2) **Collecting milk from local farms** with 2-3 cows (which was very common) was **stopped**. People lost the possibility to sell the extra milk, got rid of the cows, lost their additional income. Farming sustainable only in really big farms. The tradition of small household farms with a few domestic animals was lost.
 - 3) The **job positions of local police chiefs** were **liquidated**. Crime (thefts) increases in rural areas. People do not feel safe + it sets a bad example for youth.
- **Rural population becomes poor + does not feel safe**, is motivated to **sell their land** to big companies for farming / forest management (who often cheat it out at very low cost) and people, especially **young people**, **leave the countryside** to live in towns



Milk collection points of small rural farms replaced with huge farms of thousands of cows, newspaper articles about „the last cow on the island / in the rural municipality“ etc.



Natural
diversi-
fied
forests
being
logged



and
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with
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2010s, 2020s

- Small **village libraries** (which often functioned also as a gathering point of local culture, customs, etc) were **closed down**, several of them moved to schools
- Gradual **closing down of schools** in rural areas. **NB! New development in 2022** – government is proposing to pay money to local municipalities to **liquidate** the final 3 classes of their schools (the **gymnasium** part, i.e. grades 9-12 for students aged 16-18 yrs old). The principle of obtaining education close to one's home, which so far was followed for grades 7-9, is also not there any more.
 - This may result in lower education levels, because compulsory education is grades 1-9 (until 16 yrs). There is very poor public transportation from rural areas, the bus schedules do not enable to commute to a school in a town on a daily basis. Many rural families can not afford to send their children to go gymnasium in another town - this would mean renting an apartment, paying for the utilities and food. Those who can afford it, risk that the child who is living on his/her own does not have the every-day support from the parents and can end up with bad friends, doing drugs etc.
- It is **difficult to have well qualified teachers in the rural areas**. There are no incentives schemes for teachers to start employment in a rural area. Thus the rural youth will get worse quality education than an urban one.

2010s, 2020s

- **Apothecaries have been closed down** in smaller places and are available only in bigger centres, as they are not economically viable in smaller areas.
- There is **no support to establish small kindergartens** with 4-7 children in smaller places. The regulations to set up a kindergarten are very strict. So, as a result, **one of the parents would have to stay at home** with the small kids in a small rural area. Fuel has become very expensive to drive the kid to a town to kindergarten in the morning and later back home. Also town kindergartens are not so willing to accept children from other areas.
- **Life in rural areas is more expensive than in towns.** To buy fuel is more expensive in a rural settlement than in a county centre. Going to shop for food or building materials or gardening stuff is more expensive in a rural settlement than in a town.

So the young people ask from
themselves –
why on the earth would I want to
continue to live in the countryside,
why would I want my children
to live this life?
I can see that it is so damn difficult
in the rural areas.

The youngsters see that:

- **Education** is of **worse** quality in rural areas
- It is more **difficult to participate in hobby activities**, because of poor logistics
- Fuel is expensive and parents **can not afford to drive** their children to hobby activities in towns or to concerts, theatre etc in towns
- There are **less jobs** in rural areas and the **salary is much smaller**
- The logistics is poor – public **bus connections are poor**
- **Roads are bad** (mainly gravel roads in rural areas, no asphalt) and not always well maintained (problems in winter to keep them clean from snow, which results in bad access also for ambulances, rescue vehicles, garbage collectors etc)
- Rescue crews at local level have been liquidated, thus **long rescue time in case of emergencies** like fire etc and people feel less safe
- **Limited postal services**, older people who do not use internet have limited access to news
- **Teleworking more difficult than in towns**. Quick internet was promised to rural areas already 10 years ago and lots of money was spent on big Network of high speed internet cables, but the **quick internet „last mile“ connections to households do not exist.**

The youngsters see that:

- Problems with **electricity outages** – power is off much more often than in towns and for a much longer period of time. Problem for households who have stored food in refrigerators for longer periods of time; also problem for small companies.
- Due to administrative reform many villages and rural municipalities were united to form bigger units. As a result, the local **municipality officials do not know the local situation** any more, as the area is very big. People do not feel any personal connection with the local authority any more.
- It's all about money and business; **no real intention to want balanced regional development** (exists only words)
- This impacts also **loss of the local heritage**, as rural areas have traditionally been the barers of local customs and traditions.
- It creates a **security problem** for the country when rural areas, especially border areas to Russia, are empty of Estonians
- Local practitioners who know have been replaced by distant officials at a desk who guess, based on some theory

Immigrants. As the situation in the rural areas in Estonia is not very good, as you can see from the above,

- **So far we do not have new immigrants** from Africa, Middle East or Asia who would want to stay in our rural areas. Estonians are also known for their negative attitude towards immigrants, for historical reasons.
- When they do cross Estonian border illegally (sometimes it does happen), they want to **use Estonia as a transit country** to go to other EU countries with better living standards, or perhaps Tallinn.
- However Estonia has **lots of „old immigrants“**. Estonia total population ca 1,3 million, from which ca 65% are Estonians only. More than 25% are Russian, followed by Ukrainians and Belarussians. So there already is our „fair share“ of immigrants living in our country.

Current Ukraine war and immigrants

- Biggest demonstration since the times Estonia re-gained its independence, was held to support Ukraine 2 weeks ago
- People on personal level feeling a lot of sympathy and wanting to help, especially as we feel that Estonia and the other Baltic countries could be the next ones to be attacked
- BUT...on a state level what needs to be considered is that
- having new big numbers of Ukrainians arrive to Estonia, which has large numbers of Russians (we have areas in North-East Estonia with dominantly Russian speaking population), creates a big risk of violence between Russians and Ukrainians fighting each other on Estonian territory

Finally, on the positive note 😊

about youth ja rural areas –

- **State** agency guaranteed loans with a little bit better terms (smaller initial co-financing) to buy a home in the countryside for young families
- **State + local authority + rural inhabitant** – Project grant for improving water supply or electricity connection or road connection
- **EU funds** to support some types of **rural business** (BUT...often goes to big companies, in reality)
- **NGOs initiatives**, if there is **project money** to support them (like LEADER programme)

- State level Initiative „Day of Countryside Living“ - rural municipalities open their doors for visitors <https://maalelamisepaev.ee/en/eng-esileht/>
- Võru/Valga county regional web portal <https://kotus.ee/maale-elama/> with information on jobs, houses etc in the countryside
- There were more NGO initiatives on the topic some 5 years ago to promote going to live in the countryside, but it is something you can not do as a campaign

Thank you for your attention !