

TOWNS GROWING TO BE SMALLER

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There are 47 towns in Estonia out of which only 5 have a population exceeding 20 000. In the biggest city, Tallinn, there are about 400 000 inhabitants and in the smallest, Mõisaküla, 800. Being a town is not so much a question of prestige, but the wallet – many towns have joined with the surrounding parishes to enlarge their budget. Mõisaküla is surrounded by the Abja parish, in the same parish there is also slightly bigger town called Abja-Paluoja. From a discussion with Ervin Tamberg, the mayor of Mõisaküla, it became clear that retaining the town status instead of merging with the parish is enforced by the fear that all the money would go into the leadership of Abja-Paluoja. This fear makes them hold on to the title of town at all costs.

In order to have a title, there must be a future vision that is defined in a development plan. From that type of planning document we can see how, and based on what, the development of the area is guided. All points in the development plan have to be justified and adjusted to each town separately. However, unfortunately most development plans of Estonian towns tend to be similar, in most cases lacking any character and being too declarative.

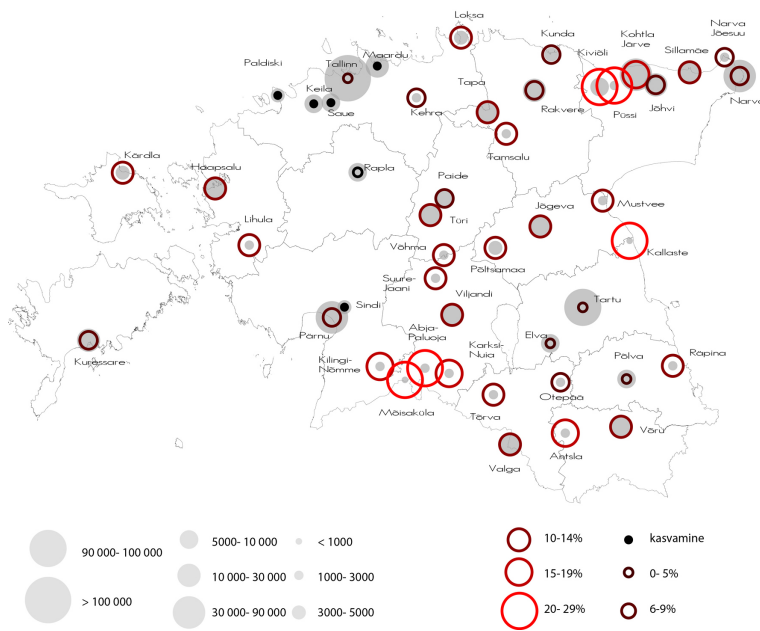
Based on the changes in population, a town's development plan can be divided into three directions – growth, shrinkage and stability. Taking into account the response to future potential, this should be followed throughout the development plan. The trend of the last decades demonstrates that most small towns in Estonia are shrinking. The reasons for the shrinking population are different, but often intertwined and resulting from several larger processes.

The biggest fading away takes place in North-East Estonia, the location of mainly industrial towns. The towns there have been built to be mono-functional and often rely on one factory. When an industry is in decline a large proportion of the inhabitants can lose their job and may be forced to move away. For example the development of Püssi (with 1007 inhabitants) is based on a wooden board factory that has hired a few hundred people, but indirectly also gives work to about a thousand people in the fields of chemistry, metallurgy, forestry and transport. According to the leaders of the local government, the closure of the factory would put the town on the edge of disaster.

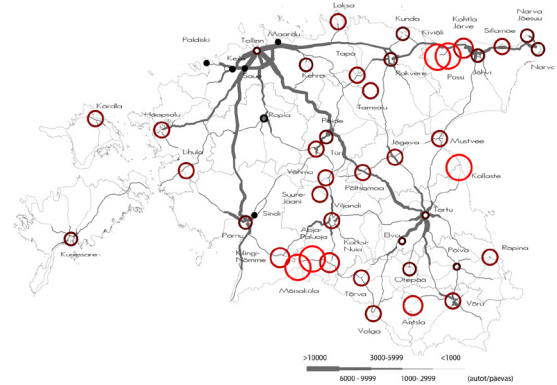
Shrinkage can also happen in towns that have historically developed beside an old trading road or highway. The change in the significance of some roads and re-directing of highways have left a few towns behind – for example Kilingi-Nõmme in South-Estonia, Abja-Paluoja, etc. I have myself been a frequent user of the Vana-Uulu highway, that also goes through Kilingi-Nõmme, but after the opening of the bypass in 2003, I have not passed through the town. Re-routing roads will slow the traffic and create safer streets, but at the same time it is harmful for local businesses and eateries who are losing potential customers.

Shrinkage is also definitely influenced by the growing attractiveness of bigger cities. Towns that are closer to a county centre have usually been able to avoid shrinkage – for example Saue, Maardu and Keila close to Tallinn, or Sindi near Pärnu. The population of Pärnu has shrunk to some extent, however the

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Shrinking population of Estonian towns on the years 2000-2010 with the size of the towns. (M. Luukas, *Shrinking Cities - Kahanevad linnad*, 2011. The master thesis deals separately with shrinking after the collapse of Soviet Union between 1989-2000 and shrinking that happened because of other reasons between 2000-2010)



Shrinking population of Estonian towns between the years 2000-2010 and the frequency of using the highways. (M. Luukas, *Shrinking Cities - Kahanevad linnad*, 2011)

population of surrounding parishes and Sindi has gone up correspondingly. Living in a smaller town near a bigger city creates an opportunity to enjoy the benefits of both – for example the varied opportunities of the cultural sphere in a bigger city, but a peaceful and safe living environment.

Even though Sindi has been growing during the last ten years and Mõisaküla is shrinking rapidly, the development plans of both towns include several similarities.¹ The vision of both towns is to be friendly for local businesses, open to cooperation, have well maintained green spaces (for making the environment more active) and to guarantee good quality education. At the same time Sindi has expanded its vision and in a more justified manner: while Mõisaküla is trying to reach sustainable education by renovations then Sindi sees its goal to discover its special qualities and strengthen the identity of the local community, in order to encourage people to stay.

The development plans of Estonian small towns are ambitious in their vision and all would like to offer activities characteristic of big cities. For example the development plan of Abja parish envisions that in the future there will be several new companies, including catering and accommodation, tourist farms and recreational services. But the plan of action in the development plan is far more modest only describing building a gardener's house and restoration of the hostel. Thereat the development plan of Abja mentions one important step, like in other towns, creating better conditions for entrepreneurs. One possible solution could be, instead of looking for economic prosperity, focusing on the natural economy – offer garden plots with better conditions for the people living in apartment buildings and support them in growing vegetables.²

In general the growth of a city's population is often linked to economic growth and the shrinking of a population with a crisis. Should shrinking be or is it even possible to see it in development plans? Planning itself can't guarantee the growth of the population, it is a tool for enabling it. Therefore development plans can't directly effect or reverse shrinkage, but they can offer better solutions considering the situation. The strategic planning of cities does not only

1. *The Development plan of Mõisaküla 2012-2018*: www.moisakyla.ee/qm/arengukava_2012_2018_190112.pdf and the *Development plan of Sindi 2011-2020*: www.riigiteataja.ee/aktiis/4260/3201/3013/SindiAK2013marts.pdf

2. For example in the town Ivanovo in Russia people live off home grown products from their summer cottages and they often organise large markets.

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include planning new buildings and infrastructure, sometimes demolishing and adjusting transport systems to lower intensity also needs to be planned. The development plan of Sindi clearly emphasises its aim to increase the population, while Mõisaküla admits that the population is decreasing, but their overall aim remains unclear (is it to shrink, to grow or stabilise).

Historically the fading away of a city has meant that there has been a catastrophe or something unexpected (Troy, Pompey, Chernobyl), in recent decades, however, as the shrinking of cities has been constant and continuous - this should be taken as an equal development direction to growth. Shrinkage does not always have to be looked at as negative or accepted as giving up, but as growing to be smaller. The development scenario of a city needs to be sustainable – a shrinking town can have hidden opportunities that could not be realised in a growing town. For example in the planning of small towns in Holland (Parkstad Limburg – Heerlen, Kerkrade, Landgraaf, Brunsum, Simpelveld, Voerendaal, Onderbanken) shrinkage is looked at as positive – instead of apartment buildings private houses are built in shrinking areas so that the space would not seem empty. Empty houses in Germany and Latvia (Karosta, Liepaja) are used for various interesting projects – growing mushrooms, performance and art projects.

IS TOURISM THE KEY TO SUCCESS?

One common denominator in the development plans of Estonian towns is the need to develop the tourism sector, with a special emphasis on the beautiful nature. The development plan of Mõisaküla states that being close to the border, having a mellow urban buzz, safety, clean air and untouched nature together will make it a suitable stopping point for those travelling to Southern Estonia. The parish next to it, Saarde (Kilingi-Nõmme is a town inside the parish), claims that the area is, from the European viewpoint, pure wilderness and the forests, swamps, lakes and moors have a special significance for developing tourism. Why would a tourist prefer Saarde parish's wild nature to Mõisaküla's forest?

I agree that the future vision needs to encourage taking action and dreaming is necessary, but it needs to be taken into account, that the meadow/forest around the town does not make it special in terms of Estonia. For example Mõisaküla emphasises the closeness of Latvia as relevant when developing tourism, but if we look at the map, each side of the border has an extended area of emptiness. Abandoned ghost towns often have many curious visitors and this can be a sort of tourist attraction, however this type of tourism is not a sustainable solution for all shrinking towns. Tourism is an economic field that needs to be developed, and a big number of tourists can be a key to success, but a lake and a forest won't be an attraction in naturally beautiful Estonia. Even Abja parish advertises hunting, fishing and hiking, but as a speciality it brings out the dairy farms. Karksi-Nuia has left the beautiful nature topic out of its tourism chapter and wishes to create a network of farms who introduce heritage and natural vacations, which could be more inviting for several groups than a hiking path in the greens.

In order to encourage tourism we should think of sustainable services created for tourists outside of the season. It's likely that small towns will not be facing a rush of tourists all year round, so the solutions should be multifunctional and make maximum use of the existing. It means that the four churches in

7. B.P. Oswalt, T. Rieniets, *Global Study of Shrinking Cities*. Loe siit: www.shrinkingcities.com/globaler_kontext.0.html?&l=1

8. *At the same time a lot of governmental support in Germany has been given for densification of city centres and demolishing abandoned buildings - a fact that has not gained enough attention in Estonia.*

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Mõisaküla could be used for different functions (in addition to the activities of the congregation they could be used for example for concerts or as an extreme solution also for accommodation), other uses for school rooms could be found for the evening times. A good example of a multifunctional attraction, the main tourist magnet of Kiviõli, has become the ash mountains that in an addition to being used for skiing during winter have also found a function for the summer and autumn period (paintball, go-carts, descending on ropes, moto-centre, BMX track, health path).

Definitely one reason that inhibits the development of tourism in small towns is the lack of accommodation opportunities. Many camps and conferences could take place in smaller towns if the necessary services and accommodation would be available. Thinking about multiple functions and using existing homes for accommodation could be considered.

RETIREMENT IN A TOWN

A large chapter of the development plan of every town is definitely education. To avoid ending up as a ghost town it is crucial to find activities for the youth and have a school in the area. Families with kids value good quality education opportunities and a variety of after school programs. From the development plan of Abja-Paluja it is apparent that the youth is passive and does not want to take part in the offered initiatives. An ageing population is characteristic to shrinking towns and parental guidance is an important developer of views at a certain age and therefore the development plans should, in addition to focusing on the youth, give attention to the older generation. The development plan of Mõisaküla has brought out the growing need for care opportunities and developing that service, but the more precise actions towards it are missing. Would there be a person hired for this? One opportunity could be to engage students during domestic-science classes, but some towns could also become distinct by advertising themselves as retirement towns directing all its services in this direction. The town could also offer scholarships or support relevant studies. Later the town could make a deal with students that they have to work there for a number of years. The Ministry of Justice has for example focused on raising the quality of law in Eastern Estonia by offering a financial scholarship for the students of Tartu University, while, in return, the student has to work in a court or a law office in East-Estonia after their graduation for at least two years. There are towns cultivating an educated population – for example the development plan of Kiviõli emphasises the offering of continuous retraining or special training opportunities, that could lessen unemployment and direct people to the specialities needed in the town. A local company (Kiviõli Keemiatööstus OÜ) also uses specialists through scholarships – offering support for successful students of Virumaa College of Tallinn Technical University, with the obligation to do an internship or final paper in the company.

It is easy to critique development plans, much harder is to find working solutions, but without a cunning plan and offering multifunctional services it is not possible to continue with a small budget. By focusing on the existing and making the life of locals more comfortable and fun, it is possible to turn a shrinking town into a growing town, while too generic and out of place development plans are making shrinking areas feel like an ill fitting shoe that is not comfortable for those wearing it.

MARI LUUKAS DEFENDED HER MASTER THESIS "SHRINKING CITIES", DESCRIBING WESTERN-EUROPE, POLAND, LATVIA AND ESTONIA'S SHRINKING CITIES, FOCUSING ON MÕISAKÜLA IN 2011 IN THE ESTONIAN ACADEMY OF ARTS.