

Everyday materialities, territorial bordering, and place-identity defined by recent administrative reform: reactions from Estonian dispersed ruralities

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Population decline in rural areas has been a concern for many European countries for decades. To deal with shrinking, several measures have been taken in different countries. The study focuses on one of such measures – the administrative reform passed in Estonia in 2017, which merged smaller municipalities into regional municipality centres. This article examines the impact of this reform on rural transformation, concentrating on shifts in everyday mobilities, governance, and territorial identity at the village level. The research data is contextualised with the new mobilities paradigm, examining the relational everyday materialities that include interviews reflecting on changes at the regional, structural, and ideological levels. The analysis is based on in-depth interviews (N=60) with local activists and inhabitants in three study areas in sparsely populated parts of Estonia. The creation of municipality districts with representative bodies within larger municipalities have influenced these rural villages in various ways. In some cases, it has caused shifts in the mechanisms of civil governance that shape community activism. In others, strengthened awareness of representations of the rural appeared, offering a meaningful territorial identity and self-realisation to local people. However, the study also indicates that the distribution of rural municipalities into municipality districts can jeopardise local coherence and socio-cultural sustainability.

Keywords: administrative reform, community, governance, mobility, territorial identity

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Introduction

The issue of shrinking has been a significant concern for network-oriented regional planning, where territorial cohesion is considered an important factor in governance policies to foster balanced regional development (Lang *et al.* 2022; OECD 2022). One of the common strategies used to address this issue in European regional policy is the amalgamation of municipalities through administrative reform (Kauder 2014; Thuesen 2017). Estonia adopted such reform in 2017. By merging rural

municipalities with declining populations, the reform intended to spare administrative costs and raise the financial base for better social and physical infrastructure. For inter-municipal co-operation and democratic ends, specific municipality districts with representative assemblies were created.

According to the OECD Rural Study report about shrinking in Estonia (OECD 2022), though the merging of municipalities increased the municipal population, nearly 60% of them had still shrinking populations in 2020. Therefore, the report suggested to not focus on a growth policy connected to inhabitants' numbers and investments on socio-physical infrastructure, but rather to orient at a de-growth policy connected to the idea of 'smart shrinking'. This perspective suggests that the state should concentrate on preserving the current socio-spatial condition of shrinking areas by maintaining the local vitality and the standard of living of the residents. The municipalities should value the particular, local socio-spatial identity connected to its landscape, people, and history, and promote collaboration with civil society and other municipalities. These measures should increase the place attractiveness, promote economic development, and strengthen the cultural identity of the place (OECD 2022).

Thus far the effects of the reform have gained attention from several angles (*Haldusreformi seireraport* 2022). However, only some experts have studied the effects of the reform on everyday governance and territorial identity at the micro level (Taluste 2018; Lõhmus 2021, 2022). To contribute to this research area, the current article positions the individual and local community with its everyday practices in the focus, when examining the administrative reform. We are interested in how dynamics in the territorial merging process have influenced local material circumstances, citizen involvement, and identity bordering. We reveal the role of the local activists, who are often involved in diverse rural/urban networks. The study focuses on the dynamics of municipality district governance and communities within them as well as the development of local infrastructure. These developments may potentially contribute to smart shrinking, as they represent the rural as a space for self-realisation by participating in local governance and foster place-bound identity (Sysner & Meijer 2017).

Driven by a new mobilities paradigm that deals with relational everyday materialities (Ellingsen 2017), this study draws on fieldwork in three different rural areas in Estonia, specifically in-depth interviews with the members of these communities (N=60). Based on this data, we examine the influence of the reform on the everyday materialities and mobilities of rural people from three specific angles. First, we analyse the impact of the reform on the infrastructure and planned environment of the area, paying attention to people's general expectations for local development, opportunities of everyday mobilities, and rural-urban relations. Second, we concentrate on changes in governance at the level of village and municipality district, showing how within the creation of municipal districts the local power hierarchies are reorganised and the roles of previous organisations are changing. Third, we look at how administrative bordering processes (i.e., dissolving the village borders and creating municipality districts) affect territorial identity. We conclude that sustainable regional development is fostered when the territory of administrative governance corresponds with the local socio-cultural dynamics and regional identity of the residents.

Setting the context for endogenous governance

One of the most crucial factors for rural sustainability is interconnectivity, for instance, rural-urban linkages and the co-operation among regional units, that enable rural inhabitants to access different resources and social infrastructure (Bock 2016; Li *et al.* 2019). This view on regional planning is commonly associated with endogenous, neo-endogenous, and nexogenous governance (Meador 2019). These governance types rely on local knowledge, bottom-up planning, and the kind of social capital that brings together the immediate community and wider structural networks (Bosworth *et al.* 2016; Westerink *et al.* 2017). The endogenous development principle became gradually dominant in the EU after the exogenous governance type with top-down planning was losing its grip in the 1990s. The latter tended to ignore the capacities of the local community and its needs (Steiner & Farmer 2018). The endogenous approach surfaced in EU policies after pioneering LEADER programs were piloted in some EU regions in 1991–1992, which providing project money for local activities and investments. These programs were successful in fostering a bottom-up area-based participatory approach to rural development (Convery *et al.* 2010). In the framework of endogenous governance, the role of local social

capital as a particular 'soft infrastructure' was stressed, as through it the skilled local communities could manage specific material, financial, and natural resources (Barraket *et al.* 2019). Thus, community-based local governance was established, linking in this way communities and institutional power, and enabling connectivity between stakeholders for managing rural development (Barraket *et al.* 2019; Meador 2019). After a while, a neo-endogenous approach was developed, which united top-down and bottom-up planning strategies by increasing both networks and local potential (Bosworth *et al.* 2016). Neo-endogenous development progressed further into a nexogenous approach, which emphasises connectivity as most important factor for reconnecting different forces across space, especially in terms of social innovation with rural-urban linkages included (Bock 2016). According to several authors, social innovation with networking facilitates entrepreneurial investments to the area and helps in creating novel solutions for managing local challenges (Makkonen & Inkinen 2015; Kumpulainen & Soini 2019).

Post-productivist countryside

Endogenous, network-oriented development is an integral part of the post-productivist countryside that emerged in the 1990s in tandem with counter-urbanisation processes (Simon 2014; Hunt 2019). Studies focusing on rural mobilities have indicated how the post-productivist countryside has brought along new forms of local attachment and collective place identity. Today, an urban middle class with specific knowledge and skills has migrated to the countryside, bringing with them new ways of social infrastructure management, transforming the perception of nature, general knowledge about the environment, and views about the rural (Willet & Lang 2018; Creamer *et al.* 2019; Gieling *et al.* 2019). These processes can potentially decrease the previous stigmatisation of rural peripheries, especially by reproducing the local images in the process of place marketing and investing into new economic activities (Jøhannesson *et al.* 2003; Argent 2019). In this way, rural peripheries can avoid marginalisation by attracting skilled middle class professionals who shape the discourses about these rural regions by reproducing a rural idyll as idealised by urban people (Marsden *et al.* 2003).

However, counter-urbanisation processes related to network-oriented governance can also entail certain threats to local development, particularly in jeopardising the existing power relations and social justice in local governance and citizen involvement (Steiner & Farmer 2018; Gieling *et al.* 2019). On the local level, power inequality has been described as the 'institutionalisation of villages' which can transform the organically emerged patterns of local governance (Kumpulainen & Soini 2019; see also Rönkkö & Aarevaara 2017). In this way, an institutionalised endogenous governance style can potentially reproduce the lack of balance in power, as communities with less social and cultural capital may face difficulties establishing citizen initiatives and thus lag behind, increasing the existing cleavages even further (McAreevey 2006; Mustonen 2013, 2014). Locals can lose control over the development of their places, not only in the economic sense, but also in producing social, political, and cultural meanings of those localities (Görmar *et al.* 2019). For example, government-funded community sustainability projects are often led by incomers with urban backgrounds (Creamer *et al.* 2019), whose perspective on local development can conflict with the needs of the locals (Mustonen 2014; Li *et al.* 2019).

Therefore, the micro-level creativity, local identity, and community cohesion of local actors remain very important in addition to social innovation and economy in regional development (Görmar *et al.* 2019). The landscape governance literature emphasises how individual experiences and memories contribute to landscape identity, continuity, and regional characteristics, thereby affecting landscape management dynamics (Soini *et al.* 2006; Loupa Ramos *et al.* 2016, 2019). The idea of endemic time-spaces for instance values bottom-up history-led knowledge on landscape management, strengthening the particular place identity (Mustonen 2014, 2017). Such territorial identities are needed for locals to distinguish themselves from their neighbouring regions (Jürgenson 2004).

Administrative reform in Estonia

Population decline has been one of the most severe issues faced by rural areas in Estonia. Before the reform, many municipalities had deficient social infrastructure and high operational costs, a lack of comprehensive regional planning networking practices, and weak self-governance (Raagmaa & Kroon

2005). The municipalities were merged based on a criterion of population numbers. According to the reform, the optimal population size was at least 5,000 inhabitants per municipality, which was regarded as a minimum for enabling local public services (Kaldaru 2018). The new municipalities mainly merged around municipal functional centres (Taluste 2018). Before the administrative reform (2017), Estonia had 213 municipalities, with 169 municipalities less than 5,000 residents. After the reform Estonia had 79 municipalities, with only 17 municipalities less than 5,000 inhabitants (Noorkõiv 2018) (Fig. 1). Fifteen municipalities of the newly established reform were classified as urban and 64 as rural (OECD 2022).

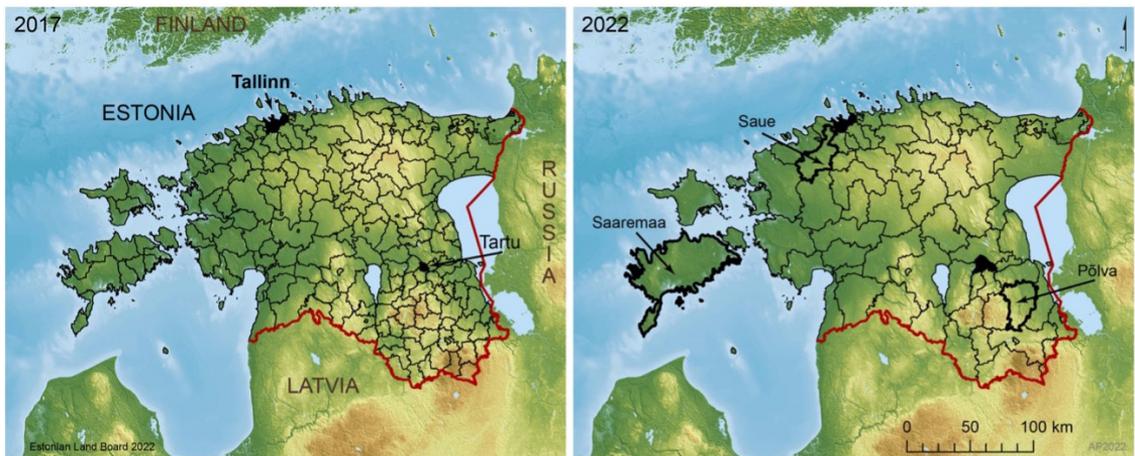


Fig. 1. Estonian municipalities before and after administrative reform and case study areas (Author: Anu Printsman).

One of the important virtues of the administrative reform was its pluralist governance model, which potentially can involve ideas and competencies of multiple parties and agents in the new merged municipalities. However, it was difficult to find balance in the power relations in integrating bottom-up civil governance and the community's historical knowledge within the new power hierarchies (Noorkõiv 2018). In addition, as the territorial borders of smaller communities stretch over different districts and municipalities, many feared that the decision-making process would move further away from their communities and the bigger centres will dominate in the new municipalities (Taluste 2018).

Before the reform, local level decisions that included community opinion were enacted for instance through the village head/association, who proposed their ideas to the municipality council. To preserve the local centre of democratic power, and for subsidiarity purposes, local sub-district decision-making bodies were created within the merged municipalities. To preserve local identity and citizen involvement, it was mandatory to create municipality districts (*osavald*) with municipality district assemblies (*osavallakogu*), or other voluntary local territorial or community-based representative assemblies (*kant*, *kogukonnakogu*) with similar functions. The municipality district is territorially defined and regulated by law. In usual cases these assemblies followed former municipality borders, however some representative bodies were looking for natural community borders. Territorial or community-based community representative assemblies emerged based on bottom-up grassroots initiatives and the particular community identity (Lõhmus *et al.* 2016; Lõhmus 2021, 2022) (Fig. 2).

Our case studies contained territorial and community-based community representative assemblies whose members in some instances were involved in the municipality council. We study how these new emerging municipality districts, with their particular governance bodies and material investments, influence territorial identity dynamics, and how everyday mobilities shape these municipal structures (Nugin & Kasemets 2021). We also analyse how the local people with their social and cultural capital shape and mould the discourses of rural identities and how these discourses affect everyday living (Raagmaa 2002).

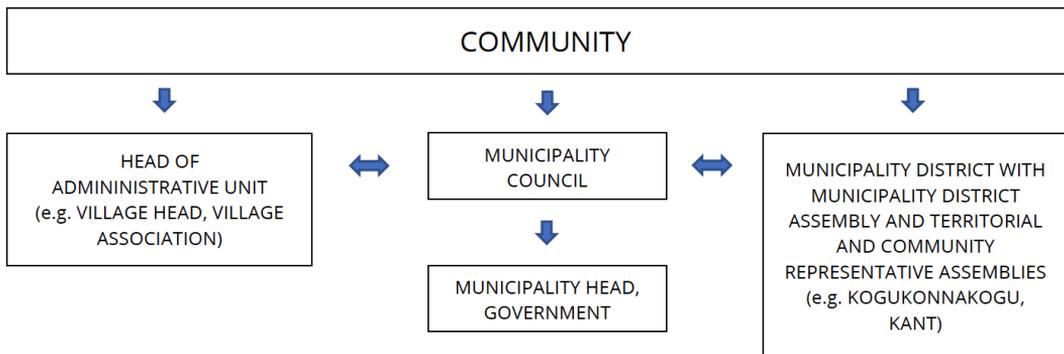


Fig. 2. Decentralisation of municipality with community involvement possibilities (adapted from Lõhmus *et al.* 2016, 46).

The new-mobilities paradigm and everyday relational materialities

We chose villages and municipality districts in three different regions in Estonia: in Saaremaa (5 villages in area A), Saue (3 villages in area B), and Põlva (2 villages in area C) (Fig. 1). Our aim was not to study the three regions separately, but to reveal interrelated issues connected to rural development.

A – Saaremaa Municipality is located on Saaremaa Island on the western border of Estonia. The reform united 12 smaller municipalities by creating the now largest rural self-government with about 32,000 residents. Area A is located 35–40 km from the regional centre of Kuressaare (13,300 inhabitants), which is a popular tourist destination with many spa hotels and attractive seaside.

B – Saue Municipality is located in the western part of Harju County, neighbouring Tallinn Municipality in northern Estonia. After the reform, three smaller municipalities and Saue town were united. The municipality has about 22,000 residents. The commute to Tallinn lasts approximately 40 minutes, thus, many people in the area work, study, and shop in Tallinn. Area B is situated in a historically dispersed area, which gained a particular status within the new administrative reform, entailing certain tax exemptions aimed at preserving the dispersed settlement (Sepp & Noorkõiv 2018). Area B is not a particularly popular tourist destination, apart from occasional local tourism and second-home owners.

C – Põlva municipality is located in the south-eastern part of Estonia. While the region is shrinking both economically and demographically, it is known and valued for its beautiful nature, making the municipality suitable for a tourism-based economy and recreation. Area C is situated (depending on the village) 6–10 km away from Põlva. After the reform, five municipalities merged there, having now about 15,000 residents. It has a convenient railway connection (50 min) with Estonia's second largest town Tartu (100,000 inhabitants), situated 55 km away, and also with Tallinn, about 230 km away. Area C has a centre-hinterland connection with the town of Põlva (5,500 inhabitants, though not considered an important regional functional centre (Raagmaa 2018).

Our fieldwork consisted of several visits and periodical living during different time periods in the researched areas (the fieldworks were conducted separately by both authors). This also involved using the local infrastructures (transportation, shops), attending local events, and observing the movements in the region during different seasons. Such an approach provided the background data and local knowledge that helped in gathering research data, asking follow-up questions, as well as analysing the data. This has given us a deeper research perspective in understanding the changes that occurred during this time and getting better access to research subjects. The main body of data consists of 51 in-depth semi-structured interviews with 60 informants (A=19, B=20, C=21) that were conducted in 2017–2020. The duration of the interview varied with an average of approximately an hour. Our sample consists of 24 male and 36 female informants (born in 1926–1992). Most of the people interviewed were permanent residents of the area except for nine informants who were tied to the location through having a second home or kinship relations there.

The sample consists predominantly of people who were involved in community life and were socially active. We compiled our sample by looking at the website of a village activists' organisation, but also via social connections and the snowball method. To compensate for the elite-prone sample, we also approached people that were not actively involved in community life, but this part of sample was smaller.

The interviews followed different approaches. Many interviews started with questions about informants' involvement in the area and their everyday arrangements, which reflect their place attachment. We also inquired about the use of social and physical infrastructures and individual involvement in community activities. Some interviews employed the biographical approach (Rosenthal 2011), starting off with informants' life course and then moving on to the questions about their everyday practices, place attachment, and belonging. Though the structure varied, the general topics were coordinated between the researchers and, thus, the interviews reveal similar research data. We also asked informants for individual reflections about the administrative reform and village institutions. The interviews were recorded and transcribed verbatim. The names of the informants were changed for anonymity purposes.

For the analysis, the directed qualitative content analysis method was used (Hsieh & Shannon 2005), in which the research data is analysed following a specific context related to the *new mobilities paradigm* (Sheller & Urry 2006). The new mobilities paradigm is an approach that, in addition to studying mobilities themselves, involves analysing the urban-rural interconnections, structural conditioning, and relational everyday practices that are intertwined with mobilities (Sheller & Urry 2006; Goodwin-Hawkins 2015; Ellingsen 2017). This paradigm is attentive to different factors affecting the dynamics of socio-spatial mobilities, taking into account the lived experience as well as political and economic processes (Willett & Lang 2018; Merriman 2019). Our study looks at how these relational materialities are shaped by transformations at the administrative level, and how the specific new norms of governance mould rural landscapes, everyday practices, ideologies, and representations (Ellingsen 2017; Willett & Lang 2018).

Each transcribed interview was read, re-read, and coded by both authors separately, after which the codes were compared and analysed. After comparing and unifying the codes, we discussed the empirical material from the viewpoint of new mobilities paradigm related to relational materialities, creating broader categories under which the codes were organised. In this way three general themes emerged, according to which also the analysis section is organised.

First, we study the investments into socio-physical infrastructure and examine how these investments influence perceptions of the local landscape, nature, and rural-urban relations. From the relational perspective, the way people thematise road conditions, usage, structure, design, function, and state of repair gives insight how infrastructures affect local identities and practices (Waitt & Lane 2007; Merriman & Jones 2017). Material structures are interdependent with social structures and roads may be used strategically to transform values and beliefs (Wilson 2017). In addition, housing and dwelling reveal lifestyles that help contextualise everyday environments and experiences in particular locations (Ash & Simpson 2016; Coulter *et al.* 2016). The second analysis theme involves developments in everyday governance with a particular emphasis on social capital and policy issues. Here, social capital is defined as 'social materiality', as certain type of 'class space' (Marsden *et al.* 2003), or 'soft infrastructure' (Barraket *et al.* 2019), which forms an important part in the construction of local communities (Scott *et al.* 2017). Third, we pay attention to the administrative territorial bordering process and identity creation related to municipality district governance. We are interested in how the administrative and political bordering processes (Bock 2016) are intertwined with rural/urban representations and relational physical and symbolic mobilities (Ellingsen 2017).

Physical infrastructure and everyday materialities

Administrative reform always affects the socio-spatial infrastructures, changing local materialities and mobilities, but also communities' expectations on what is about to change and what should change. Some of these changes are obvious and inevitable, while others are interconnected with

social and symbolic aspects of the community in ways not always acknowledged. In the following, we detail several examples where the material changes after merging municipalities affect both the territorial and social community and vice versa.

Social and physical infrastructure

The bigger financial base of the merged municipalities brought along better prospects to renovate several social and physical infrastructural objects, which would have been impossible considering the budget limits in previous municipal units. Related to smart shrinking, these prospects may involve for instance upgrading public buildings (OECD 2022). One of such examples is A, in which merging enabled the renovation of a local community centre (accommodating rooms for a youth centre, sports activities, medical care, library, concert hall, etc). For locals, it meant a lot and they saw it as a way to attract also new people. However, for a local activist (Meelis), not only was the renovation of the building important, but also the process how the renewal was achieved. Though within the bigger municipality the budget enabled to invest into the house that was in decay, the initial plan for renovation did not suit the locals, as in it the house was to be diminished. The local community joined to fight to accomplish their own version of the project. This fight, peaking with the renovation of the house in the form the locals had wanted, was in Meelis's (from A, b 1970) view important for the entire local community:

This community feeling emerged... during these fights for the mutual goal, this sense of community has risen. I think that /.../ this fight is an important part of the history of this house; if it will be preserved and renovated, it has strengthened the identity of community, which... well, it may have existed before, but it was not so strong.

Hence, maintaining or erecting material infrastructure is not only important in providing services or fulfilling people's everyday needs. It may also strengthen their identity and foster their will to act together, indicating a positive co-operation example between the municipal government and civil society (Bock 2016; Steiner & Farmer 2018).

Besides the built environment, one of the most important topics for locals in all the study areas was the condition of the local roads. The quality of roads influences everyday mobilities and the choices regarding the usage of the local services (Kaldaru 2018). This consideration may also influence municipal road repair decisions. For example, before the merging of the municipalities, the local government in A chose not to asphalt a road that was a shorter way to the nearby town. According to Mati (from A, b 1983), it was because the municipality wanted that the children of the parents working in town to attend the local school instead of the one in town. The longer way to town, which passed the local school, was covered with asphalt. Though longer, this route was preferred by locals because of its quality and thus people passed the local school on their way to work in the nearby town.

On the other hand, to some extent gravel roads were highlighted by locals because of their emotional value. In area B, several informants said that for them these gravel roads represent the image of the rural and signify resistance to the urbanisation pressure in the area, associating the urban with monotonous infrastructure (cf. Rönkkö & Aarevaara 2017). It is noteworthy that these ideas were expressed only in area B, which was situated near the capital. It was an area that was moving towards becoming a suburb of Tallinn. This meant its road structure was also becoming more like that of suburban regions, with plans to build a network of light traffic roads to enhance access to the area. Kertu (from B, b 1961) pondered about the urbanisation of the place:

Well, the city has already reached almost until the road junction and... there is no more [rural]. And people are talking about this [light traffic road] /.../ Then it would come right from here... And that would make the road crossing for the cattle even more difficult...

Other informants with urban backgrounds were, however, very enthusiastic about the prospect of a light traffic road, which was expected to become an important encountering place related to the emergence of new public spaces (cf. Martens *et al.* 2021), offering options for safe movement. The interviewees complained that the cars go too fast, and the bus stops are not at appropriate locations, and thus during the dark hours it is dangerous to walk home from the bus stations.

Public transportation was a topic that came up often during the interviews. Though considered an important component of rural life, most interviewees in all studied areas admitted that they still preferred their individual cars to public transport. The bus transportation was considered inconvenient, time consuming, and logistically challenging. Sometimes, the bus stop was situated too far from home. Several informants mentioned that public transport was important for retired people and school children. Yet, the interviewed elderly in our sample were not always eager to use public transportation either, relying on their children's help. Often, their adult children took them to the doctor by car and supplied them with groceries. But even in these cases the presence and accessibility to public transportation was considered very important, suggesting that extended networks offer a certain sense of security, which is needed both for identity and local development (Jürgenson 2004; Martens *et al.* 2021):

I am so glad that we don't live near [a place with scarce transportation options]. /.../ You cannot go to town, there are no buses or trains. /.../ Here, it's so good that it's close to Põlva. (Mare, from C, b 1948)

Besides being situated close to the municipality centres Saue and Põlva respectively, both B and C areas have also an urban settlement nearby, where access to these cities/towns was also very important in terms of medical care, employment opportunities, and even sometimes food supply. In B, these places were Keila and Tallinn, in C, primarily Tartu (but also, occasionally Tallinn, Võru, or Rääpina). This indicates that the mobility network of rural people exceeds the borders of regional centres, depending on infrastructural options, conveniences connected to regional transport (Kaldaru 2018), and availability of services in functional regional centres. While kilometre-wise area C was situated as far from the capital as region A, the transportation options differed. Area A's island location made the trip to Tallinn quite long and inconvenient. However, in C there was a direct train connection to Tallinn and many informants mentioned that this had made the capital more accessible, especially as they could work during the train ride.

Buildings

Similar to roads, the location, structural arrangement, and appearance of the houses becomes important in terms of everyday mobilities and community activities, affecting also the identity and representation of a particular municipality district. The structural arrangement of the houses depends a lot on the potential of mobilities (Nugin 2020). For example, B was situated near the capital and many new houses were built there, threatening to turn the area into densely populated location. To avoid this, the pre-reform municipality had established a regulation according to which new buildings should not be closer than 300 m to other buildings. In addition, some areas in B were in the green belt zone, where building activity was prohibited. These regulations supported both environmental and cultural awareness related to landscape quality, where infrastructural developments may have negative impacts (OECD 2022). The previous village head in B justified the regulation, stressing that "all village inhabitants are interested that dispersed settlement will persist" (Mari-Ann, from B, b 1962). Some interviewees from B reasoned, however, that the regulation was established by a handful of urban incomers to prevent urbanisation pressure in the region. Thus, the urban image of rural idyll gets reproduced by a small group of people with social capital within the process of counter-urbanisation (Willet & Lang 2018; Gieling *et al.* 2019).

Inhabitants with local roots had ambiguous feelings towards this regulation. Though they acknowledged that a dispersed settlement preserves the beautiful natural environment and the rural idyll, they also pointed out it can hinder development in the area. Some informants suggested that abolishing this regulation could foster population growth. Others were disappointed that they could not build a new house next to the old one:

... they did not get a permission for building a new house. They have an old house. Well, the old one had already sunk into the ground. They wanted to build a new one [on the spot of the old one], but they were told that they could not tear down the old one. /.../ I have a plot, but I cannot do anything. /.../ For example, we have a foundation for a sauna. We wanted to build a sauna on it. No, we cannot, we should not. /.../ There should be 300m between the houses. I said [to the municipality] that the different farm buildings have always been close to each other... (Kätlin, from B, b 1985)

These regulations affected also the ways of living in rural areas, Riho (from B, b 1954) pointed out that these big plots with farmlands can be burdening for the owners, as one must take care of the land, and it could be tiresome to manage 1.5 ha of it. The neighbouring districts in the municipality did not have this restriction, so after merging the particular regulation was changed, establishing a minimum distance between the houses to 100 m. The ban to build houses in the green belt zone remained.

Thus, in a way, all the villages in the researched areas had to deal with a paradoxical dilemma. On the one hand, it was clear that preservation of a certain rural idyll – a dispersed settlement with few people – reduces population shrinkage by attracting people who value this kind of environment. On the other, too many people moving in may create a dense settlement, ruining in this way the valued quality of the landscape connected to anonymity and beautiful nature.

Social materiality: everyday governance

After the reform, local governance patterns changed, particularly in areas A and B (in C, the regional centre and the surrounding municipalities remained more or less the same). As we will show, this merge worked in both directions: in some sense, it created a certain distance between the municipal government and local people. On the other hand, in several cases, it created opportunities for people to locally unite to fulfil and fight for local community goals within the bigger municipality.

The scale of governance and community coherence

Many interviewees in A and B pointed out that in a bigger municipality, communication errors emerged, which created the feeling of being left aside and the decisions that came were felt as imposed rather than discussed. The notion of the new municipal government now being distant both mentally and physically was voiced and people were concerned that they were unable to participate in strategic discussions (cf. Laan *et al.* 2018). A few years before the reform of 2017, a large merger took place in A in which three small neighbouring municipalities formed a bigger one. After the administrative reform, this municipality became a district-based representative assembly. During the interviews in A, these two administrative formations were constantly compared. For many, this intermediate municipality (2014–2017) was compact, with the information moving smoother and the decision process thus being closer to the inhabitants. Joonas (from A, b 1975) recalled that after the first unification, an active communication between different villages began, mutual events were organised, and the community activism grew stronger. In the new municipality, however, the situation was different:

This previous municipality, it kind of spoiled us, there the communication and stuff were effective. When something was discussed, the information about it reached us and our governors. /.../ It was far more transparent, one can say. But in the new municipality, I don't get it, somewhere the information gets stuck.

After the second merger, according to Katrin (from A, b 1964), the local villages ceased to communicate with each other. Smaller village units activated as the new municipality was too big to create a sense of a single community. Therefore, in 2020, the representative assembly including three previous municipalities was divided into three independent representative assemblies (Löhmus 2022). For Joonas, this was too confusing, but Katrin had noticed that in many locations, it enabled them to create district bodies for small communities. An active community has the potential to attract newcomers to move into the areas (Argent 2019; Barraket *et al.* 2019). Risto, who bought a former school building and moved to C from Tallinn, argued that for him it was indeed an important consideration:

I read the village development plan /.../ and I noticed that there was a library next to our plot and... And there was an active community. This was certainly a plus.

In addition to the active village association uniting the three villages in C, there were other locals who were involved in different local activities outside the local association, which offered them self-realisation.

Some informants, however, pointed out that as the decisions were not taken on a local community level any longer, local political intrigues tend to disappear. Instead, people united on different issues to achieve mutual local goals within a bigger municipality. The informants also acknowledged better options for communication and networking. Marika (from A, b 1992) indicated that the reform created possibilities for different villages to learn from each other. In her view, different localities could achieve better transportation or social aid by acting together. Another informant (Laura, from B, b 1965) also pointed out the potential of a merged municipality to bring together people with extensive social capital. This was indicated especially when in some locations active people expressed 'involvement fatigue': they had already contributed their voluntary work for years and felt they could take a break. The effect of the loss of social capital had already been experienced by A, as an active participant drew back from the village association, causing communication breakdowns that affected local community projects.

One of the aims of the reform was to give locals the chance to take responsibility and communicate about larger investment projects, which would benefit the community. This aim, though promoting micro-level activism, created at times the feeling that the local village community only met when there was a need to write project applications, reducing the local governance to an institutionalised project-writing mechanism (cf. Kumpulainen & Soini 2019). Karin in A pointed out that the model of applying for project grants can be rather complicated for those village heads who have not done it before, giving developmental advantage to villages institutions with better social and human capital (Mustonen 2013; Görmar *et al.* 2019). However, not all local issues can be solved based on village-level project applications. In C, the village head spoke about the need to tidy up the village's riverbed. Yet, as the river passed through different regions, broader co-operation was needed across the region, taking into account also environmental research, regional tourism, and local knowledge, for this project to succeed.

Policy involvement

As the local district under the new municipality was small, Katrin in A felt that one had to become active politically to have any say in the overall issues of regional development. When previously the municipality was small enough for everyone to know everyone, which helped one get elected a member of municipal council, now the municipality was too big for this; candidates had to join some bigger political party to gain access to the municipal council. Thus, the feeling of being left aside could be deepened if the local activists did not manage to become members in municipal governing bodies. For example, in B, some activists who were previously involved in the municipality governance receded themselves from the citizen activism after not being involved with the reformed municipality council. In C, where the local village head continued to be a member in the municipality council, such dispositions were not expressed. Some interviewees recalled personal intrigues and power abuse in personal interests in the previous municipality and current municipality district formations. For example, in region B one local activist who was working in the school and was involved in the municipality council was criticised by some others for concentrating too much on developing physical infrastructure connected to the school when dealing with local issues and ignoring other, more pressing ones. This indicates how spatial decisions at the local level are made by actors with social capital upholding particular individual interests (OECD 2022).

The importance of networked cultural and social capital and municipality governance involvement is particularly well illustrated in region C, where an active village head had been involved in local development for almost two decades, being a member of the municipal council, having good knowledge about local structural organisation, and maintain good relations with both locals and people in the public sector. He moved to the area in 2000, having quit his job in town, looking for self-realisation. Besides his individual place attachment, his life cycle and readiness to participate at the local government level influenced the emergence of the particular political governance of the area:

I was about 50 then /.../. And then I found this place. It was very shabby and hardly visible, drowned in brushwood and weed /.../. The place had lacked the spirit of life already for four or five years /.../. And it is exactly three times that I have been engaged in the work of the local government /.../. And for this, there is only one option. To win the community's support. (Sander, from C, b 1948)

He emphasised his own role in improving the social and material conditions in the village – asphaltting roads and renovating and widening the local library into a village centre.

Bordering and regional identity

The borders of the new administrative units defined in the framework of the administrative reform influenced everyday practices of the locals and shaped territorial identity (cf. Raagmaa 2002; Jürgenson 2004). The re-structuring process, with its intention to create municipality districts, was in many cases based on the historical borders. However, the borders drawn in the reform plans did not necessarily coincide with the ideas of the locals, who had pragmatic expectations on territorial coherence. For example, in B, the locals felt that district borders drawn by the municipality were arbitrary and did not take into account the current everyday functioning of the villages (cf. Lõhmus 2022). The newly established district community (*kant*) initiated a new development plan that supervised the change in the borders intended in the reform. According to this plan, the district would include some additional dispersed villages further away that were not originally in the plan and leave out some densely populated settlements from it. The district representative assembly reasoned this by the historical pattern of this sparsely populated area, which needed to preserve its uniqueness. Besides the historical and cultural reasons, the district activists also needed to attain a certain population number to preserve the status of a community district as service centre, which secured certain budget facilities for local cultural activities initiated by locals themselves. According to Liisa (from B, b 1962), one of the aims of re-arranging the municipality district was also to make their small villages more visible:

We formed the district ourselves. Those borders that [the rural municipality] draw on the map, did not coincide with the character of our district, because for us, the district is around [name of a highway], they have a similar, say, historical background, traditional dispersed village area. There are similar habits and customs. The [name of a densely populated area] doesn't have anything to do with us.

She also added that rearranging the original plan helped them to manage the transportation issues, as their commuting needs differed from the region they had left out. Apparently, the district transportation would have been planned considering the entire district, and that would mean local people would have to travel first to the densely populated area to get the bus to the capital. In some interviews in A, however, it was argued how within the merged municipality the district borders have now become vaguer (cf. Taluste 2018). This affected people's perception about what community they represent. For example, Sirje (from A, b 1967), responsible for managing the local community house, complained:

Today, when I call up a man from our village and tell him I have a problem, /.../ the shed door has come off due to the storm, would you come and fix it? Well, of course he comes. But... this is not the same anymore. But when we used to have this smaller [name of] rural municipality, you had to stand for it/.../ you were proud of it! /.../ This [name of] rural municipality, it was our little home, you stood for it, you represented it. You did it without asking reward. Now, in the big rural municipality, its more anonymous.

The same concerns were expressed elsewhere. In the B region, in Riho's words, it was now harder to find people to compete in local sports games in the name of their new municipality district. According to him, previously people had no trouble knowing where they are from, but now, people asked in whose name are they competing.

In areas B and C, historical village borders have been restored, being initiated by active inhabitants with local roots. These borders, however, though in accordance with the biography of landscape, carried rather cultural and symbolical value than practical. In B, several interviewees identified their own territorial identity commonly with the name of the municipality district rather than the historical village name. In C, by contrast, the historical village name was commonly used, particularly by the older generation. While some informants remained indifferent or accepting towards the symbolic establishment of historical village borders and names, others took these changes far more personally. In C, Ivo (b 1944) initiated the process of restoring a historical village name with its historical borders. In his view, he was the only one who bothered about it, stating bitterly: "for others, it was nothing." Yet, he got forty-five supporting signatures for his cause. When the decisions about the village borders

were taken, he could not unfortunately attend the meeting and his proposal about the enlarged village borders did not pass. Ivo commented on this emotionally that “they just gave it away,” concluding that “besides me, there were no other patriots.” However, another inhabitant, Paula (b 1954), saw it differently, saying that it makes little difference where the exact borders are. For her, it was important that the three villages (with total number of inhabitants 140) under one village association would act together: “if everyone started to act on their own, there will be nothing left.” Restoring village names and borders can be important for a specific territory’s identity, but also have significant value for local and regional visibility and socio-cultural development. For example, the rehabilitated village in B is active on the village association level, influencing local matters related to its municipality district.

Discussion

Relying on new mobilities paradigm, our research focused on the relational everyday materialities and mobilities, material infrastructures, governance, and territorial identity bordering in sparsely populated areas after the administrative reform. This view highlighted how structural policy arrangements influence everyday life and spaces connected to it. We examined the administrative reform through the lens of smart shrinking, considering the current living conditions of the residents and their self-realisation connected to the civil governance. These issues are connected both to the individual and collective identity bordering, which shapes the territorial character of a particular community.

Examining changes in the physical infrastructure, everyday materialities, and everyday mobilities, our analysis showed how access and relations with regional functional centres become very important in the lives of rural inhabitants (Kaldaru 2018; Laan *et al.* 2018). Nevertheless, the functional municipality is multi-layered (Raagmaa 2018; Sepp & Noorkõiv 2018). Connectivity and potential accessibility to these centres shapes mobility practices to the centre, but also *vice versa*: it can add attractiveness to rural localities and be appealing for in-migrants with social capital (Jøhannesson *et al.* 2003; Scott *et al.* 2017). The transportation options to other functional centres becomes important as well. In C, the convenient railway transportation to both Tartu and Tallinn enlarged the mobility options for local people, making these centres important in relational rural/urban networking. In B, the closeness to the capital connected mostly to work mobility diminished the importance of Saue as regional centre in people’s everyday mobility practices. In addition, the formation of a municipality district influenced the access to the municipality centre and to Tallinn, as within these units the mutual transportation options are considered.

Regional networks become important in managing everyday living in rural villages, as contemporary villages are not autonomous anymore (Thissen *et al.* 2021). According to this perspective, liveability in rurality is related to mobilities and accessibility rather than the availability of services locally (Gieling & Haartsen 2017). Investments in material infrastructure connected to contemporary mobilities remain significant for rural viability, thus, the actual mobility trajectories of the inhabitants should be studied.

One of the aims of the administrative reform was to improve local infrastructures, and these issues were highlighted in all studied areas. The increased financial base in the municipalities opened discussions for asphaltting gravel roads, which were considered important not only because of improved driving conditions (and better access), but also symbolically, signifying modern ways of rural living. However, these development issues also reflected ambiguous attitudes about further developments connected to the post-productivist countryside.

The infrastructural renovation projects influence the image of the rural and the local place identity and branding (Jøhannesson *et al.* 2003; McAreavey & McDonagh 2011), but for some people, road modernising is associated with urbanisation and creating the “monotonous concrete infrastructure” (Rönkko & Aarevaara 2017, 399). Similar development ambiguities emerge in relation to the building regulations. On the one hand, these regulations help to preserve the historical dispersion of the rural area and the cultural and environmental quality of the landscape. On the other hand, the regulations diminish building options for locals. The recent OECD report about shrinking in Estonia (2022) suggests solving this potential conflict by setting temporary limits on expansion by establishing green belts, which meet the municipality’s strategic objectives and socio-economic development plans. Such

issues with potential conflicts should be openly discussed in order to ensure sustainable and dynamic change in the landscape (Semm & Palang 2010).

The article also investigated the impact of the new governance model on the community's involvement. Since the borders of the new municipalities grew bigger, several interviewees indicated that their chances to participate in actual governance had diminished. Some activists felt that their powers were now limited to organising local events, instead of having a say in larger issues. At the same time, for some, citizen activism with village heads had not been strategically and financially effective anymore, either. The increased financial base under the new municipal system was welcomed, since it enabled smaller peripheral villages (with sufficient human and social networks) to attain project funding for local development (Sepp & Noorkõiv 2018). In some cases, the further distancing of the municipality actually helped to ease some previous local tensions. For instance, in region A, the district community united in fighting for mutual goals in municipality, strengthening this way the sense of community (cf. Noorkõiv 2018). However, in some places, the inhabitants felt that the community activists who were networked and active also on a rural municipality level were being too selfish and preferred some institutions within the district to others. In other words, the smaller the unit, the greater the risk that personal biases of the leaders can jeopardise regional development.

For region C, the impact of the reform was smaller compared to A and B, as the areas in C were belonging to the same municipality and connected to a functional regional centre also prior to the reform. However, C illustrates vividly how the active village head with excellent urban/rural networking skills, political capital, and community involvement can foster local development (Bosworth *et al.* 2016). Being also a member in the rural municipality council, he managed to have access to social capital resources enhancing the development of the village areas. C also exemplifies that a functional village association can remain important as a community centre. Besides offering gathering space for the local community, the village association was important also for non-locals, visitors, or part-time residents as it strengthens the impression of a viable rural community (Kumpulainen & Soini 2019).

Examining territorial bordering and regional identity highlighted how the administrative reform affects regional identity and the discourse about it in several ways (Vainikka 2013). The governance pattern of the reform established several new municipal units, which affected reorganisation of some regions within different borders. Though many of those borders had existed in the past under some previous municipal formulations, some of them were reshaped and included villages that had not belonged there before. The formation of the municipal district in B showed that historical borders are symbolically important, but can be re-shaped according to the current development perspectives (Martens *et al.* 2021). Besides, the reasoning was along the lines of rural/urban representation, and in the narratives of the locals, the newly included dispersed villages represented the rural and the excluded densely populated area the urban. This indicates that the discourses about the rural and the urban have direct impact on the managing of the everyday governance.

Here a question remains of how large the local and municipal district units should be in order to ensure such networking and the feeling of being involved in local and regional development. The feelings of alienation should be taken seriously, as due to this many former local activists may step aside and quit local activities, potentially causing the decline in community activism, which may also affect the place-attachment of other inhabitants. This may lead to new power hierarchies among the community and the erosion of endemic knowledge about place character (Mustonen 2013, 2014).

Conclusion

The Estonian administrative reform in 2017 sought coherent and cost-effective municipality arrangements, but at the same time aimed to ensure larger infrastructural developments and the involvement of locals in sparsely populated settlements. Our research showed that though the economic effect was acknowledged in most settlements, the reform impacted various other aspects of rural lives, particularly the civil governance bound to territorial identity. The study showed how the reform accelerated new interregional municipality districts, which have initiated and carried through projects improving the material infrastructure (houses, roads). These, from its part, have a potential to enhance local socio-cultural activities and services.

The reform affected the endogenous governance, showing vividly the importance of the role of local community activists and human capital. One could speculate that the role of local individual activism increases, particularly individuals' capability of networking and activating the local community. In our view, even though the role of local individuals remains high in the framework of the new administrative reform, the pattern of supporting volunteers should be preserved to empower local governance. These findings confirm earlier research on smart shrinking that emphasises interconnectedness of formal and informal planning practices for the interest of the local community considering available resources (Syssner & Meijer 2017; Küpper *et al.* 2018).

Our study also indicated that the rural administrative processes should be analysed through a prism of rural/urban networks and mobilities. In the local arrangements, people rely on the decisions based on what they consider appropriate for the rural (versus the needs of the urban). These representations affect not only the managing of the rural, but also the everyday lives of the residents, which are intertwined with rural/urban connectivities. Therefore, the regions are not only defined by their geographical borders, but also by social and discursive constructs connected to political spatial distinctions, in which identity narratives connected to a particular territory and self-realisation become important.

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