



**UNIVERSITY
OF LATVIA**

2022 NORDPLUS intensive course (5 ECTS); *preliminary programme*

Smart shrinking as a development approach for de-populating regions around the Baltic Sea

2nd-15th of May 2022, Finland & Estonia

We invite students from the Baltic States and Nordic countries to join international intensive course dedicated to the relationship of de-populating peripheries with rural development strategies of “smart shrinking”. Students will have a unique opportunity to learn and actively engage for two weeks with experts and academics, business, and governmental stakeholders active in the field. During the course students will attend numerous meetings with regional/local authorities, enterprises, and NGOs. They will carry out their own empirical research project in international small groups and enjoy interactive excursions, but also local culture, environment, and cuisine. Finally: the course enables participants to establish international contacts and meet students and professors from many countries!

Background of the course

The course is based on a long-lasting collaboration between a variety of Nordic and Baltic universities with a key focus on rural areas and their development. The key theme of the course, “smart shrinking” as an alternative development approach for the Nordic and Baltic countryside rests on today’s challenging socio-economic processes in the same:

Outmigration, loss of local service infrastructure and an ageing population are a harsh reality for many Nordic/Baltic rural regions and communities, mostly accompanied with a downturn in their economic performance (Syssner 2020). In many cases the prescribed cure for these developments aim to spur new growth, not merely economic but particularly in small towns also in terms of population. Realities in the Nordic context, but also elsewhere have so far rendered these re-growth approaches largely wishful thinking (e.g. Kortelainen & Albrecht 2020, Schatz 2017). The increasing acceptance of these realities has infused alternative ways to local development that accepts these demographic realities and rather than to oppose, integrates them as a key part for alternative development strategies. One key approach is “smart shrinking”. While it is currently employed largely in relation to urban settings, it holds much potentials to be applicable for rural communities and small towns as well. Hence, it provides an alternative approach that accepts de-population and employs it actively to counter the often-accompanying negative processes. The course directly engages with this novel concept to assess its potentials, challenges but also its pitfalls when applied in a rural context.

Main question of the course

What are the key potentials, challenges and risks to employ smart shrinking strategies as an alternative pathway for regional/local planning in de-populating areas in northern and Baltic countries?

The course outline

The course contains of two directly connected parts that take place in Finland and Estonia. The intensive course framework is twofold: 1) pre-fieldcourse activities: “homework” and lectures (partially online); and 2) activities during the excursion/field course part: lectures, topical excursions & expert meetings, group works and data collection with rich feedback from the teachers, report writing and presentation of research results (see detailed program below).

The course will be implemented in six stages:

- 1) Every national group is obliged to carry out a preparatory homework: reading and discussing course literature in the seminars and preparing presentation
- 2) Intensive theoretical, methodological and topical teaching sessions (online/pre-field course & during field course).
- 3) Regional interactive excursions in the host countries including the visit of local and regional administrations, ministries, companies, and NGOs.
- 4) Carrying out fieldwork in chosen case studies (FI & EE) in mixed, international groups.
- 5) Drafting reports in close consultation with supervisors:
 - About 15-20 pages (single spaced, max 10,000 words) including tables, figures and sources. Additional appendixes in the form of audio-visual materials and virtual reality instruments are an important part of the course.
 - The reports will serve rural municipalities and other rural development authorities in their efforts for improving local attractiveness and eco-efficiency.
- 6) Presenting of group reports
 - Grades and diplomas will be awarded during the farewell dinner (Grading scale 1-5).

Homework

Every national team should prepare and present a (literature and web based) small report of about 10 slides (ppt) that describes smart shrinking approaches and regional policy aimed to counter de-population trends in their country. The aim of the student presentations is to extend empirical knowledge about smart shrinking approaches and contrast it with current regional development. Local teams of Finland and Estonia will be also asked to describe municipalities chosen for case studies. Please also be ready to tell shortly about your personal experience regarding the concept of smart shrinking and/or regional development (courses attended, work experience, involvement in projects etc.).

Case studies

After presenting homework new international teams (5 groups of up to 6 persons, depending on participant numbers) will be established. Every group will have one or two native speakers. Each team will design their empirical research plan for a pre-chosen case study in one municipality:

- 1) *5x Finland*
- 2) *5x Estonia*

We will provide one local informant in each fieldwork municipality, who can consult you about local services, recommend interviewees etc.

Organizational information

All costs (including accommodation, catering, travel expenses, car rental etc.) will be covered from the Nord+ project grant.

Students should bring their own laptops & cameras. Special equipment (e.g. audio recorders) are provided by partner Universities. University of Eastern Finland provides virtual reality equipment (e.g. 360 cameras, virtual reality goggles).

Organizers

The course has been organised by GEONORDBALT network for many years (See some previous activities <https://wiki.uef.fi/display/Geonord2/Geonord>). This years course is organized by 5 Nordic/Baltic universities: Linköping (LiU), Tartu (UT), Latvia (UL), Vilnius (UV) and Eastern Finland (UEF, coordinator)

In 2022, the main organizers for the course are University of Eastern Finland and University of Tartu.

Main coordinator and contact

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