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

Smart shrinking practices in Savonranta and Palmse

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1 Introduction

Nowadays we are seeing that people are going more and more to the cities and rural areas are suffering from the loss of people who have gone to the city. Because of the shrinking, new ideas are being developed in regional planning like smart shrinking which does not focus on growing the area's population, but its main goal is to make life quality in the area better. There are different understandings about smart shrinking. What does it mean exactly? Shrinking does not automatically lead to a decline if the quality of life in the remaining population does not worsen.

In this report, we are going to explain our understanding of smart shrinking and explain how smart shrinking has been used or can be used in our two study areas. One in Savonranta village in Finland and the other in Palmse village in Estonia. Both places are in some way very similar but also very different. For figuring out solutions or new ideas we did interviews with the locals, entrepreneurs, and municipality workers, as well as conducted overall statistics. In the end, we present ideas on how to develop these areas from a smart shrinking perspective.

For the research questions our focus is on the subjective atmosphere experienced by the locals and the researchers and both social and physical atmosphere are considered. Therefore, the research questions for this report are:

1. What is the social atmosphere in Savonranta and Palmse like?
2. What is the physical atmosphere in Savonranta and Palmse like?
3. How do they promote smart shrinking?

1.1 Theory according to articles

In Europe depopulation is seen as a process that must be handled quickly and efficiently, for example, limiting community services and infrastructure while maintaining social equity and good life. This kind of approach is defined as smart shrinkage or wisdom of knowledge, where an area can lose population and decline yet still have a high quality of life (Peters et al., 2018). Shrinking and decline are often used in smart shrinkage theory describing communities that are getting smaller and quality of life is getting lower. An important indicator of shrinkage is population loss followed by vacant residential houses and abandoned houses (Vujičić & Đukić, 2015). In Europe, rural areas depopulated the most before 1990 after that, it stabilized a little, but still, some Europe

countries rural areas are losing people where depopulation percent is over 70, especially in eastern Europe and the Baltics (ESPON, 2017). When depopulation isn't handled it can negatively affect economics, labor force and age structure which all together can affect the quality of life of the area. Different challenges like maintaining community services, businesses, and infrastructure are difficult when people are going away because areas get less tax money and support from country or other different regional planning structures (Meijer & Sysner, 2017).

The decline can also be the result of a failure to act at the right time. One reason for decline can be that some rural regions are denying decline and don't focus on that, therefore, ignoring the problem and doing nothing to deal with it. Instead, they are focusing on growing but looking at the facts it's clear that they aren't growing in the future. The concept of shrinkage should be explained to decisionmakers as an alternative to perspectives, which understand depopulation and how to use it in developing rural areas. (ESPON, 2017) Interactions between rural areas and regional planning play part in communities' growth, or decline. It is important to improve rural communities' resilience to coming demographic changes by diversifying the environment, creating workspaces and social capital to make rural areas more resilient to changes (Li et al., 2019). Estonia is starting to deal with shrinkage in rural areas for example developing planning documents for shrinking or dealing with demographic changes in the near future. In 2022 shrinkage research was conducted for developing a regional planning document for shrinking (Estonian ministry of finance, 2022). Also, several municipalities have developed their own shrinkage document, for example, Lügause municipality. Finland is also developing regional planning for shrinking by conducting different research with universities to figure out, what smart shrinking means in Finland and how to plan for it (UEF, 2022).

1.2 Our vision

From what we have gathered during our time in the field, there are numerous indicators that communities and municipalities have vastly different approaches and opinions to shrinking. One often heard answer, especially from the locals, when asked about how they would develop their village or area, is that they would want more employment and young people to move into the area. Smart shrinking as a concept and theory seldom makes an appearance in interviews with local “layman” and sometimes even when politicians or village activists seem to shy away from the idea. Our understanding of the concept includes some sort of proactivity to counter or take

shrinkage into account, not reactivity to the problems it is causing. Smart shrinking being a new concept, it is impossible to assume that decision makers and villagers would have had knowledge of it in the past decades and adjust their actions accordingly. One aspect of smart shrinking is accepting it and planning around that, so policies and actions aimed at growing that go counter to all the available indicators and predictions, cannot be counted as smart shrinking. In our opinion there should be an awareness of this, and therefore policies should be aimed at accommodating shrinking and not combatting it.

2 Methods and research questions

The selection of methods was based on a few limiting factors. First, as only one person in the group is fluent in the native language of each research area, using documents and some governmental sources will be limited due to the amount of time that this one person can allocate to them. The second factor is that because neither of the study areas is an independent municipality, they don't have their own aggregated statistics which means that they must be compiled indirectly. Third factor relates to interviews which may or may not be held in English which all group members are fluent in. With these restrictions in mind the following methods were chosen.

Literature review was conducted, and it was performed in tandem with interviews to search for more information about the topics that were discovered during the interviews. Literature review involved sources such as statistics, maps, newspaper articles and official memos. It is used to gain an understanding of the attributes of the research areas and their background.

Historical analysis was carried out by comparing old images on Google Street View with current scenery of the area to get an image of the changes that have happened in recent years. From the difference in Google Street View images and current situation it can be estimated for example, how many people were working at a location before by counting the cars in the parking lot or checking which building still had adolescent living on that location based on the items seen in the yard.

Visual observation was also used. Its role is to support other methods and to gain an understanding of how outsiders might view the area. As neither of the research areas are familiar to the group members, we can get a genuine first impression of each area and compare that with other information.

The most important research method was interviews. In each location the first interview was with the local contact person(s) after which ideas and topics for following interviews began to form. The interviews are unstructured and follow-up questions based on interviewees answers were made. Interviewees are selected partially based on their local standing, availability and to some degree by chance. Paper notes of the interviews are the primary method for recording, and sometimes voice recordings and pictures were taken too.

With these methods there is the possibility of ending up with a very biased or warped view of the situation. They are based on subjective reasoning and carry values with them about life in the countryside and what is desirable and what is not. To counter this and produce as unbiased a report as possible the whole team participated tightly and used different backgrounds and life experience to estimate the viability of the conclusions. Data collected from interviews was compared to other interviews and other sources to get the bigger picture and not to rely blindly on one informant. There might also be a need to touch upon personal relations in the research areas to find motives for people's actions. Despite these measures our understanding of the research areas will never be complete, and we are very heavily relied on what type of interviews we get and what data we happen to find. There is always the possibility that crucial information about the area is missing that would change our understanding in a fundamental way. It is also important to note how the interviews are carried out and in what sort of situation because they very likely impact how and what sort of topics people are comfortable talking about.

3 Data

3.1 Case of Savonranta

Savonranta is an ex-municipality in South-Savo and it joined Savonlinna in 2009 and at the time there were about 1100 residents in the municipality. It is between the regional center of Pohjois-Karjala, Joensuu, and Savonlinna, and it takes 1h 10min and 45min to drive to them respectively. Nowadays there are about 500 people living in the immediate vicinity of the old municipal center and according to interviews during summertime there are about three to four times as many people in the area, approximately 1500-2000 people. The largest employer in Savonranta is the Savonlinna municipality, and a big portion of residents are self-employed. In the heart of the village there is an old water mill that houses a museum and a handicraft shop, where about 120-

130 people deliver their goods to be sold, of which about 80 do so regularly. There is an elementary school in Savonranta which has about 50 students in total but grades 7-9 have only seven students in the eighth grade.

Table 1: Savonranta population by sex and age in 2020 (Liiteri-tietopalvelu)

Grid ID 1x1km	Men	Women	0-14 y.o	15-64 y.o	65+ y.o	Total
200355	18	17	1	19	15	35
199680	96	87	17	76	90	183
199681	34	35	5	28	36	69
199005	42	37	11	42	26	79
199006	22	23	3	24	18	45
199007	4	6	0	10	0	10
201030	7	4	2	8	1	11
Total	223	209	39	207	188	432
Grid ID 5x5km	Men	Women	0-14 y.o	15-64 y.o	65+ y.o	Total
8076	132	117	23	109	117	249
8077	52	47	9	47	43	99
7941	43	39	11	42	29	82
7942	36	35	3	43	25	71
Total	263	238	46	241	214	501

3.2 Case of Palmse

Palmse is a small village about 10 km² in Haljala Parish in Lääne-Viru County. Before 2017 municipality reform it was under Vihula municipality. Palmse has good geographical location because to the capital Tallinn is about 80 kilometers. The nearest bigger city is Rakvere which is located 37 kilometers from Palmse and the center of the county Lääne-Viru. To Võsu, which is the center of Haljala parish, it is approximately 9 kilometers where you can go and walk by the seaside. The biggest employers are metal factories like Palmse Mehaanikakoda OÜ, Palmse Metal OÜ, and

Palmse manor. Palmse region is an attractive place for tourism because a lot of foreign people come to see the mansion and beautiful nature in the Lahemaa national park which is located near the village centre. Most tourists are from Germany and Finland but during COVID-19 Estonians started to visit area more often. The vision that Võhma-Palmse has for 2021 is that the region has a strong community with permanent residents promoting village life, where local businesses are developed. Also, the environment is an attractive place to work from home or spend summers here. Social life values and transmits Estonian cultural heritage and local traditions. (Võhma-Palmse development plan, 2017)

As can be seen in tables 2 and 3 the population in 2022 was 62 but 11 years ago it was 77 so there has been a decline. In the village center, there is a kindergarten where there are 31 children now but through interviews, we found out that there is a queue for kindergarten spots because some workers who come from another village or city bring their kids to the kindergarten. Also, there is a little library for the locals. The nearest basic school and high school are in Võsu. The closest food market or shops are also in Võsu, in Palmse they have a local shop near the mansion, but the prices are quite high and there isn't much to choose from. The mission in Palmse is to find a new use for two old soviet time complexes, both buildings are in private's hands but the owner of the old cow barns does not want to sell the land and the owner of the grain drying building is interested in selling but before selling he wants to think through different ideas what to do with the building what can bring him profit. Both buildings are in a rough shape, especially cow barns, and partly is damaged wheat drying facility roof and some walls. Cow farm owner also owns a piece of land near grain drying facility where is a former silo hole. Pictures of the buildings can be seen in chapter 3.7.

Table 2: Palmse population 2011-2017

(https://media.voog.com/0000/0040/2277/files/_Vohma_Palmse_arengukava_uuendus_2017_LIIKMETELE.pdf)

Year	2011	2012	2013	2014	2015	2016	2017	2022
Population	77	77	67	71	71	72	69	62

Table 3: Palmse population by sex and age in 2022

(<https://www.haljala.ee/elanikud-kulades-ja-kantides>)

Men	Women	Age	Total
10	2	0-18 y.o	12
21	16	19-64 y.o	37
8	5	65 + y.o	13
			62

3.3 Voluntary work and events

In such small towns, the locals rely on themselves to organize activities and events for the community. In Savonranta, as we talked to two main activists, there seems to be a local division between the active people and ones who just participate as guests or don't participate at all. All the events and activities are organized by the two women with some help from others, by their explanation – nobody wants to work unpaid as volunteers or at least they're hard to come by. So, it's a lot of work to put on such a small amount of people's shoulders. The other problem with this is because the area is shrinking, in the future there may be a situation where nobody will want to take over the responsibility of arranging the events, so the area will become even less attractive, with nothing to participate in. Currently there is a small board of a couple dozen people that come together to brainstorm ideas and help each other and the local café which caters food for the events, like sports, concerts etc. The only time the community truly comes together is for the local arts and crafts shop, where over 120 people including children from the school participate with their talents in jewelry, woodworks, knitting, postcards, pins and many more, giving the locals a sense of identity, of being very hardworking and creative. So, whilst there is a strong sense of community in Savonranta, not many are willing to put in the work.

In Palmse, again, there is the opposite. The community is much smaller than in Savonranta, so they come together more actively, with almost everybody either arranging or participating in the local events. Outside of Palmse in a nearby village is a community town home where mainly all of the local events take place, and nobody is exempt from participating – from the youngest to the oldest. They have a choir, a dance group, they hold theatre performances, local parties, and play musical instruments, they even have a historical double bass, that one local restored himself. The choir and dance groups even compete in regional competitions, the members of the community hold parades like the punk parade and others, spreading the word further that this community is as strong and diverse as ever. The community hall is also the place where people can gather, since it

doubles as a café, and an overall a safe space for people to gather and do nothing as well. The home was renovated with the help of government funding, however even before the renovations, with the houses poor condition, people we're still using it in good faith. The activist that runs the home also takes care of other local duties and renovations that are funded by the municipality. With this community there is no fear that after the old active people die out, new ones won't come in, because they're already there, many people in their twenties participate in choir and dance and are probably ready to take over once the old leaders are gone. Any local that we interviewed said that the local community is incredibly strong and active and that's one of the main factors that drives people that may have left, come back to the area.



Picture 1, 2 and 3: Restored double bass, community event gallery and concert venue in Palmse community hall.

3.4 Ukrainian refugees in Savonranta

Savonranta has become a safe haven for about 45 people, mostly women and children. They arrived through a connection in Poland. The children do not go to school yet, but are quickly learning Finnish, to integrate into the school system. The local people are helping a lot, by donating clothes, electrical appliances, and other necessary supplies, to an unused clinic, that is being used as a storage space for the items, of which there are many. Currently, the best thing to come out of this is that the abandoned houses behind the firehouse are now occupied by the refugees, which brings new life into the houses. The refugees get their food stamps in Savonlinna and shop there. The women who can't work because of the language barrier are contributing with their arts and crafts at the communal shop, about the men is hard to say, since talking to a little boy we found that his father stayed behind in Ukraine, which can only mean that many men of these families

may have done the same. However, the refugees don't know if they're going to be staying in Savonranta and make it their forever home, but for the time being they are integrating themselves into the community and helping shrinkage by just being there, so it's a good start for the area if they decide to host more Ukrainians, that will occupy the rest of the empty spaces in the area.

3.5 Infrastructure and places

In Savonranta there are some abandoned buildings that are in varying conditions but mostly they can be renovated and repurposed. The old gas station along the main road is probably the biggest eyesore but not, particularly a big problem. The old municipal office is partially empty and now at least two artists have their studios in the building but there is room for more and there have been talks with Savonlinna about turning it into a remote office space. Savonranta-house is also partially empty and some of the spaces are used by authors and locals for singing etc. Next summer they will host a Ukrainian coffee shop in Savonranta-house. Just outside of the village there is a large and very new industrial complex known to locals as Darecon-building after the company that built it. In the village, there are a few abandoned wooden houses, but they could still be used as summer cottages. Just outside the center there is a big old house that was fully renovated, and it sits on a hill overlooking the village and it's owned by a private owner. The roads in the village are in a mediocre condition and the roads leading to Savonranta are in varying conditions. The restaurant in the harbor is currently under renovation and the building itself is new but the rest of the harbor infrastructure is lacking comparatively. There are some recreational vehicle parking spots and tent spaces, but the sauna and restrooms are old. The nature around Savonranta is varied with lakes and forests surrounding the village. Close to the village, there is a lake made by a meteorite strike and there are apparently these mystical lights spotted which cannot be explained and there are two caves that are told to be magical and tied to old Finnish mythology. The village also has a gravel-surfaced sports stadium with a covered spectator stand.

In Palmse the most important physical attributes are the manor, two metal factory sites and the old, abandoned farm buildings. The community hall is located just outside of Palmse but functionally it's part of it. There are a few apartment blocks and a kindergarten between the manor and the industrial area and there are some detached houses littered along the main road going through Palmse and in the fields. Palmse is surrounded by national parks north and south. There's an old cowhouse that needs a new purpose and the grain drying building too. The cowhouse is owned by

an old lady who has been unwilling to part from it and the metal factory next door would be willing to buy it but without success. The grain drying building is owned by one of the metal factory workers who inherited it from his father, and he is interested in giving the building a new life or at least attempting to before selling it. The manor consists of about 40 different buildings and some of them are under different regional ownership (Lahemaa national park information center and Environmental board. In the manor ground, there are two restaurants and there is a third restaurant across the road. New two detached houses are being built in the area, but they are too expensive for the local workers.

3.6 Public transportation

Both towns have the issue that locals must be reliant on personal cars to navigate their lives. As we have observed and spoken to the locals, most families in Savonranta own at least two cars, since both the woman and the man of the house need to get to their jobs. One of the women we spoke to said that they make trips to Savonlinna and other neighboring towns for different purposes almost every day and with the rising gas prices it's just very inconvenient. There is one bus that goes to Savonlinna twice a day, but if you need to go somewhere else you have to go there first and find a different bus transfer and of course be back by the time the second bus of the day can take you home, which doesn't give you enough time to run your errands or you need to manage your time very efficiently. The municipality does not care about this and sees no reason to expand public transport to the area as the main inhabitants come only in the summer with cars and the locals have adapted to just driving. Newcomers who don't drive or would like not to drive would be deterred from moving to the area, as it's also not very ecological since there are no electric car charging ports as well. No train comes to the area either and there are no plans for at least one to be integrated.

Palmse is in a similar situation, with only one bus per day that comes through the town. Locals rely on cars as well to get them where they need to be, it's essential, since schools, medical centers, banks etc. are located outside of the town in nearby cities like Rakvere or even Tallinn. Again, this is not cost or environmentally friendly with no electrical car charging ports or even a gas station anywhere near the area. No other forms of transportation exist either, no train, no tram. Just to live everyday life, go to work, take your kids to school – you need a car. There is no prospect of this changing since the population of Palmse is very small, even though it's growing, the people already

know that at least one car is needed to survive here, and the municipality doesn't see the point as well.

3.7 Google Street View historical comparison



Picture 4 and 5: Savonranta gas station in 2011 (still operating) and 2022 (abandoned).

Next to the main grocery store of Savonranta there is an abandoned gas station that significantly decreases the visual enjoyment of the village. In picture 4 and 5 is visible difference of the same spot of land in 2011 and 2022. The gas station has Russian owners who are not ready to tear it down because the ground underneath needs to be removed as it might be contaminated, and it is a big and expensive project. Inside of it there is a functional furnished space that can, in theory, be used for events.



Picture 6 and 7: A building in the center of Savonranta in 2011 and 2022.

Savonranta used to have a bank (Picture 6), however now it is gone (Picture 7). There is no other bank now so the villagers have to drive outside to get the services. Also, instead of pharmacy, in the building is now located a *forest owner service office*. The pharmacy has been moved to the same building as the main grocery store. Across the road there is a notice board and one of the

notices is for help with governmental internet services, like taxes and Kansaneläkelaitos (social service institute).



Picture 8 and 9: Shop and café in the center of Savonranta in 2011 and 2022.

On the same street there is a building that serves multiple purposes – a café and a universal products store. Based on pictures from Google Street view (picture 8 and 9), there used to be only a store, but then via expansion sometime after 2011 a café was opened too. The place is a significant meeting point for the locals; we observed them spending time right outside the building.



Picture 10 and 11: Industrial building in Savonranta in 2011 (with cars) and 2022 (unused).

Just outside of the town there is a relatively big industrial building that is unused. In comparison between 2011 and 2022 (pictures 10 and 11) it is easily noticeable that the number of cars in the parking lot has drastically decreased. The building used to be used by a company that dealt with medical equipment, however the company moved to the nearest big city Savonlinna indicating that Savonranta is not suitable place for a business like this. Now the unused space, that is still in a good shape, has a potential to be adapted for the needs of the local community.



Pictures 12 and 13: Palmse cow farm in 2019 and 2022 (abandoned).

In Palmse there are two buildings in a critically bad state. The first one is a complex for a cow farm. Even though it is in very bad shape, just three years ago it was still being used. The complex gives the impression that no improvements have been made since the Soviet times. In picture # we can see that the roof has already started to degrade, and now (picture #) it has already partially collapsed. The building is unusable, and any repair would cost more than just rebuilding the entire thing. The land is highly wanted by the metal company next doors, however because of some historical argument the owner of the land refuses to sell it. Which makes the property an annoyance to the huge burden for the landscape and municipality. We see no other suitable solution besides tearing down the old buildings and, likely, selling the land to the metal company. Also tearing down the building seems wise because when building a living space, there has to be an environmental evaluation done to see if the ground has not been polluted by farm activity and if construction work does not affect the environment. Also, Lahemaa national park is very near so that has to be also taken into consideration.



Picture 14 and 15: Palmse grain processing factory in 2019 and 2022



Picture 16 and 17: Palmse grain factory control panel and a dangerous state example

The other old building is the grain factory. It is in a very bad state, dirty and dangerous, however, as a surprise for us, it can still operate. The supporting structure of the building is in a good shape and can be used, if renovated, as a basis for a warehouse, workshop, or other kind of industrial space. The owner of the factory hopes to find a reasonable and profitable idea of transforming the space, though still considers selling the property. When comparing the building in 2019 (Picture #) and 2022 (Picture #), one notable difference is the use of garage. In the frontal part there is a room that has been revitalized for a use of car and motorbike repair.

4 Analysis

The case study areas share very different past and projected future so their take on smart shrinking is different. In the case of Savonranta shrinking is much more present in the village than in Palmse where the atmosphere is much livelier and housing market is seller's market. Savonranta is facing further decay and shrinking and Palmse seems to be maintaining its population and job base. Palmse in that regard has no immediate need for smart shrinking measures but in the long run it is something that should be taken into account. Savonranta has a much tougher situation and turning the tide is probably impossible and therefore smart shrinking measures are vital for not only Savonranta but also for Savonlinna municipality because of their large stake in Savonranta. Savonranta hasn't given up on maintaining their livelihood and quality of life, but they are facing an uphill battle against realities. They are growing older and fewer, and the services will be oversized at some point. The health services that are still in the village are probably one of the lifelines that keep at least the elderly people in the village.

In Savonranta many things rely on the two ladies being active and if they cannot stay active anymore due to some reason, it will be a big blow for the community. The idea of hiring a “village coordinator” would negate this scenario and give the village a much better chance of surviving and shrinking smartly. The absence of coordination might also mean a loss of identity.

Palmse has a very vibrant local community and resilient local job market with the other metal factory being market leader in their segment and focused on import markets. For smart shrinking Palmse does not offer many immediate places to put it into use and there is more of a need for smart and slow growth. Some of the things that would make the village more welcoming would be a playground which is missing from the village and a foot walk and/or bike path from municipality center to Palmse.

Table 4: Atmosphere and shrinking keywords in Savonranta Palmse

	Savonranta	Palmse
Social atmosphere	Finnish mythology and stories Graying village Artists and jouhikko ¹ Handicraft shop Small active group	Young workers Children Manor Active community hall
Physical atmosphere	Savonranta-house Sports stadium Harbor Meteorite lake Caves	Manor Metal factories Kindergarten Community hall Lahemaa national park
Smart Shrinking	Building multi-use Summer events Story marketing and events Professional coordination	Building multi-use Community hall Playground Footpath

¹ Violin-like music instrument traditional in the region

In the table above are the main attributes of each village's social and physical atmosphere and the possibilities they open for smart shrinking. In Savonranta the best opportunities to practice smart shrinking are giving the old buildings a new purpose, putting more emphasis on summertime events to keep the local entrepreneurs fed and clothed during the off-season to combat out-migration. In line with this is building the image as village of stories and mythical locations that could bring much needed money to the village even if it does not increase employment. An events coordinator would be very good for the village to bring together smaller entrepreneurs and build up bigger and more lucrative events.

5 Recommendations

5.1 Recommendations for Savonranta

For Savonranta, mainly the recommendations would be to improve social media activity, like promotions on *Instagram*, using hashtags and tags, and the newly popular *Tik tok* app, to reach people all over the world and overall platforms so that more people could know that such villages exist. Also, tourism perspective should be expanded, such as focusing on heritage because the village has very mysterious lightning shrimps, that may cause the nearby lake to glow, a hell's cave, and many haunting stories. Also, an online web page could be made where local people's handicrafts are being sold or shown so that more people could see the local handicrafts. Nowadays making a webpage is not difficult or expensive. The old Russian-owned gas station can be given a new life when it comes back into the municipal hands.

Our suggestions may be

- a.) since covid-19 started, the local senior citizens haven't been playing their regular bingo games, that however, is going to change soon and they need a new space for that activity, so it can be made into a game lounge, not only for the seniors but also for kids and other locals,
- b.) remodel the area into an information centre for tourists, so they can find out about the local activities and upcoming events, buy souvenirs etc. and lastly
- c.) make it into a quaint café, where people can bring their kids, or other family members to spend time together, since there seems to be a lack of such places, with there being only one family friendly café in the area and a local pub that isn't so suited for younger people.

Another issue is the abandoned empty space behind the grocery store Sale. The activists in the area suggest making a green garden space for communal use, planting fruit trees, and building green houses and we agree with this idea, since it's a complicated area where there is not much of anything else one can do.

5.2 Recommendations for Palmse

As for Palmse, since the area itself isn't prone to shrinkage, the complete opposite is happening – it's growing, so there needs to be more space for new arrivals to live in, that are affordable and have good living conditions, however for that to happen there needs to be a change in mentality, for many apartments, the case is that they're empty, and the owners or inheritors are not willing to sell, so there should be a push by the municipality to release these spaces into the commercial selling space. Additionally, there are two abandoned buildings in the area, one cow farm, and one grain processing factory. The cow farm is in an interesting limbo, because it's so close to Palms OÜ and they are wanting to expand, but the owners of the farm are not willing to sell their land, because of an alleged argument between the owners' son who was working there and the company, maybe in the future the farmland will be sold, because there is no other use for it, as it's in a very bad condition, the only other choice is to demolish it. The land piece near the graining processing factory is empty with a former silo hole, our contact person was very interested in doing a greenhouse in a silo pit where is fertile land for it, also a vineyard or vegetable-fruit garden where locals can grow produce and sell it to the mansion or take it to themselves. The grain processing factory is also in the hands of a worker for Palms OÜ, he isn't interested in selling, nor are there buyers for it, the owner is interested in finding new uses for the building. After speaking to him and getting a look around, it makes sense why the man wouldn't want to sell it instantly. It holds sentimental value as his father's company, so finding it a new life would bring even more memories to the area. Firstly, one of the many spaces in the building is already being rented as a car repair shop, the owner has ideas of maybe doing the same for the other more usable spaces, for example, one large square-shaped brick space could be used as wood storage for a company, as he already got an offer for that, the other is a long, about 40-meter corridor type of space with high ceilings, that could be cleaned out and used as a rented storage space as well. For the rest of the building, it's impossible to remove the machinery, since it was built in soviet times, the machines came first and the building was built around them, so the only solution for those spaces is to tear them down

and sell the machines for scrap metal. Because the owner was brought to many ideas in the past like a go-kart place or a greenhouse, but again, these ideas fall flat if the machines are still inside, and you can't remove them. Once the area is cleaned out and torn down and enough money is made from the rented spaces, then you can think of new ways to use the empty space. Because, also, many people and companies don't see the appeal in an abandoned commercial space, since people are lazy, once the whole demolition part is taken care of for them, offers might come to him, on how to use the space. Building a new one is much easier as well, since you have more options, like an ice-skating rink for people in the winter to enjoy or a skate park. Once the necessary steps are taken, it is recommended for the owner to seek architectural or structural engineering help from university startups, that just need an opportunity to shine with a space like this.

6 Conclusions

The study areas have considerable differences which were to be expected and their needs for smart shrinking also differ. Palmse has an established tourism-business, but Savonranta could possibly benefit from growing their tourism. Then again it is important to consider how much tourism is still beneficial for the locals and how much tourism is viable. Same issue as with population, not all places can grow at the same time and there is some level of zero-sum game involved in competition for tourists.

Old unused buildings seem to be the bane of existence for depopulating areas and finding other uses for them a big unifying theme. Buildings that have no use and only use energy and cause expenses are obviously a problem and finding use for them a good practice, but smart shrinking must be more than just that. Would it be possible to reserve the thinking to finding places for people instead of people for places? This way it would be human centered, not infrastructure centered. In our understanding of smart shrinking, it is not a cost saving measure but a tool to maintain reasonable living conditions.

The issue of employment is a tricky one. On one hand people need to have a livelihood and while living off subsidies is possible, it will hurt the public budget and cause further problems, on the other hand getting new business to open shop in remote and already depopulating areas will be difficult. Savonranta especially has a geographically demanding position and suffers from long distances whereas Palmse has relatively good location which is evident by the companies present.

Multilocality and remote work might offer some relief to keep the shrinking at a manageable level, but it will not be a silver bullet for these places if other services and everyday life amenities are not present.

Large scale money and events seem to be hard to gather in small rural areas and coordinating what little resources there are most likely has good effects. Personal relationships between the most important actors have been observed to be very important in either forwarding or hampering coordination and effective use of resources. Single entrepreneurs or village activists can achieve only so much alone.

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Appendix

Appendix 1: List of interviews

Date and time	Places	Interviewee	Information
5.5.2022 13:00	Savonranta handicraft shop, Savonranta house	Two local activists and entrepreneurs	Local stories, development, tourism, local activity, employment, summer events.
6.5.2022 11:00	Shop and restaurant in Savonranta	Entrepreneur couple	Local employment, summer events.
6.5.2022 12:00	Savonranta, old municipal office	Local artist	Local intangible heritage, development, vision on the future of the village.
6.5.2022 12:30	Parking place in Savonranta	Ukrainian refugee boy	Life is good, being taught Finnish.
10.5.2022 14:30	Abandoned properties in Palmse, Community house	Municipality worker	Excursion around the two abandoned properties; overall history and information of Palmse; main local problems. Cultural life of local community.
11.5.2022 13:00	Cages behind the tavern in Palmse	Rabbit	Food is quite nice in there.
11.5.2022 13:30	Palmse tavern “Palmse kõrts”	Waitress	Not a local but comes to work from Rakvere, tourists use the tavern more than locals.
11.5.2022 13:45	Palmse tavern “Palmse kõrts”	Manor receptionist	Comes to work from Pärnu, majority workers are locals, mansion one of the biggest employers. Works in Palmse for over a year but is not involved in community.

Date and time	Places	Interviewee	Information
11.5.2022 14:00	“Kastekann” restaurant	Owner of the restaurant	Locals do not want to work long hours in restaurant, trouble staying alive all year long, must find ways to diversify the scope of business by, for example, renting trailer space or accommodation.
11.5.2022 14:30	Forestry trailers and cranes factory “Palms”	Manager	Make forest machinery like trailers and forest cranes. Most workers are locals, 120 workers, one of the highest salaries in the region, hard to find apartments or houses
11.5.2022 15:45	Grocery store “Mõisa pood”	Shop assistant	Tight community- plan different events, mostly tourists now from Finland, locals have jobs nearby
11.5.2022 16:00	Lahemaa National Park Visitor Center	Shop and museum worker	Nature trails, tourism, museum.
11.5.2022 16:40	Palmse village centre	Local	Young mother, hard to find home in Palmse, que in the kindergarten, low unemployment rate, living here about 1 year, wanted to get away from the city, no jobs for women, does not participate in community events, would like playground for children and a light traffic road.
11.5.2022 17:40	Võsupere Youth Library	Librarian	Local, tight community, empty apartments what are not put on sale, children do not have free time activities (playground), no job offers for women,

Date and time	Places	Interviewee	Information
			new development expensive, iron factories keep the area alive, optimistic for future-young families and former locals coming back.
12.5.2022 15:30	Abandoned grain factory	Owner of the property	Got the property as a heritage, now considers making it profitable, before giving it up and selling it.