

Jēkabpils

A report on Smart Shrinkage and rightsizing

A PLACE TO LIVE... FOR NOW

Nordplus Baltic research project 2023

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Executive summary

Jēkabpils, a Latvian town situated in the central Daugava River, has shrunk considerably in the last three decades, having lost 37% of its population. However the signs of decline were not as obvious as one might think as the community exhibited clear signs of strong place attachment and resilience. These considerations led to the following research questions:

- 1) *What aspects of Jēkabpils are important to community members?*
- 2) *How might long-term population change impact these aspects?*
- 3) *What strategies could be used in Jēkabpils to improve resilience to population change? (rightsizing)*

The chosen research approach was based on qualitative empirical methods; interviews and observations, and collected data which identified significant themes for the inhabitants such as challenges the community faces and services and qualities the inhabitants value about the city. To answer the questions the collected data was put into theoretical frames of place attachment, rightsizing and social resilience. The understandings and discussion of the results in the theoretical framework leads us to evaluate potential solutions for the preservation of Jēkabpils as a regional centre of services without investing in a growth based paradigm:

- To consider place attachment in a more central role in informing population change policy through increased community engagement for planning of municipal affairs.
- To introduce rightsizing in municipal policies by prioritising repurposing land use of abandoned areas and grey sites.
- To implement continuous monitoring of the effects and perceptions of population change in interview processes to ensure understanding of the impacts of population fluctuations on the quality of life
- To introduce more advanced options of studies in the technical college, focused on local needs of professionals, such as teaching, nursing and other such related occupations.

Introduction

The first decades of the XXIst century has seen an immense amount of change in communities across the western world. Changing socioeconomic and political frameworks led to unprecedented migrations across regions of Europe. Even in 2023, these changes are still felt, as the general trends of population in eastern Europe seems to continue to decline, with even the urban core of certain cities, such as Vilnius and Riga, are declining in population in favour of suburban towns and more peripheral areas (Bērziņš & Zvidriņš, 2011). Many factors contributed to this phenomena, chief among those being economic migration caused by the fall of the Soviet Union and lower birth rates.

The town of Jēkabpils in Latvia, situated on the central Daugava River, hasn't escaped this decline in population numbers, which declined from its peak population in 1992 of 31 525 to 19 448 in 2021. Having lost 37% of its population in about 30 years (OSM Latvia, 2023), one might think that this community is left destitute, with no services, a stagnant economy and many social problems. However, such perceptions reside strongly in the camp of a growth paradigm (Krebs, 2002), which tends to perceive declining populations as the source of all communities' downfall. While some of these impacts of a shrinking community might be negative, there are also opportunities for Jēkabpils to adapt and find new ways to thrive despite a declining population. In this report, we will observe how the community of Jēkabpils demonstrates strong place attachment, resiliency and rightsizing. We will discuss the implications of smart shrinkage as an important concept in analysing the town's services and amenities and how the perceptions of inhabitants demonstrate that Jēkabpils is a post-shrinkage city, which offers most services and amenities needed despite an important population decline.

Research Question

How is long term population change impacting Jēkabpils and what strategies could be used to ensure resilience?

Research Aims

1. What aspects of Jēkabpils are important to community members?
2. How might long-term population change impact these aspects?
3. What strategies could be used in Jēkabpils to improve resilience to population change?
(rightsizing)

Background

In this section the current state of literature related to the research question is examined. Firstly an overview of shrinkage is provided, including common definitions, and possible implications. Secondly the case study used in this report is introduced along with relevant demographics and geopolitical factors relevant to shrinkage. Relevant theories and concepts are also discussed in detail including place attachment and resilience. Lastly current policies to address shrinkage are considered, highlighting the role of rightsizing in preparing regions for demographic change.

Shrinkage

Bănică et. al (2017) consider shrinkage in their paper as a decline in population and/or economy. The causes of shrinkage are complex and diverse, such as deindustrialisation, financial crises, social and cultural phenomena, environmental problems or the refusal of innovation and changes (ebd.). Effects that are caused by shrinkage are such as the closing of services, the lack of job options, high unemployment rate, loss of working social and transportation infrastructure and urban utilities.

Figure XY shows a schematic view on the topic of shrinkage with connecting reasons and consequences.

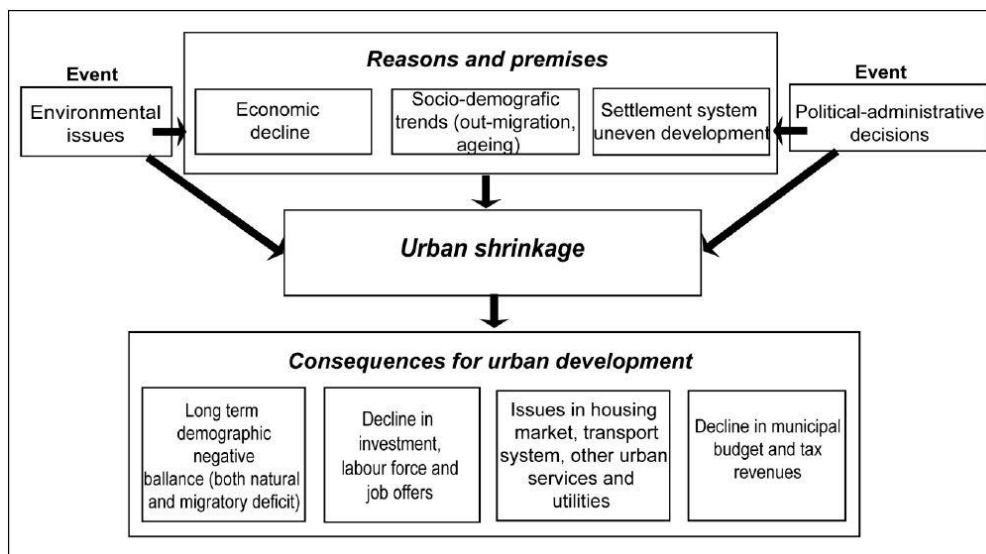


Figure XY
(Bănică et. al
2017)

The OECD (2022) published a report regarding adapting to shrinkage in Estonia. The paper highlighted key findings from the shrinkage assessment, as well as key recommendations to 'shrink smart'. Smart shrinkage is the name given to frameworks designed to help declining communities maintain or improve their standard of living despite a loss of population and associated services. The paper found that although areas were depopulating, the amount of land being developed was increasing. This means that land-use can become less efficient and environmental performance can decrease. This can especially be the case when areas of farmland and forest are developed. Another key finding discussed is the negative impact of depopulation on existing regional disparities as population increase is concentrated in and around large urban areas. This can have numerous knock on effects in rural areas which are at risk of being 'left behind'. Challenges related to providing quality education were also highlighted including the difficulties in attracting teachers and the lack of post secondary education options for residents in shrinking areas. The remaining findings focused on the short-comings of current planning and finance systems which were not designed with shrinkage in mind. This can also impact municipality and regional governance that are not aware of smart shrinkage approaches. The report also offered recommendations, many of which call for reform of systems and approaches which will require first and foremost a change of mindset amongst policy and decision makers. However, this report has no mention of the perception of shrinkage from the point of view of those directly affected by shrinkage i.e. a community member living in a shrinking area. In this report, shrinkage is examined through a place attachment and resiliency lens in order to better ensure the quality of life of those living in shrinking areas is maintained or improved.

Case Study: Jēkabpils

This report analyses the impacts of long-term population change on the municipality of Jēkabpils located on the Daugava River, Latvia. The municipality of Jēkabpils, including the main urban area and the surrounding areas, has a population of 39 700 inhabitants (OSM Latvia, 2023). It is an important regional centre, being the biggest town of its administrative region. The town of Jēkabpils, being smaller in population, includes both urban banks of the Daugava, including the historical cities of Jēkabpils and Krustpils, both merged during the soviet era.



Figure 1.

Jēkabpils municipality and its administrative territorial region.

(Source: Laurent Trottier; Government of Latvia)

The town of Jēkabpils was founded in the early 17th century by Orthodox old believers, fleeing persecution from Russia (Jēkabpils county, 2021). Its development was facilitated by the presence of rapids, which forced travellers and merchants going down the Daugava river to stop through Jēkabpils for their transit. The town is located on the banks of the Daugava river, around halfway from Riga and Daugavpils. It is an important economic and geographic regional centre.

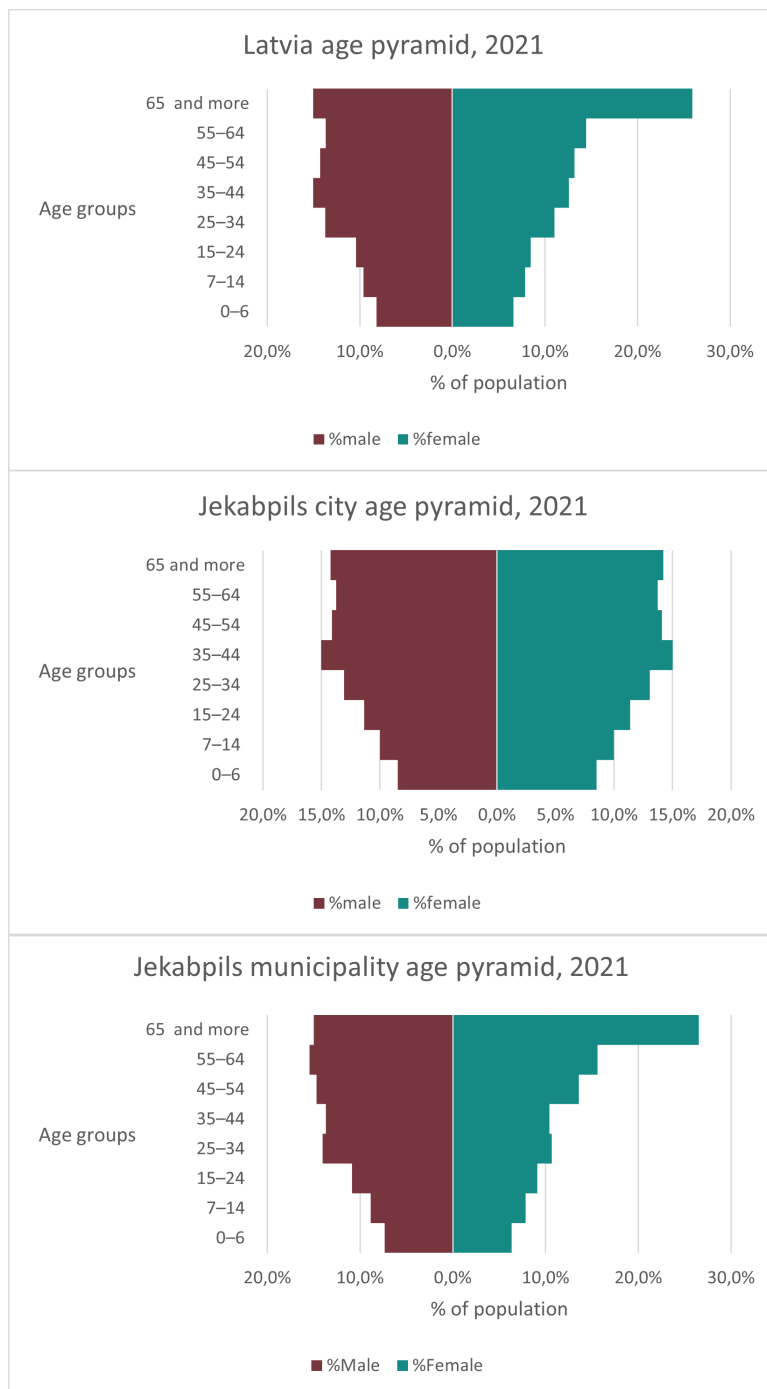


Figure 2.

Age pyramids of Jekabpils, its surrounding areas and Latvia. (Source: CSB Latvia)

As previously mentioned, Jēkabpils reached its population peak in 1992 and lost 37% of its population, reaching the current numbers of 19 448 inhabitants. Many factors contributed to this population decline, economic emigration being chief amongst them (Bērziņš & Zvidriņš, 2011).

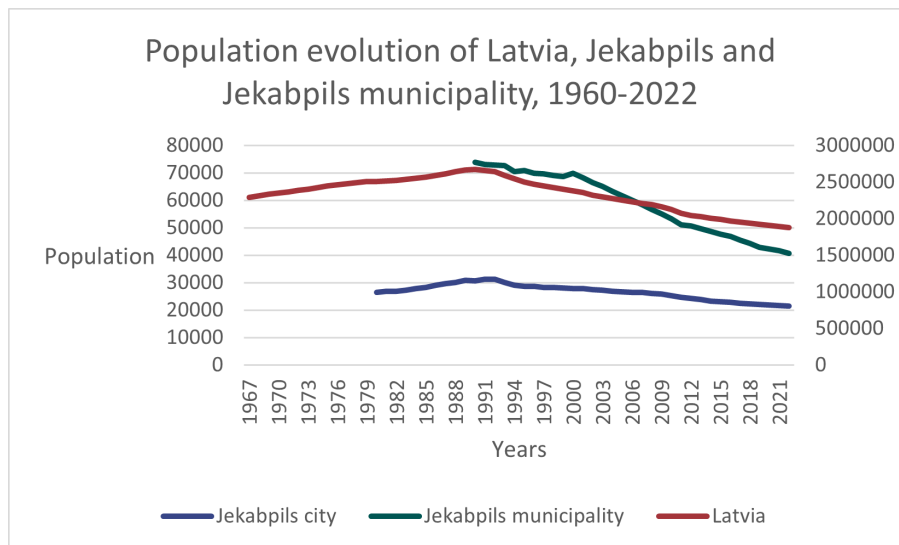
The age pyramids in Figure 2 indicate the composition of the population of the town of Jēkabpils, the municipality (which includes surrounding areas) and Latvia. We can see at first that all three indicate an ageing population, with a declining birthrate and higher life expectancy.

The regional age pyramid of the municipality of Jēkabpils is very similar to the national levels of Latvia, with a very high proportion of 65 and plus women, which follows historical models with the emigration of several working age men in the 1990's and early 2000's with the end of the Soviet occupation in the late 1990's and after 2004 with the entrance of the Baltic

states into the European Union (Engbersen & Jansen, 2013). Surprisingly, the population levels are more balanced in the town of Jēkabpils. This might be due to the still very present balance between rural and urban areas in Latvia and most Baltic states (Bērziņš & Zvidriņš, 2011; Aidukaite & Blažienė, 2021). Older women, often single or widowed, also tend to live in more rural areas in the Baltic countries, where they are closer to their support systems, which might explain this important rural-urban divide between men and women. Generally, men also tend to die earlier than women, for many health and socioeconomic reasons (Schmerling, 2022), leaving a higher imbalance of the sexes for the older age groups. The high number of elders comparative to the number of younger people and active working age adults is similar to other western industrialised nations, post-demographic transition, (Frejka & Sobotka, 2008). These observations allow us to understand that Jēkabpils follows similar patterns of demography in Europe and in the country, with a few exceptions in the sex balance of its regional area. This demographic transition towards an ageing society has serious implications for the access to services, especially for more rural communities such as Jēkabpils.

The overall population changes in the town also reflect a similar reality of an ageing population coupled with a steady population decline since the peak in the 1990's. Jēkabpils and later its municipal territory have also followed this trend of population decline after the 1990's .

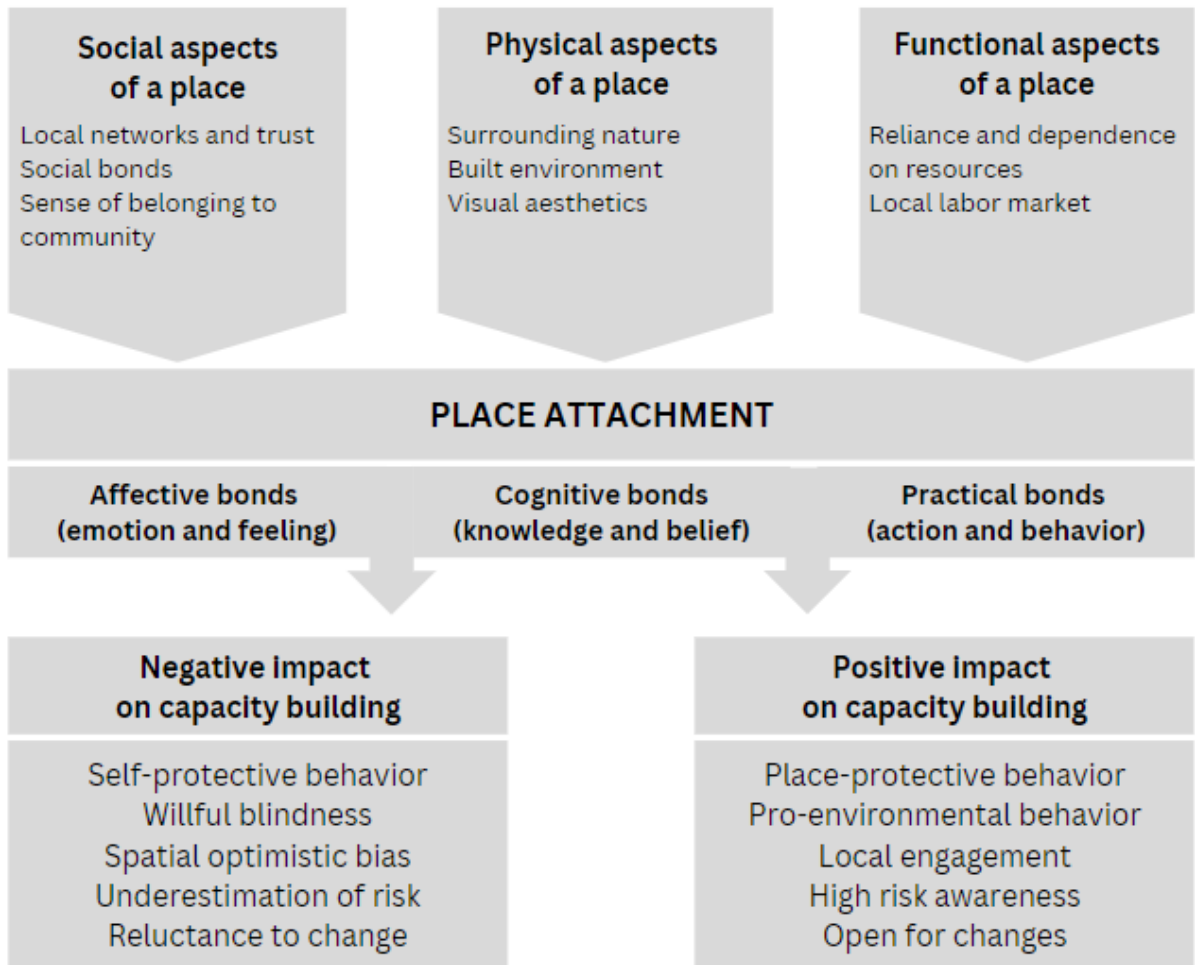
Quantitative data indicates a decline in Jēkabpils Municipality, however this report focuses on qualitative indicators of decline using concepts of place attachment and resilience to better understand the perceptions of shrinkage from the point of view of community members.



*Figure 3.
Population
development of Latvia,
Jekabpils and Jekabpils
municipality from 1960
to 2022 (Source: CSB
Latvia)*

Why do people live in Jēkabpils? - Place attachment

Place attachment is a field of study which examines the bond people have with places in relation to certain social, physical, or functional aspects of the place (Lewicka, 2011). There is a large body of research which exists surrounding place attachment (Scannell and Gifford, 2010, Lewicka, 2011, Bonaiuto et al., 2016, de Dominicis et al., 2015, Blondin, 2021). Scannell and Gifford, (2010) with the aim of understanding place attachment, broke down the term into three dimensions. These are the person, the process, and the place. The person dimension - who is attached and why - encompasses an individual's as well as a group's attachment to a place, with group and individual's attachment often overlapping. For individuals, place attachment can come from places which connect them to strong memories or feelings. This can also come from experiences in a place, such as milestones. For groups attached to a place, shared meanings can lead to a willingness to preserve for cultural or historical reasons. These shared meanings can be passed down through generations. The place dimension of place attachment refers to the place in which individuals or groups are attached, and the dimension can be divided into social and physical places. Physical attachment differs at the spatial level, for example: home, community, and region. Social attachment tends to be stronger and includes social ties, familiarity, and togetherness. In general, it seems place attachment is shaped by different factors and these factors can shape how people or communities perceive and accept changes including flood risk or population decline (Blondin, 2021, Scannell and Gifford, 2010). Kongsager et al. (2023) created a place attachment diagram to connect aspects of place attachment to capacity building in communities (see Figure). The diagram draws on Lewicka, (2011) and Scannell and Gifford (2010)'s understanding of place attachment based on three different aspects of place - social, physical and functional, and the three different bonds to place - affective, cognitive and practical. Place attachment theory is used in this report to establish why people live in Jēkabpils currently. By doing this we can then ascertain what aspects of the community are important to safeguard or adapt inline with the depopulation of the community. In addition the most at risk aspects can be highlighted to ensure the resiliency of Jēkabpils going forward.



Kongsager et al. (2023) Place Attachment Framework

Resiliency

Resiliency encompasses persistence, adaptation, and transformation, it is about the capacity to withstand external and internal changes (Davoudi, 2018). Community resilience, therefore, is the ability of a community to deal with and adjust to changes including political, social and environmental. Resilience should create stability after being affected by a negative event. Recently, resiliency has become an important concept in studies relating to vulnerable settlements (Kokorsch, 2023). Community resilience has different dimensions as highlighted by Amundsen, (2012) such as resources, networks, services, institutions, and people-place connections.

The main critique formulated against the concept of resilience in the paper by Keck and Skadapolrak (2013) is the fact that many authors chose a naturalistic approach which leads to a “depoliticization” of societal processes. The concept of social resilience referring to cities acknowledges a political dimension and the importance of power relations (Keck and Skadapolrak 2013). The authors identified three relevant dimensions of social resilience:

First, the coping capacities, the abstract notion of the ability of social actors to cope with, react to and overcome acute adversities (Keck and Skadapolrak 2013). Second, adaptive capacities, the capacities to learn from past events for the future and third the transformative capacities which refer to the ability to implement and transform their community in terms of an improvement of resilience.

Resiliency and place attachment are related as attached people often express their attachment in ways which improve resilience including place protective behaviour, pro-environmental behaviour, local engagement and openness to change. However, place attachment can also manifest in ways which negatively impact resilience including willful blindness, spatial optimistic bias and reluctance to change.

In the paper of Bănică et. al (2017), the authors consider resilience as a theoretical framework to evaluate shrinkage by not focusing on the performance of the town in a crisis, but the general ability of coping with shocks. In the paper shrinkage is considered as a sort of crisis that the town has to handle. The most important part of the resiliency of cities is the capacity to

learn from past events or challenges. In the argumentation of the authors, “smart shrinkage” is one form of resiliency towards urban shrinkage by learning how to face the challenges emerging from population change. Smart shrinkage as a tool of resilience to population change can take many forms, one of which is rightsizing, the strategy focused on in this report.

Rightsizing

The continuing urbanisation of highly developed nations has long been seen as the inescapable law of the land naturalised through neoliberal policy discourses and supported by the perceived super linearity between urbanisation and growth of efficiency (Coppola 2019; Hynynen et al. 2020). Towns losing population in the U.S. rust belt as well as old industrial towns in Europe have held onto the sometimes irrational hope of reversing their decline by searching for outside financial investment in the hopes of revitalising their economies and attracting more people (Coppola 2019). The macro trends of urbanisation usually mean that population decline is not easily reversed. Thus, cities and municipalities often tie themselves down with expensive and unrealistic development plans that eventually fail to have the desired effects of regrowth, and rather produce a lock-in effect forcing declining municipalities down a certain path of development. If the benefits of economic growth and innovation continue to concentrate on a few major urban centres, regional inequality increases without mechanisms to distribute the benefits across all regions (Hynynen et al. 2020).

Rightsizing has emerged as one of the breakaway concepts presenting an alternative to the paradigm of community development through growth. Along with the similar concept of smart shrinking and the degrowth paradigm, rightsizing challenges the idea that the wellbeing of a community is solely determined by values such as population and economic growth. Coppola (2019) argues that the great financial crisis of the 2000s presented communities, especially in the U.S., an opportunity to break free from the perpetual growth paradigm to experiment with new types of policy. This new form of urban policy making should in his view focus on tracking the unfolding of shrinking communities’ individual trajectories over time while also evaluating continuities and departures in local urban policy and planning. Communities should investigate new ways of engaging its endogenous resources through, for example, local procurement policies and new ways of accessing and mobilising land for re-use or re-zoning (ibid.).

Hynynen et al. (2020) argue that in the process of rightsizing a community, place-based solutions are required. In their view every community has a size which corresponds to its development prerequisites. Place based solutions in rightsizing can be utilised by investigating the starting point and unique characteristics of each community. Furthermore, planning systems and policy shouldn't strive towards a predetermined outcome, but instead should focus on setting qualitative goals for development. Values such as population number, density or the extent of territories should make way for new ways of measuring a towns' prosperity. It must be kept in mind that regions are never entirely separate from each other, but form a network where places are affected by both endogenous and exogenous factors. (ibid.) Therefore, the process of rightsizing must also account for the communities' place in the broader network.

Németh and Hollander (2016) approach rightsizing through the lens of planning for abandoned property. They argue that municipalities can, through quantitative and qualitative measures such as property inventory, community meetings and identifying institutional partners, plan a strategy for areas that could be suitable for redevelopment in case of abandonment. A municipality could utilise these areas to enhance the living spaces of the remaining residents, by creating new parks, community gardens or bike paths, while setting suitable areas aside for later development. Such plans come with challenges of funding issues and community backlash, but Németh and Hollander (2016) argue they could also provide a way for communities to repurpose otherwise dilapidating properties and provide the community with such a plan a way to improve the quality of life for the communities' residents.

Gaps in the literature

One gap in the literature regarding smart shrinkage is the lack of research on perceptions of shrinkage among different stakeholders, including residents, and policymakers. While there has been significant research on the impacts of depopulation and demographic change on areas, there is less research on how different community actors perceive these changes and how they respond to them. Perceptions of shrinkage can help to ensure that smart shrinkage strategies are responsive to the needs and priorities of the community. The inclusion of place attachment and resiliency in smart shrinkage frameworks is important as place attachment can determine the willingness of residents to participate in shrinkage strategies. Overall, there is a need for more research on perceptions of shrinkage in smart shrinkage literature. By better understanding how different people perceive and respond to demographic change, more effective and sustainable strategies for managing these changes in urban and rural areas can be developed.

Method

The research methods for this project aim to understand the aspects of Jēkabpils which community members value the most in order to determine resilience to depopulation in regards to these aspects. The primary method used was interviews to carry out several semi structured in-person interviews. These interviews were supplemented by observations made at different locations in the community. This section outlines the data collection methods used as well as the methods of analysis.

Interviews

Interviews are a useful tool in social research as they can provide in-depth knowledge, they are exploratory and descriptive and can connect the themes of the research with the personal experiences of the participant. A semi-structured format was chosen for the interviews meaning there was a general script, but respondents were free to mention anything they saw relevant. The interviews weren't transcribed in their entirety, instead key notes were written down during the interview. The interview gathered information about why the participant's lived in the community (see Appendix B) and included such things as what they valued the most about the community, what they would change, and how they saw the future. The interviews were used to better understand why people currently live in Jēkabpils in order to expose potential negative impacts from population decline on the quality of life of community members.

The interviews were carried out between 5th and 8th of may and consisted of a total number of 14 separate interviews and 15 interviewees. One of the interviews was a follow up interview with a local guide and the last interview was with a municipality official. The first two the interviews were carried out alongside tours given by local contacts, and in addition to consisting of a larger number of questions (see Appendix A) also involved more open questions about the town and surrounding areas taking the form of an open interview after the prepared questions had been carried out. These interviews also lasted for well over an hour, while most of the rest of the interviews varied in length from 10 to 45 minutes. For the shorter interviews the interviewees were at first selected at random and ended up involving mostly young people who we were able to interview in English. These interviews were carried out using a shorter form of

the interview given to the local contacts (see Appendix B). In order to get a sample more representative of the population demographics we then sought out older people for interviews later in the process. The interviews were carried out in varied public places like the central old-town square, peripheral areas and the town museum. The interviewees were split evenly among genders consisting of seven women and seven men. The interview process took place during a holiday period in Latvia, so there were many people visiting their families. Three of the people interviewed did not live in Jēkabpils anymore, but had grown up there and moved away later for work or studies. Lastly a municipal official was interviewed to follow up on themes that had come up during the previous interviews and find out about the municipalities' policy direction. This last interview did not involve the usual questions but still followed a semi-structured format with pre-prepared questions lasting for a little over an hour.

After the interviews had been completed the raw data was analysed using grounded theory. Grounded theory is a method of qualitative research analysis that involves generating theories to explain the circumstance being studied. The key point of grounded theory is that the theory is generated from the data collected and is therefore 'grounded in the data' (Chong & Yeo, 2015). Grounded theory is particularly useful when current theories are not enough to describe the circumstance being studied. Although there exists a large body of work regarding smart shrinking and rightsizing we decided to use grounded theory in order to create a report that incorporated the frameworks of place attachment and resilience instead of using a pre-existing framework. The data was first reduced to a number of keywords and then reduced further to discover common themes from the interviews. By this method we were able to find out the most salient themes persisting through the interviews.

Observations

The method of ethnographic observation of the people in a town is, as Eckardt (2014) examines, the base of every urban research. It offers the possibility to gain a more accurate insight in the reality of the life of people. Beer (2008) states that the aim of observation is to observe the action of people controlled and documented and gain data that is directly connected to the place, the observation occurs.

Prior to commencing the project, we kept our research about the Municipality to a minimum to reach an unprejudiced picture of the Municipality by doing explorative observations. Initially the method was oriented to Debord's 'Derive' (1958). The study area was first observed using unplanned walks with no predetermined route commencing 05.05.2023. Through this it was possible to base our further research on our perception of the town and not on the general opinion on the town from the media or from the outside. After initial observations and interviews were completed, further observations took place in areas identified as significant for the inhabitants of Jēkabpils. Areas identified as significant were observed using the criteria of demographic groups, number of people passing, and which functions are present. Each observation lasted at least 30 minutes, with some areas requiring more extensive observation.

As the observation method is highly qualitative and specific to this study a description of the observations is now provided. The old-town square, which is in the centre of the town, was deemed as significant and was the site of a community event on the 6th of May. Observations were carried out at 12pm 06.05.2023, during the preparations for the event. The aim was to observe how the square is used by the community. Due to the event this data might be influenced because of the work for the preparation of the event.

Participatory observation was also used At 6pm on the same day, the community event in honour of people that helped during the severe flooding in January took place and the next observation was executed. With additional interviews, it was the aim to get an idea of the sense of community and how people are connected to the town or not.

Participatory observations were also conducted at other community events or locations including a local Hockey Game and the town museum. In addition, tours guided by community contacts took place. Through the not systematised approach to the observation, the locals were able to identify places by themselves that were important for them and the everyday reality of the inhabitants could be captured more easily. The aim of this method was to get to places that are not obvious from our outsider's perspective, but relevant for the inhabitants in different ways.

After a first evaluation of the collected data through the interviews and observations we emerged with themes of significance as well as a theoretical background on which we based our further methods. One topic is related to (social) resilience and one observation took place at the identified places on which resilience manifests, like the dam in terms of flooding and the central square in terms of community building and social resilience. Visual sketches and notes were taken to better document these locations, as it improves the awareness and perception of a particular area of significance (Lavoie, 2005) (Appendix D1) (Appendix D2).

Results

Services / places valued

One of the repeating topics in interviews and observations were the places of importance in the town. These services were mentioned as either places of interest, services, gathering points. Through observation these areas hold a central social role in the everyday lives of the inhabitants of Jēkabpils through either social participation, areas of leisure, places of relaxation, commercial activities and celebrations of the locality. In that way, locals live their everyday lives in this environment and have placed importance to these areas, importantly mentioning them as services and places which hold importance in their lives and thus contribute to the place attachment and sense of place. These services, places and areas are therefore important contributors to how individuals understand and interact with their environment. This is as well reflected in how the community and the local authorities held celebrations to honour people who helped and showed courage during the January 2023 floods, an event which still holds great significance in the collective memory.

This collective understanding and value giving of the town is also reflected in how people are attached to their local sports teams, with most of the crowd being held in a hockey fueled frenzy, chanting and drumming away in the night to encourage their local compatriots. Observations of this event showed great involvement and great excitement from the local crowd, mostly made of locals, all united in cheering and encouraging their teams. Local colours and team jerseys were worn by fans and family members were whipped to a frenzy, chanting their loved one's name to encourage them (Picture 1).



*Picture 1.
Regional league hockey game
(05.05.2023) between teams of Jēkabpils
in white-red and Madona (another town,
regional centre of central Latvia,
northeast of Jēkabpils) in blue.*

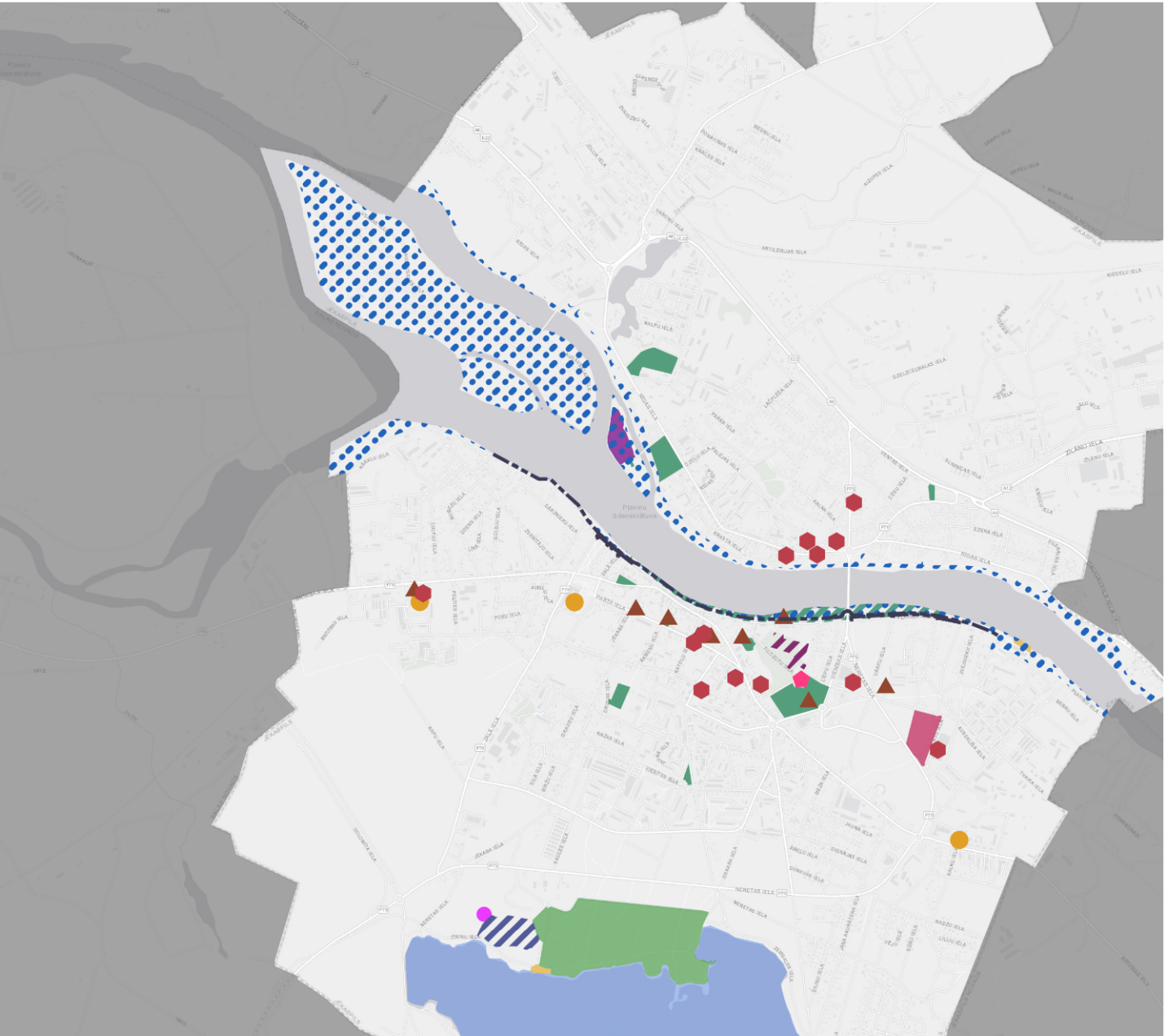
Events taking place in these environments contribute to the affective bonding and cognitive bonds of the community, accumulating a positive impact on capacity building. By experiencing bonding events such as these, inhabitants give value to the environment that composes their town (Kongsager et al. 2023). This also allows us to understand which services and locations are valued in a community, which are to be preserved in a shrinking or rightsizing context. With a declining population, Jēkabpils has and will experience rightsizing which will lead to the closure and decline in access of a few services.

The following map indicates these locations mentioned in interviews and which were then observed as areas of transit and community gathering, economic activity and leisure. The importance of mapping these services and areas allows us to understand the dangers and risks, physical and social, posed to these areas of interest.

Most of the services, and indeed the whole town centre, is located in proximity to the flooding zones or in the flooding zones. Technically protected by the embankment dam, some of these places were still flooded in the 2023 floods and will be at risk of similar events in the next few years. While the actions of local individuals to save and help the town from the ever rising waters contribute to the affective bonding and the practical bonds of the community towards their town, it still puts a strain and a risk to the perennity of these services and places.

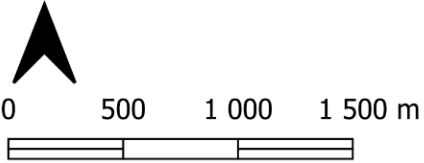
Similarly, knowing locations of importance and significance to individuals is crucial in a declining or rightsizing context since it allows decision makers and stakeholders to act by protecting local cafés, shops and restaurants, giving them visibility, and organising local fairs, involving them in town events (Hollander et al. 2009). Smaller businesses are often important pillars in the economic activity and wellbeing of not only local towns; they are also important providers of services at the regional level, with several people from the municipality and neighbouring villages going on their free days or time to these commercial establishments either for shopping or for leisure.

Places of value and interest in Jēkabpils



Legend

- Flooding zones
- Ski and Sledding area
- Open air museum
- River promenade area
- Nautical activities
- Playground
- Empty field used for market
- Forest park
- Outdoors amphitheater
- Public beach
- Drifting track
- Sports facilities
- Important commercial services
- Art School
- Observation sites
- Flooding Dyke



Laurent Trottier - 11-05-2023 - Source: Esri, Latvian office of geography

Salient Themes from Interview

Through analysis of interview notes several salient themes were identified. These themes are used to describe the current situation in Jēkabpils and how population decline is affecting the current and future quality of life for the community members.

Sense of belonging and sense of community

This theme emerged as respondents commonly noted the feeling of belonging they had in the community. Interviewees described how “everybody knows everybody” and that people help each other out when needed. Sense of belonging was heightened as respondents noted that they grew up in the community and had a lot of friends and family still living there.

During the observations the impression of a close knitted community also was confirmed. People were actively using the public space with their families and especially young teens spent their time on the central old-town square in groups.

The event we participated in was a festival to honour the people who helped during the flood in January. The amount of people attending was high and throughout all demographic groups. The combination of interviews and observation showed a perceived increase in the quality of the community. The event was an example of the strengthening of the community belonging and showing off the engagement of the mayor. Due to a big number of attendees and the observation of the demography, we can come to the conclusion of the community cohesion. Nevertheless the observed and interviewed people might be the ones that are looking positively on the community and feel as a part of it, because those people are more likely to participate in such an event.

Lack of third level education and employment options

This theme emerged as community members spoke about moving away, mostly to Riga to get a university degree. At least two people interviewed had moved away and returned to live in Jēkabpils and at least two respondents had moved away for education but had not yet returned

full time, mostly for employment reasons. One of the older interviewees was also accompanied by their daughter and granddaughter who did not live in Jēkabpils, also pointing to a trend of younger people moving out of town for work or university. Interviewees did mention that technical college in Jēkabpils as one option for those wanting to further their education within Jēkabpils.

One identified aim of the community is the increase of employment options through implementing new factories in Jēkabpils. When interviewing the municipal official, one of the focuses was not shrinkage, despite population loss over 30 years. Development and increase of employment opportunities was still the main goal of the municipality. Jēkabpils was seen not as a declining town but rather to be a “sponge” which would absorb the surrounding workforce. Regarding education, the municipal official mentioned that higher education would not be an option in Jēkabpils and that local colleges should focus on practical domains and industrial training.

The main focus of development was the reusing of the old soviet airfield for industrial purposes. The area already has a few factories, such as an asphalt plant and a wood product factory, but a forested area was cleared and the land was in preparation for the installation of a few industries, such as a High-tech chemistry factory, Solar Panel factory and furniture parts factory. These plans of development are in place, despite the low accessibility of the area and the lack of railway branching. All in all, the municipality seems to be focused on industrial and employment options rather than education opportunities, especially in higher education.

Access to Nature

Access to nature including the surrounding forests and most notably the Daugava River was mentioned throughout the interviews as an important part of living in the community. One participant used the river for fishing and another used the path along the river banks for walking her dog. The Forest Park recreational area and neighbouring lake were also discussed as a valuable asset to the community.. In addition, from observations, pro environmental behaviour was demonstrated as the area appeared clean and taken care of. People were spending time in

their gardens and residents were observed picking up litter. Observation in the forest park found that it was indeed used actively by families, the elderly and even young people.

Development of the surrounding peripheral areas could be observed during the tour of the peripheries taking place in the form of recreational construction funded by the Interreg Latvia-Lithuania development programme, which itself receives funds from the European regional development fund. Outdoor exercise equipment, a new observation tower and theatre/concert stages had been erected in the peripheries of Jēkabpils under the previous programme plan. An interviewee also mentioned that bike paths were being constructed from the peripheral areas to Jēkabpils to increase access to the surrounding areas of Jēkabpils and vice versa. According to the old programme the objective was to increase the number of visitors to the programme area through improving and developing cultural and natural heritage objects services and products (Interreg 2015). The funding of Interreg has been approved under a revised programme until 2027, but after this the maintenance of the new developments might fall under the responsibility of the municipality and could represent a burden to the community.

Consequences of shrinkage

There were aspects of the town that participants highlighted as ‘things they would change’ and although depopulation was not directly mentioned things such as lack of bars, restaurants and cafés especially for young people could be a consequence of shrinking population. In addition a shortage of doctors and teachers was mentioned as a problem which would be exacerbated by continued long term depopulation. Not all potential consequences of shrinkage were seen as negative. Reduced traffic was mentioned by several respondents who noted that fewer people living in the area meant that there was less traffic on the roads.

Governance

The governance theme includes distrust in the planning and decision makers and the ease or difficulty in having your voice heard in issues of community development. Some interviewees mentioned the fact that during the time of the previous mayor the municipality had problems with corruption but that the new mayor established a more transparent way of politics.

Nevertheless the perception of one interviewee is that mainly the people who already have a position of authority are heard.

Perceptions of shrinkage (future)

How the community members viewed the situation in Jēkabpils was important to assess as the ‘issue’ of depopulation as perhaps the people living there do not view it as an issue. For this theme the question ‘how do you see the future of Jēkabpils?’ was asked but a direct mention of population was not included.

No community member interviewed mentioned population decline as an issue in the town now or in the future. Moreover, growth was not overly emphasised as one respondent who simply said “Jēkabpils will be a place where people live”. This sentiment was echoed in several other interviews as respondents did not express excessive growth or decline for the future. Generally, interviewees viewed Jēkabpils as being fixed in how its population would be, sitting betwixt small rural town and an important regional urban centre. This can be understood in a framework of place attachment as people strongly attached to their environment can be reluctant to change, as stability is often tributary to wellbeing in a community (Korpela et al; 2009).

Adaptive use of places and spaces

Resilience to long-term population change in Jēkabpils can be fostered through a variety of strategies, particularly those related to the adaptive reuse, repurposing and multi-purpose use that can happen at both planned and indirectly adaptive levels - economically and socially as well. This can involve attracting businesses to previously unused areas, as well as the redefinition of places with primary functions to better serve the various needs of the community members.

Economic repurposing

In an economic context, adaptive reuse can revitalise disused spaces, transforming them into desirable locations for industry. For instance, the repurposing of a former Soviet military airfield shortly north of Jēkabpils for large-scale industrial operations (Picture 2). That will be facilitated by infrastructural additions such as railway network extensions and wastewater treatment facilities which are being planned by the local municipality.



Picture 2.

Jēkabpils (also known as Krustpils) air base located three kilometres northeast of Jēkabpils. Some of the abandoned hangars have already been renovated for industrial purposes and are already being used as warehouses.

This strategy aims to attract businesses in a way linked to already locally established industry specialisation (road building, construction) and primary sector resources that have for

long been one of the primary economic drivers in these regions, mainly farming and forestry in the periphery of the municipality. These secondary sector industries aim to use these local resources as well as build upon already existing specialities such as food and wood processing, material production, etc. The intended industries include large-scale egg factory, asphalt manufacturing, and diverse wood-related industries (wood chemistry, pellets, furniture, etc.).

However, as these industries provide employment opportunities and utilise local resources efficiently for the creation of value-added products, challenges arise in the context of an ageing and shrinking population. While Jēkabpils aims to stimulate significant economic activity and progress through this adaptive reuse strategy, there are concerns about the sustainability of this growth-oriented approach, especially in an area where gradual shrinkage and ageing of population is still ongoing. Undeniably this process affects the availability of labour as well, especially at a high skill and more knowledge based level. While the municipality wants to attract development in places already or soon to be suitable for industrial use, it is actively facing challenges in attracting specialists for various critical public services, such as education and healthcare.

The difficulty in attracting specialists in these areas raises concerns about the potential parallels in industrial sectors. It might be assumed that as the industry operates in the private sector, it has a capacity to offer competitive salaries, which would effectively mitigate these shortages by attracting labour from elsewhere, particularly when compared to mainly public sector roles in Latvia such as teaching and medical services.

For now these assumptions remain untested in the context of Jēkabpils. Therefore, while the potential for growth through adaptive reuse is evident, the reality of a shrinking and ageing population necessitates a more nuanced analysis of the labour market dynamics and the sustainability of these development strategies.

Social multi-purposing

From a social perspective, the multi-purposing of spaces and places initially designed for different primary uses is a notable phenomenon in both urban and peripheral settlements of Jēkabpils, including natural areas. The desired social purpose is dependent upon the interests of

various groups of the community. Conceptually this is important and related to population change issues, as these places serve a role for social functions necessary for the community without additional development implementations in otherwise shrinking area. In an attempt to understand the social multi - purposing of spaces in Jēkabpils, we can explore three examples.

Social transformation of a gambling establishment due to secondary services:

Originally designed as a gambling establishment, despite its primary function, the establishment has become a frequently used pool hall and a late-night social hub for the local youth. This transformation is somewhat unique within the context of Jēkabpils, as other similar gambling venues lack substantial additional services apart from slot machines, sports betting and small bars. This incidental multi-purposing indicates a deficiency in designated social spaces for the town's younger population and shows how they can adapt existing spaces to fit their needs. It also raises questions about how the necessity of such spaces could be satisfied, designed or reconfigured intentionally to better serve this demographic.

Natural environments for social gatherings of the youth:

The adaptive use of natural environments for social activities is another example of space multi-purposing in Jēkabpils area. These locations are particularly popular among the youth during milder seasons and are often found near water bodies like the Radži waterbody or Saka river, where recreational activities such as bonfires, fishing, and swimming take place. Yet in most cases there is no specific infrastructure regarding these activities. Nevertheless, the social function of these gatherings is paramount, providing a distant, undisturbed space for friends to socialise. These natural spaces, due to their relative remoteness, are often associated with illegal but otherwise common activities, mainly underage drinking and smoking. In most cases even the aspects of visible degradation or even danger, such as flood damage or raw sewage discharge, are insignificant enough in the perception of the locals, to propose these sites for recreational and social activities (Picture 3).



Picture 3.

A place in nature next to a riverfront with social and recreational use despite the surrounding negative aspects - significant flood damage, sewage from the adjacent area, etc.

Despite these negative connotations, the usage of these secluded locations for social purposes highlights the creative ways in which communities can repurpose existing spaces to meet their social needs.

Rural shops as small and local social hubs:

In the peripheral settlements of Jēkabpils, local shops have taken on a dual role. In addition to their basic function as providers of groceries and essential items, these shops serve as social centres within their communities (Picture 4). Given the limited number of such establishments in rural areas, usually only one in the whole settlement area, they become sort of improvised and sought after gathering points for social interaction. This is particularly true among older individuals who often engage in lengthy conversations with the shopkeepers. This dual usage of shops underscores the importance of social interaction in rural communities and points to the need for more dedicated social spaces in these areas, although it could be argued that exactly the shops are sufficient and informal enough places for such social activities.



Picture 4.

Local shop in the Sala village. Typically, there is only one in each populated rural area, so such places providing basic services assume a greater importance in the life of the local community. Various types of advertisements and announcements about local and municipal public events can also be seen on the shop door.

This adaptation represents a type of rightsizing in response to population change. While rightsizing typically involves deliberate planning strategies to align the environment and services with its changing population, what we see in Jēkabpils can be considered as an 'unintentional' or 'organic' form of rightsizing by community members themselves, to better align with their needs and circumstances, resulting in a form of rightsizing from the ground up.

These three examples illuminate the varied ways in which the residents of Jēkabpils have adapted spaces for social use in response to the changing demographic dynamics of the town. In each instance, the spaces were not initially intended for these purposes, but the community, driven by necessity and innovation, has found ways to meet their social needs.

However, a balance between deliberate planning and organic space evolution is crucial to maintaining their authenticity and character - a valued element in community's place attachment as well as contributing to their resilience to said demographic processes.

Both on economic and social level, the adaptive reuse, repurposing and multi-purposing of spaces requires a thoughtful and inclusive approach, taking into account the interests and needs of different community groups. By fostering a sense of ownership and belonging among residents, these strategies can contribute to the overall resilience of Jēkabpils, helping the town adapt to long-term population changes.

Research Limitations

The limitations of this report include time, sample size, language barriers and the position of the researchers as outsiders to the community. The timeframe for the study meant that the time for data collection and data analysis was a constraint. In community research where local connections are important, spending a longer time in the communities would have been beneficial in terms of creating rapport and getting a better feel for the place. In addition the research took place over a holiday weekend in Latvia meaning schools were closed and many people were on vacation elsewhere. Another limitation of this study is the sample selection, the small size of the sample selection means that an important point of view of a large portion of the community was not heard and therefore the results do not speak for the entire population. Another key issue was the language barrier as only one member of the research team spoke Latvian. Frequently, resources are only available in Latvian and there are likely far more resources missed due to a lack of knowledge of the language. In addition, knowledge of Latvian or other frequently spoken languages in the communities, such as Russian, could have resulted in a larger, more diverse sample selection. The time and resources available to the research team also constrained the results, without access to a car areas in the periphery of the municipality were impossible to reach in the time allowed. Finally, the position of the researcher as outsiders to the community was a factor which potentially impacted the results as participants were reluctant to speak about negative community issues and wanted to paint a positive picture of the community.

Discussion

Possible implications of Shrinkage on the quality of life of community members

Sense of community

Population decline could impact the sense of belonging and community as depopulation increases the chance that a family member or friend will move away. However, the small size of the community was frequently cited as a reason for the strong bonds between the people - especially in relation to Riga. The small, close knit community could potentially be unaffected or bonded even tighter by a decrease in population. Greater sense of community: In some cases, depopulation can lead to a closer-knit community. With fewer people living in the area, residents may be more likely to know each other and work together to address community needs. Positive feelings about the community can also contribute to a greater capacity of resilience building on flood prone communities (Holley et al. 2022). From a policy and planning perspective the strong sense of community in Jēkabpils is an important factor in resilience to long term population change. Place attachment literature places emphasis on the importance of social aspects of places, particularly related to local networks and trust. In addition, place attachment can impact willingness to change and engagement within communities. The strong sense of community in Jēkabpils demonstrates strong place attachment and therefore, can impact the effectiveness of current and future shrinkage policies.

Third level education / employment options

A key finding of this study is that there is a lack of high quality third level education options in Jēkabpils. This finding is in line with OECD (2022) that highlighted the challenges of providing quality education in shrinking areas. The employment options however seemed much less grim with several new opportunities in the old soviet airfield being planned. This increase in industrial development might be good for the area however, while other populations seeking higher education will have to leave the community to either Riga, Daugavpils or other university

towns in Latvia. While interviews have shown that educated youth tend to come back to their community after their studies, it is impossible to predict whether this tendency will continue in future years. To address the impact of the lack of third level education in shrinking or rural communities, it is important to invest in education and training programs that are tailored to the needs and priorities of these communities (OECD, 2022), this could be done in the already existing technical college in Jēkabpils.

Nature

Bonds to environmental aspects of Jēkabpils were seen as strong and it is possible that population decline will not impact this access to nature that is so important to the quality of life of the remaining population. However, long term shrinkage could mean fewer people maintain natural areas: In rural towns, natural areas like parks and forests often rely on volunteer efforts to maintain trails, clear debris, and perform other necessary tasks. With fewer people in the area, there may be fewer volunteers to help with these tasks, leading to a decline in the quality of these natural areas. This in combination with less funding for conservation efforts could negatively impact the access to nature in Jēkabpils. In addition, OECD (2022) found that in the case of Estonia, although areas were shrinking in population, land development was increasing. If this were to happen in Jēkabpils then the access to nature which people value would be vulnerable to development, thus impacting the quality of life of the current population.

Quantitative Versus Qualitative Data

The background section of the report clearly demonstrates the quantitative outlook of Jēkabpils - a declining area. However, qualitative data painted a different picture - a small but socially strong community with many positive aspects and many people who are attached to the place. Place attachment literature points to the many ways in which attachment can improve resilience in a community which could be the case in Jēkabpils.

Graphs presented in the background section of this report showed a declining community, losing around 37% of its population in 30 years, which is grim indeed. One might expect to find a desolate town but we found the town thriving and the interviews proved this perspective, with people seeing it as “the best place to raise a family” in Latvia. This shows a stark contrast

between the numbers and the qualitative perceptions and livelihood of individuals on the terrain. Reality is often more nuanced than statistics (Erlingsson & Brysiewicz, 2013) and of course, quantitative data could never reflect the vastness of human experience, especially in a small Latvian town. Population decline might not be caused by mass migration out of the municipality as it was understood in the past and it might be temporary, with young people leaving for a few years for studies then coming back to settle and have a family. A part of population decline might also be attributed to natural deaths of elders, which, as fig.2 showed, is entirely plausible with the high number of people above 65 years old.

Perception of Shrinkage

The results show a gap between the indicators of shrinkage and the perceptions of shrinkage of the community members. Some reasons for this perception gap include the social and emotional bonds that individuals have to their community, and the role of wilful blindness and resilience in coping with change and adversity such as risk of flooding (Kongsager et al. 2023). While this perception gap may provide some benefits, such as maintaining social cohesion and community pride, it can also hinder efforts to address the challenges of population decline and plan for a sustainable future.

Rightsizing in Jēkabpils

Overall, depopulation can have complex and varied impacts on the relationship between community members and local authorities and decision-makers. While it can lead to challenges, it can also create opportunities for community members to take a more active role in shaping the future of their community. Participatory methods in planning can increase the legitimacy of the decisions, but despite the growing popularity of participation in government it must be taken care of that this does not take the form of a mere consultation of the citizens. Participatory methods also represent a challenge in the case of Jēkabpils, since none of the people interviewed recognize the town as declining and might be hard pressed to accept policy driven by the municipal government to implement rightsizing measures. Furthermore the municipal official interviewed expressed in their opinion that the town should focus on attracting new business as well as ensuring the wellbeing of its citizens.

Based on the interview with the municipal official and their development strategy documents, the municipal government might still not have fully internalised the fact that the town has been losing population for the past three decades and that there is no reason to expect a reversal in the trend any time soon. Some progress towards acknowledging this fact has been taken though, since the newest municipal development plan (see Jēkabpils novada Attīstības pārvalde 2021) focuses on merely levelling out the population decline instead of believing the fortunes could be reversed with new growth goals as their previous development plan had set out to do (see Jēkabpils pilsētas pašvaldība 2012). The most important part of correcting an issue is of course to acknowledge its existence. A declining municipality should not waste its resources chasing after massive development projects that are unlikely to manifest or might be in risk of being abandoned halfway through construction because of economic or other turmoil. Jēkabpils has already experienced such an interruption when in the aftermath of the Covid pandemic the repairs of the town's gymnasium were halted because of a lack of available labour delaying the finishing of the repairs (Paegļkalne 2020). Such things show the precarity of large construction projects in small municipalities. Still, the current industrial development projects pursued by the municipality seem to rely on pre-existing strengths of the town's wood and agriculture industry, and so these represent a more place based approach in development and an example of rightsizing instead of a growth paradigm.

Jēkabpils does not have a massive problem with vacant housing such as the cities that were researched in the literature about rightsizing (Coppola 2019; Németh & Hollander 2016). Therefore the issue of rightsizing in Jēkabpils does not manifest itself in the form of numerous abandoned apartment complexes or single housing being left vacant. Instead there seems to be only a few soviet era apartment complexes and some smaller buildings currently unused. The lots of these buildings naturally present a problem for the community, since especially the apartment complexes are unlikely to be ever used for living purposes again with the trend of population decline. Apart from the old soviet airbase, these vacant buildings are also not suitable for industrial development since they're in residential areas and could therefore be repurposed for example, for recreational areas.

Resilience

As directly located next to the Daugava, Jēkabpils has an increased risk of flooding. In January 2023 a flood occurred, which is considered a century flood. A big part of the town was affected and streets, houses and public infrastructure like the hospital was damaged. The exact cost still cannot be predicted, because due to the still lasting rise of the groundwater level, it is possible that infrastructure also could be washed away due to erosion and unstable ground structure in the advent of future floods.

During the flood several interviewees said that the help of the community and the direct actions of the municipality and the mayor was considered as helpful. Beforehand and during the flood, community members secured the dam, provided excavators, helped people to save their belongings and supported people in need. The direct coping with the flood is, at least from the perspective of the interviewees, successful and the municipality was able to act in face of the stress of flooding.

According to the interviewed municipal official, the population is used to the floods and all people living in the areas at risk have evacuation plans and are prepared to bring their belongings in the higher floors or rather store nothing valuable in the basement. This behaviour can be interpreted as a form of adaptation to the risk. For generations people have had to deal with it and learned strategies to save their lives and belongings. Flooding is the reality of their lives in Jēkabpils.

Nevertheless, the municipality seems not to be able to prevent flooding. So, on the one hand the community learns from these events how to act in case of flooding and on the other hand the long term prevention is not granted. The municipal official justified this circumstance with the complexity of flood prevention and the effectiveness of measurements against flooding. One action they identified as necessary is the construction of a concrete levy on the Jēkabpils side rather than the existing levy consisting mainly of ground. Furthermore the interviewed municipality official also pointed out that some victims of the flood had to leave Jēkabpils. This indicates that the flood also contributes to the shrinkage of Jēkabpils.

Concerning social resilience, this example of threat shows that there are factors contributing to a resilient community in Jēkabpils, but that in terms of environmental threats there is still potential to adapt to the situation. Especially facing potential impacts of climate change, such as the increase in floods.

Regarding the resilience against the consequences of shrinkage the development of Jēkabpils does seem to choose the way of re-growth rather than an intelligent way of shrinkage. The examined plans for future development of Jēkabpils are focussing on the attraction of industry and therefore more people to work.

At the same time the municipal official pointed out that they are combating the lack of teachers and medical staff with the offer to provide housing and an additional monetary grant. This strategy aims at the needs of the current population. The lack of specialists is one effect of shrinkage and this measurement can be perceived as a strategy to learn from the negative effect of the population change and therefore as a positive sign of social resilience.

Recommendations

From a broader perspective the inclusion of place attachment and resiliency in smart shrinkage plans and policies can improve the willingness of community members and stakeholders to engage thus improving the effectiveness of the shrinkage strategies. In that sense, a few recommendations centred on the inclusion of place attachment, rightsizing and placing an understanding of the community in the municipal processes were produced. In the scope of this report, it is aimed to put in a practical perspective the implications of a declining community perceived by its inhabitants as a thriving and family friendly community. As such, this reports recommends:

- To consider place attachment in a more central role in informing population change policy through increased community engagement for planning of municipal affairs.
- To introduce rightsizing in municipal policies by prioritising repurposing land use of abandoned areas and grey sites.
- To implement continuous monitoring of the effects and perceptions of population change in interview processes to ensure understanding of the impacts of population fluctuations on the quality of life
- To introduce more advanced options of studies in the technical college, focused on local needs of professionals, such as teaching, nursing and other such related occupations.

Conclusions

Despite the numbers, many members of the community continue to perceive their town as vibrant and thriving. Interviewees have mentioned that it was one of the best places to raise families in the country and local officials perceive the town as a place to work, live and have children.

We have explored some of the reasons why this perception gap exists, including the social and emotional ties that individuals have to their community, and the role of positive thinking and resilience in coping with change and adversity. While this perception gap may provide some benefits, such as maintaining social cohesion and community pride, it can also hinder efforts to address the challenges of population decline and plan for a sustainable future.

Overall, depopulation can have both positive and negative impacts on rural towns. While it can lead to some challenges, it can also create opportunities for those who appreciate the small size and closeness of the community. It is important for local authorities and decision-makers to take these potential impacts into account and work to foster a strong and productive relationship with community members, regardless of the size of the population.

Jēkabpils is not the only community with an important population decline and still with a thriving social and community life. However, as we have discussed, these positive signs might hide a much rather grim reality of wilful blindness to an impending important decline in access to services, shops and an overall lower quality of life. Only time will tell if these communities will have what it takes to preserve, consolidate and carry on.

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Appendix A

Questions regarding sense of place / sense of belonging / settlement attachment

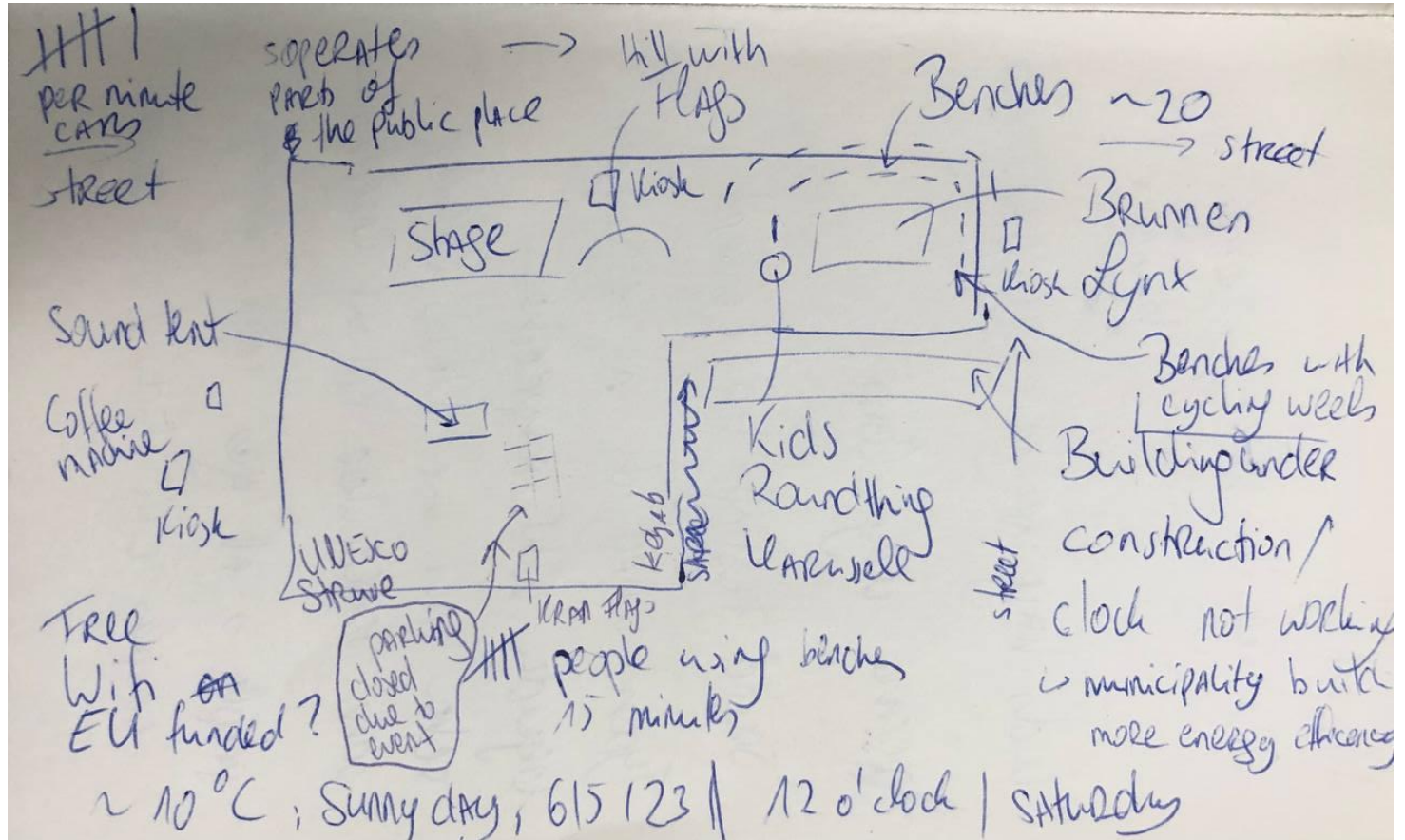
- How long have you lived here?
- Can you describe this community in a few words?
- What are the benefits of living here? What do you value about this community?
- Are there any negative aspects about living here?
- Would moving somewhere else be an option or what, if anything, could make you move away from here?
- Which services does this community have that you use most or value?

Appendix B

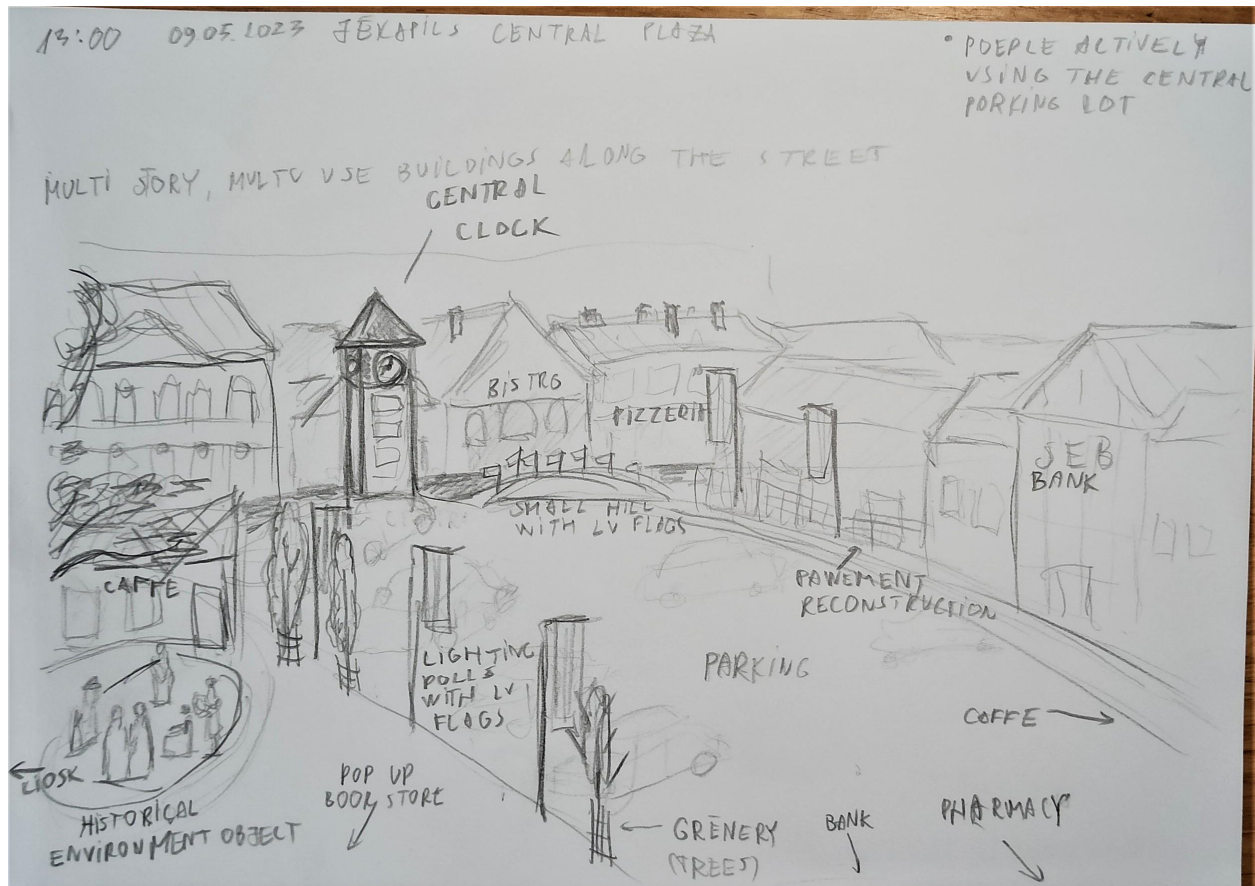
Short Questionnaire for community members

- What does Jekabpils mean to you?
- Is there anything you would change about Jekabpils?
- What does the future of Jekabpils look like to you?

Appendix C

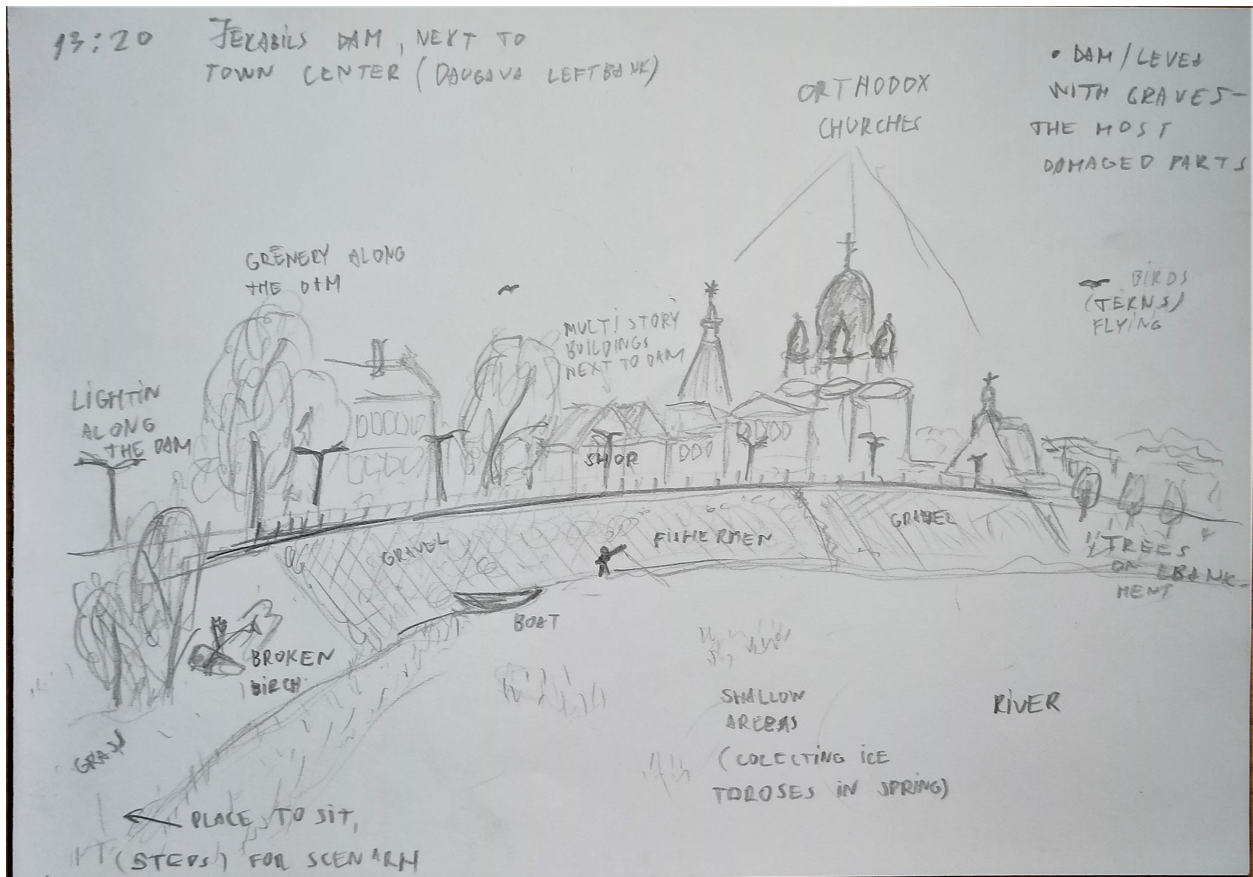


Appendix D1



Annotated landscape sketch (09.05.2023, ~13:00) of the central old-town square. Place is directly allocated next to the dam. A significant community event and a concert happened here three days prior. Author: Mūrnieks, M. R.

Appendix D2



Annotated landscape sketch (09.05.2023, ~13:20) of the main part of the dam in Jēkabpils. Dam provides crucial protection from ice and flooding for the central old-town square and surrounding area. Gravelled parts of the dam were the ones most significantly damaged during the last flood. Author: Mūrnieks, M. R.