

For the 2023 NORDPLUS intensive course: Smart shrinking as a development approach for de-populating regions around the Baltic Sea



# Navigating the Challenges of Shrinking Cities: Insights from Zarasai, Lithuania

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# Background

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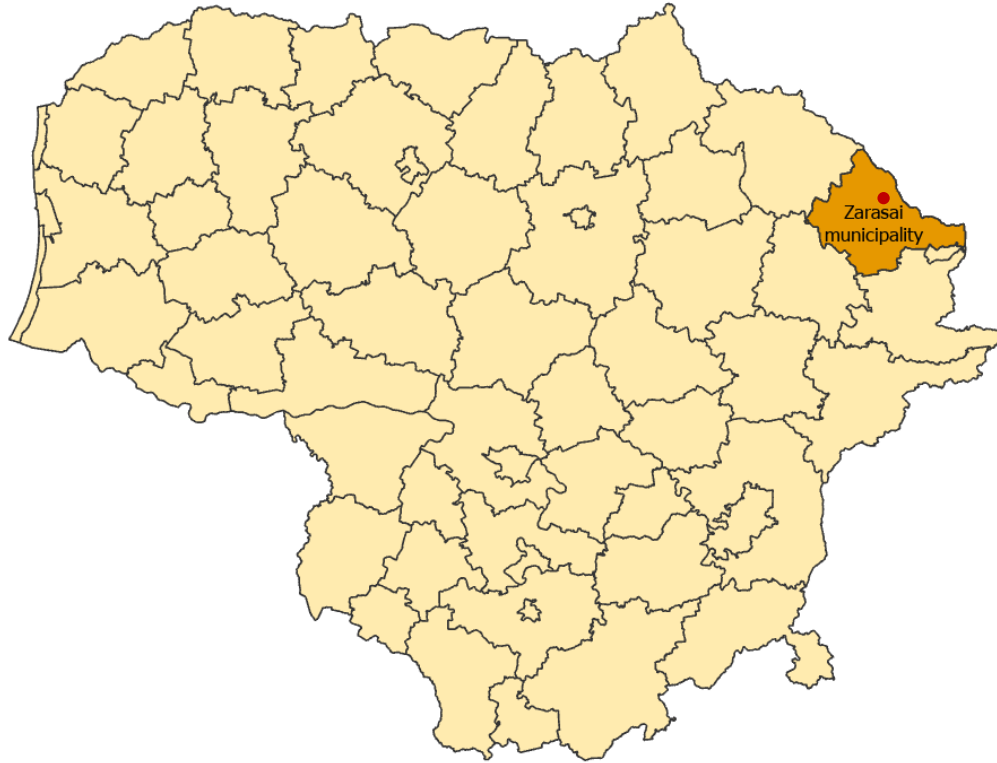
We used mixed methods to understand the history, culture, people, and current issues of Zarasai

The study is relevant to several key concepts:

- Well-being
- Economic migration theory and push and pull factors
- Social capital
- Smart shrinking and ageing populations
- Sustainable development, nature-based tourism

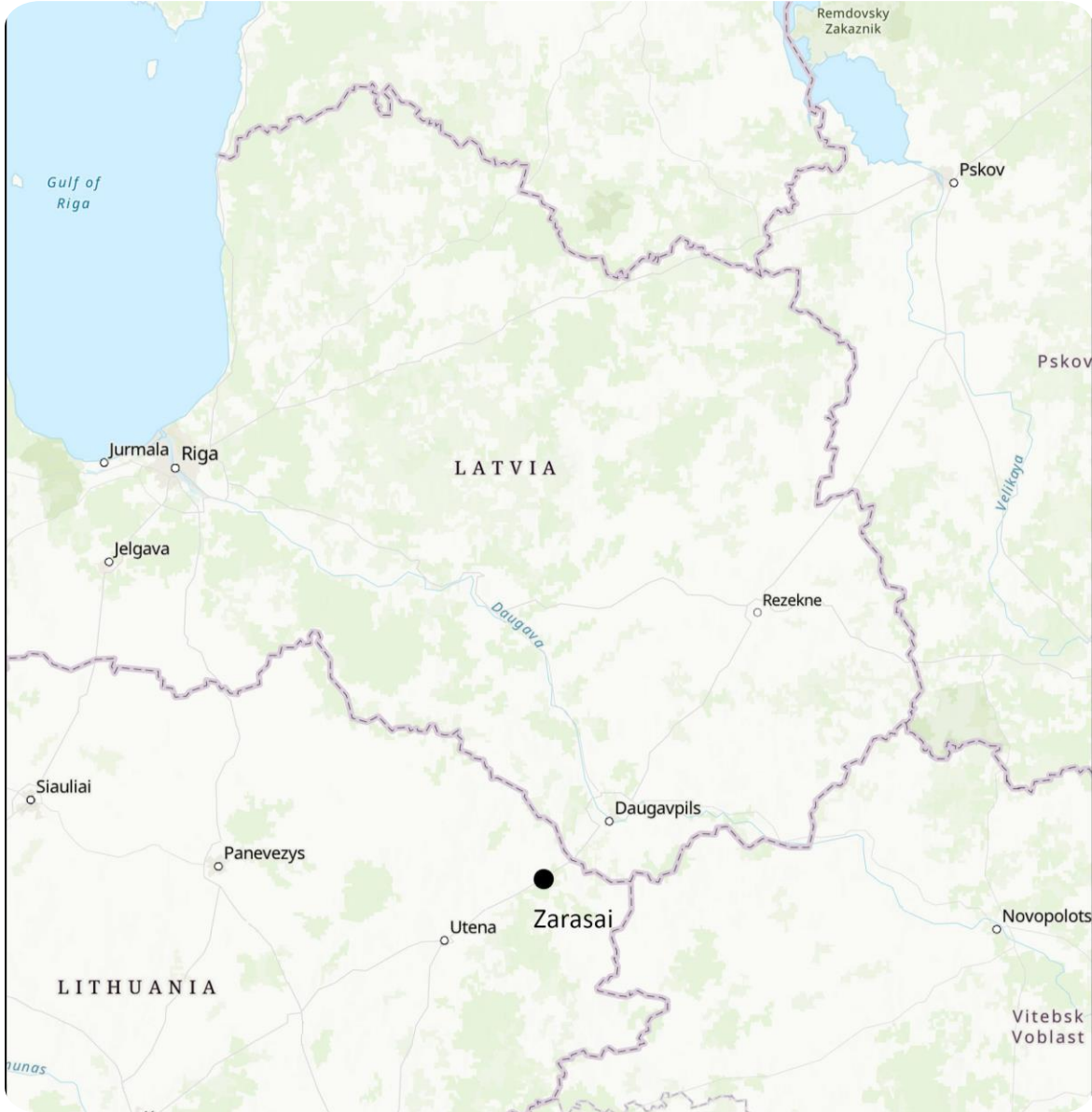


# Case study area



- Location: Zarasai is located in northeastern Lithuania, bordering Latvia and covering an area of 1,339 sq. km.





# Key figures

- Population decline of 17.8% from 2011 to 2021
- Median age: 45.8 years
- Unemployment rate 21.5% in 2021 (national average is 7.1%)
- 33% at-risk poverty rate
- High suicide rate – highest average from 2011-2019 among Lithuanian municipalities



# Services, tourism, culture and investments

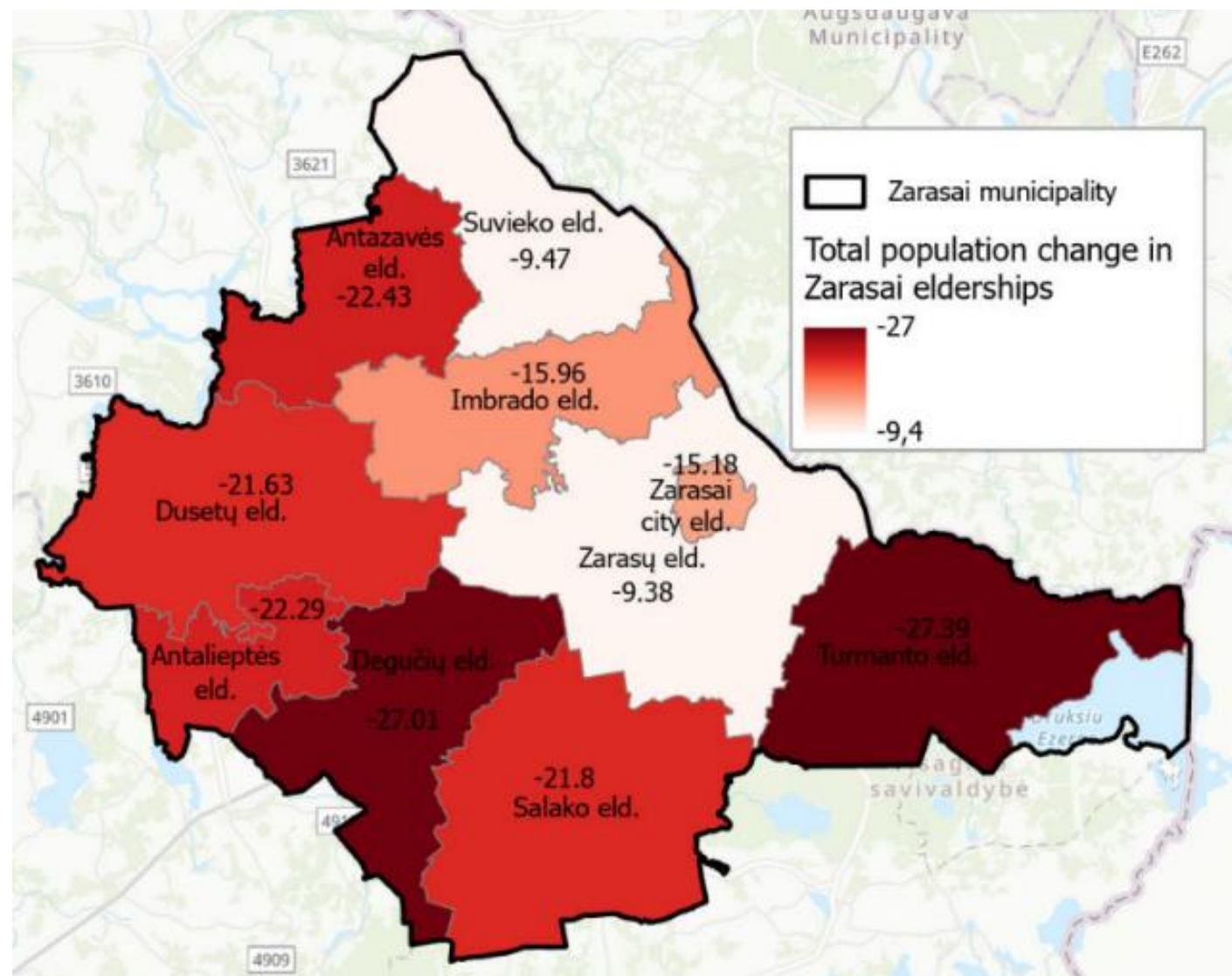
- Healthcare
- Education
- Transport
- Food, groceries, and amenities
- Leisure and entertainment
- Information services
- Tourism





# Challenges

- High at-risk poverty rate exceeding 33%, leading to economic and social difficulties
- Limited access to essential services
- A lack of rental housing availability, and a restricted variety of prices, exacerbating inequalities within the community.
- Low economic appeal and vitality, making it more difficult to attract businesses and investment.
- Mental healthcare missing, low support for youth and students
- Seasonality: dull life in the winter





# ArcGIS Survey123

## Methodology

Online survey covering themes of demographics, education, work & transport, quality of life and services, relationship with govt. & media

# Interviews

- Residents – subjects discussed: government assistance for families, employment opportunities, access to medical care, and the town's culture
- Expert interviews with the mayor and municipality, including their innovation expert: insights on town's policies, plans, strategies, and challenges. Interviews with residents
- Focus group discussion with students







# People

- 28 interviews: varying length and diverse people (e.g. service sector, unemployed mother, 17 y/o musician, fisherman, elderly etc.)
- 74 respondents for the survey: age range varied from 18 to 80 years old. Around 81% of the respondents were women, while approximately 17.5% were men, and 1.5% non-binary.
- Focus group: 7 school students
- Municipality: 5 people



# Common reflections

- Quality of life: mixed perceptions:

## Positives:

proximity to essential services

natural beauty/tranquil atmosphere

people are drawn back to family life here, sense of belonging

safety and security: low crime

## Negatives:

low access to healthcare

seasonality (dull winter)

long waiting lists for kindergarten

limited employment opportunities for young people

# Push and pull factors identified

Push Factors	Pull Factors
Limited access to employment, education facilities, and healthcare	Nature-based tourism and outdoor activities
Perception of limited job prospects	Proximity to essential services
Seasonal changes and limited services	Cultural offerings and history
Declining population and limited social connections	Affordable housing options
Limited recreational and entertainment options	Strong community support and sense of belonging
Lack of career advancement opportunities	Access to quality education and professional development
Limited infrastructure and public transportation	Serene and peaceful environment
Harsh weather conditions	Close-knit community and friendly neighbors
Economic instability and low wages	Opportunities for entrepreneurship and small business development
Lack of cultural diversity and exposure	Potential for a slower pace of life and reduced stress
Limited opportunities for personal growth and development	Close proximity to natural landscapes, lakes, and forests

*Table 4. Possible Push and Pull Factors for Migration Decisions in Zarasai*



# Social capital

- More resources, opportunities, and support when there is access to social connections and networks
  - Close-knit community
  - Gathering places like cultural center and the library
  - Positive bonds among youngsters
  - Family activities on the weekend is the Island area: work-life balance

# Expectations from the government

- Demands for a pro-active problem solving approach
- Address the issue of healthcare services for minors
- A more active youth council
- Accessibility of the city, services, and leisure all-year round
- Innovation and business interaction



# Focus group discussion with students

- Businesses are interested in hiring local youth in Zarasai, and summer jobs are paid for by the municipality.
- Students believe that younger teachers are needed in schools to adopt newer, more effective ways of teaching, and more mental health resources would be helpful to the student community.
- Students want more outdoor events and a sports club to keep them engaged after school, and they have innovative ideas but no club to pursue them.
- They want more help and guidance from the school to choose their future paths, and they feel disconnected from the Youth Council that meets them every once in a while.
- Mental healthcare within the school premises would be beneficial
- Students find the winter boring due to the lack of events and poor bus services for people who live outside of the town.

# Mayor and municipality

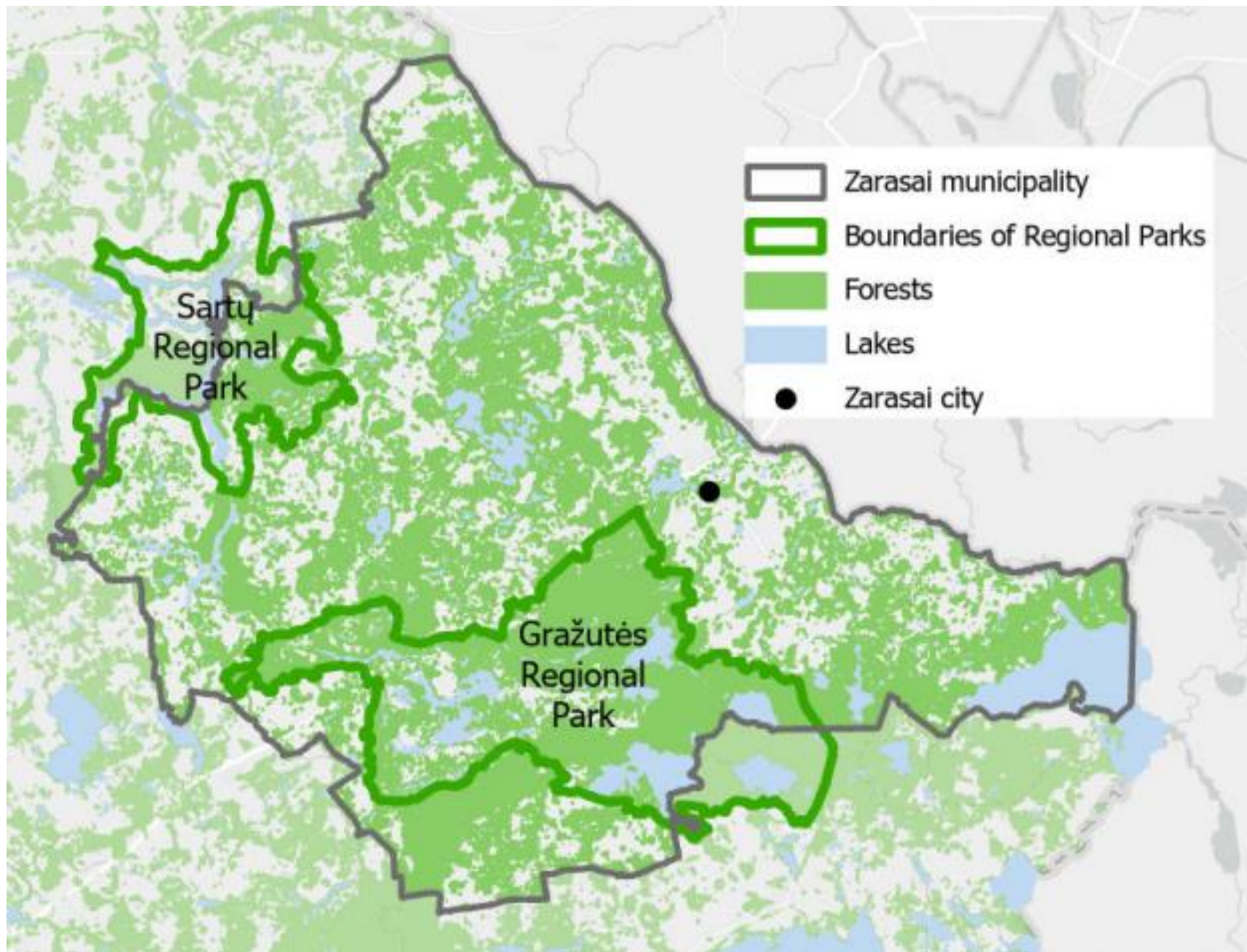
- Zarasai has potential for new businesses and investors due to its location and plans to improve accessibility year-round.
- The municipality offers flexibility and support to new businesses and encourages the opening of space for local businesses.
- The population consists mostly of senior citizens, and the lack of participation from long-time residents affects the motivation of newcomers.
- Zarasai is popular for second homes among Lithuanians due to its natural environment and tranquility.
- Challenges include attracting young families due to lower educational levels, limited after-school activities, and the lack of job and career opportunities for young people. Efforts are being made to address these issues, such as the planned opening of a private kindergarten with partial price compensation.

# Observations of Zarasai & its outskirts

- It's difficult to get to the Gražutės Regional Park without a car or bike.
- Heritage biotopes, meadows, forest and water areas in the region.
- The city of Zarasai has several popular places for leisure time, as shown on the map, and Sunday is a popular day for people to go out.









# Recommendations

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- Existing resources, such as buildings, could possibly be used more effectively and in a way that benefits the existing population the best (e.g. more turns for people in schools' sport facilities)
- Traffic flow through the city via main road is high: more ideas, such as parking lot for the trucks could be evolved to attract more people to stop in Zarasai around the year
- Better branding for regional park and better connections to get there
- Nature-based strategies and rebranding using social media
- Local Action Group with involvement of youth for community-led govt.



# References

- [1] Panorama of Zarasai [personal archive, 2023]
- [2] Zarasai city [Internet] wikimapia [cited 11 May 2023] Available form: <http://wikimapia.org/32991/Zarasai>
- [3] Zarasai District Municipality map, [made on GIS as per data]
- [4], [5], [6], [7] Zarasai services please [personal archive, 2023]
- [x]Zarasai district newspaper [Internet] Zarasaivvg [cited 11 May 2023] Available from <http://www.zarasaivvg.lt/naujiena/2422/>