

# IMPACT OF THE ADMINISTRATIVE REFORM ON THE PROVISION OF PUBLIC SERVICES IN ESTONIA<sup>1</sup> (the case of small settlements of the Jõgeva County<sup>2</sup>)

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## Introduction

People spend their whole life mainly creating as good living conditions as possible for themselves. They want a school which provides good education for their child, good medical services, care homes at a reasonable price and with high quality services for their parents, and everything else which makes it possible to have more comfortable living conditions and better prospects for the future. Estonian people move above all to places which have the best living environment for them, and Estonians are well known to be very demanding. Every municipality would like to achieve satisfaction of their population with the work of the local government and with their life. Always new solutions have to be found to make the life of the local population more interesting, better and more efficient.

The Estonian government also wishes to make positive changes for the population, for instance, through the administrative reform, but it is for the people to decide whether it will also be the best in the opinion of the Estonian population. The specific consequences of this activity will probably be evident only years later as it is not possible to assess all impacts immediately. This subject is topical as the elections of local councils and the administrative reform were among the most important changes in Estonia in 1917. Many small municipalities disappeared as a consequence and were merged into larger

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<sup>1</sup> This article is based on the graduation paper „Impact of the administrative reform on the provision of public services in small settlements“ by Karita Lepiste. The paper has been successfully defended at the Pärnu College of the University of Tartu in June 2019, supervised by Associate Professor, PhD Matti Raudjärv who is also the author of this article at the consent of and with cooperation from Karita Lepiste, the author of the above-mentioned graduation paper.

<sup>2</sup> The Jõgeva County is located in East Estonia, between the centre of continental Estonia and Lake Peipus, bordering on Lake Peipus in north-east and the Tartu County in the south.

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municipalities. Such considerable measures have always their pluses and minuses, so the administrative reform may have positive and negative impacts on the population of small settlements.

The objective of the article is to study and identify the impacts of the administrative reform on the provision of services in small settlements by analysing the opinions of the population of villages, towns and small towns, and to use the result for making proposals for the necessary changes in the set of services provided by local governments.

The research tasks of the study would be as follows:

- to describe the essence of public services in small settlements;
- to examine and identify the essence of the conception of local municipalities and the administrative reform;
- to examine and provide an overview of the organisation of public services in local governments;
- to examine whether the administrative reform has had a positive or negative impact on the services provided;
- to make proposals on the basis of the research results for making the necessary changes in the services provided.

The theoretical background of the article has been created by using different articles, books and other sources. A survey and its analysis were conducted in the course of the study. 144 persons participated in the survey (a questionnaire with 21 questions, with additions (opinions, choices)). The number of women was the highest among the responders to the survey (111 women), they constituted more than a half, i.e. 77.1% of all respondents to the survey. People who responded to the survey could be divided into four different age categories, the youngest of whom were at the age of 18 years or younger and the oldest group of respondents older than 50 years. The objective of the survey conducted in the study was to examine the impact of the administrative reform on public services provided in small settlements.

### **Conclusions and proposals of the study**

As the inhabitants of small settlements are clients of local governments, it is important for local governments to perform all activities in a manner which would improve the life of the local population. This assumes that the population would be satisfied with the organisation of their life also in the future after all the changes made in the course of the administrative reform. As the inhabitants of small settlements are clients of local governments, it is important for local governments to perform all activities in a manner which would improve the life of the local population. This assumes that the population would be more satisfied with the organisation of their life after all the changes made in the course of the administrative reform.

The following positive conclusions can be drawn on the use, satisfaction, quality and accessibility of the public services of local governments based on the survey conducted:

- most inhabitants of small settlements who responded to the survey were aware of the nature of public services provided by the local government;

- 67.4% of the respondents had used the public services provided by their local government;
- most inhabitants of small settlements were satisfied with the public services provided by local governments;
- most inhabitants were satisfied with the quality of the public services provided by their local government;
- 63.2% of the respondents did not consider the services of local governments difficult to access.

It can be concluded from these results that most of the population of small settlements is satisfied with the public services provided there and also actively use the services provided. They are also largely satisfied with the quality of the services provided by local governments, and the population of small settlements receives all public services necessary for their life. Local governments should make radical changes in the provision of services to their population (MR: contradictory statement compared to previous statements). However, local governments have coped relatively well with the provision of public services to their population.

The following negative conclusions can be drawn:

- 47.9%, i.e. almost half of the inhabitants of small settlements who responded to the survey found that information on the services provided by the local government is not easily accessible;
- a large number of respondents to the survey could not tell whether or not enough public services were provided to their age group, and 22.9% found that not enough public services were provided for them;
- according to the survey, 37 of the 144 respondents were not satisfied with the quality of the public services of their local government;
- services of local governments are not easily accessible to 36.8% of the respondents.

We have to state unfortunately that almost a half of the population of small settlements are not aware of the services provided by local governments, thus something has remained undone somewhere and some changes should be introduced. This fact that people do not receive enough information on public services is unfortunate and the situation should be improved as soon as possible. Due to the lack of information, people are not sure whether their local government has enough public services to provide for their age group. Thus, improvement of the accessibility of information may remove the problem of insufficient awareness of the population of the availability of public services for their age group. Unfortunately, a part of the population of small settlements is also not satisfied with the quality of public services, and for some people, public services are not easily accessible in local municipalities. Local governments can also have a common approach to these two subject areas and improve the situation.

Merger of municipalities in Estonia, i.e. the administrative reform in Estonia was/is a very topical subject. The whole process had been a thoroughly considered and long process. All this is done in order to have capable local governments in Estonia and that

the local population could have more opportunities for improvement of their quality of life and to make local governments more sustainable.

According to the results of the survey, the following positive conclusions can be drawn about the administrative reform:

- after the administrative reform, the quality of service has remained the same in municipalities or has rather improved compared to the earlier situation;
- 15 persons found that more different public services have appeared that the people in small settlements can use;
- people at the age of 30 or older found that there were enough public services for their age group;
- according to the opinion of 41 respondents, the state has allocated more resources and afforded more freedom to local governments in order to ensure enough public services to the population of small settlements;
- 25.8% of the respondents found that the new, larger municipality takes the opinions of the local population into account;
- in the opinion of 26.8% of the respondents, the local community has become more active after the administrative reform.

It can be concluded on the basis of the results obtained that although the number of positive responses was not as high as it could have been, it was still evident that municipalities are moving in a positive direction after the administrative reform. The objectives of the administrative reforms have not been fully achieved yet and therefore it is difficult to draw final conclusions and make assessments.

The following negative conclusion can be drawn about the administrative reform:

- 39% of the respondents found that the quality of public services has deteriorated after the administrative reform;
- the respondents younger than 30 years of age found that there are not enough public services at their municipality for their age groups;
- in the opinion of 45 respondents to the survey, public services have become less accessible in small settlements after the administrative reform;
- in the opinion of 71.5% of the population of small settlements, local governments have not received enough resources and freedom from the state to adopt decisions on ensuring enough public services to the population of small settlements;
- 29.7% of the respondents to the survey found that the opinion of the local population is not sufficiently taken into account in new municipalities, and 44.5% had no position about it;
- 47.2% of the respondents found that the opinion of the local population is not taken into account in new municipalities after the merger of municipalities as much as in the former municipalities;
- 73.2% of the respondents found that the local community has not become more active after the administrative reform;

- 78.3% of the respondents to the survey found that the local government does not support the activities of the local population more after the administrative reform compared to the former municipalities.

Proceeding from these results we can state that the population of small settlements is not satisfied with the impact of the administrative reform on public services. Since the people have a rather negative attitude, they are not very active but rather keep away and observe what is going on.

According to the results of the survey and the conclusions, a number of proposals can be made based on this study, on how to increase the impact of the administrative reform on the public services provided in municipalities and how to make the opinions of the local population more positive with respect to the changes made in the course of the administrative reform. The proposals could be the following:

- local governments have to find a simple common solution for the distribution of information to the whole local population on the public services provided in the municipality;
- a separate page on public services should be added to the web site;
- local government officials should visit small settlements more in order to see the shortcomings in public services in the opinion of the local population and to obtain a better overview of the situation and problems of the municipalities;
- to inquire from the young population of the municipalities the consumption of what kind of services they would be interested in, and to find solutions for the provision of more and better public services to them;
- different services should be made more accessible to the population of small settlements;
- the route schedules of bus lines should be reviewed and optimised to enable people to reach the establishments/enterprises which provide public services;
- the opening hours of the establishments which provide services should be reviewed and analysed more in terms of their conformity with the needs of the population for specific services;
- use of the resources should be analysed, it should be as optimal as possible; inhabitants of even the most distant villages/households of a large municipality should feel that they are receiving attention as well;
- more public surveys should be conducted – even if these are just surveys on opinions because people feel then that the local government is interested in their opinions and trying to take them into account;
- local governments should find solutions for supporting the activeness of communities and specific people of small settlements – find funds and other resources to support the events organised by communities and motivate people to participate in events organised by local governments.

It is not easy to implement all this fast but the orientation for the future should be agreed upon and specific actions undertaken for their implementation by the local governments together with the communities.

## **For conclusion**

The local government has an important role in the organisation of the life of the population of small settlements. Local inhabitants are the clients of local governments, and local governments have to ensure the satisfaction of their clients with all services provided. Sustainability of the municipality can be ensured through the satisfaction of the local population as people want to live where they feel good and want to be satisfied with their quality of life.

In the recent years, implementation of the Estonian administrative reform has been a very topical subject. The objective is to have capable and sustainable local governments which have more potential for the provision of different activities and opportunities for life for their population. This would also decrease the migration of the population to urban areas and other municipalities.

Each local government provides different public services to its population. If the population is satisfied with the public services provided, the local government is capable, respected by its population and sustainable. The administrative reform is also closely related to the provision of services as it should make different services more accessible to people and improve their quality.

The objective of this study was to identify the impacts of the administrative reform on the provision of services in small settlements, find out the opinions of the population of villages, towns and small towns and use the results for making proposals for the necessary changes in the set of services provided by local governments. A survey was prepared for that purpose to which all inhabitants of small settlements were able to respond online.

According to the results of the survey, the impact of the administrative reform on the provision of public services has unfortunately been negative as very many services have become less accessible for the population of villages, towns and small towns after the merger of municipalities. The reason for this result is mainly the transfer of the necessary services which used to be close-by, to a larger centre of attraction of the municipality, with poor transportation opportunities. Another main reason was the unsuitability of times, i.e. while the establishment which provided the service earlier had been open five days a week, the opening hours were now shortened to three or two days after the reform in some municipalities.

As a result of the study, a number of specific proposals were made that the local governments should consider in the administration and provision of services to the local population. The proposals made have been prepared according to the problem areas identified as a result of the survey and by taking into account the theoretical positions concerning the particular subject area. It was found that the main proposals that the local governments should take into account are making information on public services more easily accessible for the local population (e.g. on the web site) and making the accessibility of services to the population of small settlements easier also through the improvement of bus traffic. Local governments should also focus on the problems of the

younger generation and find solutions for the provision of more public services to them as this is an opportunity to ensure stabilisation of the number of population more effectively in the future.