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Snapshot: Expressions of Urban - Peri-Urban - Rural Relationships

E-Services in Tukums municipality

Tukums, Latvia

1. Brief Description

The number of people living in more remote parts of the municipality of Tukums has declined, and this has made the maintenance of infrastructure and provision of public services in these areas costly and inefficient. Nonetheless, one of the goals outlined in the municipality's sustainable development strategy is to maintain connections between, and provide services to, communities located in different parts of the municipality irrespective of whether they live in cities or any of the parishes. Furthermore, the Ministry of Environmental Protection and Regional development has emphasised that ICTs are becoming increasingly important in state and municipal institutions because they create opportunities for automating many activities and services. Consistent with this approach, Tukums is planning to further optimise the delivery of various public services (e.g. libraries, health care) by using ICTs to maintain and strengthen links between rural and urban areas.

However, while connectivity and access to communication infrastructure in the municipality as a whole is above average, some parts of the municipality are not adequately connected and not all residents have the necessary skills to employ online and digital tools confidently. Furthermore, in order to make an informed political decision regarding resource allocation, the municipality needs to carry out assessments as to how accessible these services are, whether there is demand for them in rural areas and what kind of services are and will be necessary. This is crucial for making political decisions as to the allocation of funding to implement new or utilise existing infrastructure to provide the necessary services electronically and hire professionals to cover places where the provision of e-services is not possible.

2. Questions and/or Challenges

One of the limitations of increasing reliance on e-services is the so-called digital divide: not everyone has the necessary access or skills to make use of the online facilities provided by public institutions. This is also true of Tukums. Nonetheless, there are indications that residents would be receptive to a greater use of e-services. A survey was carried out in 2016,

and a number of its findings bear upon the provision of e-services by Tukums municipality. In particular, 49% of respondents noted that they would prefer receiving services online and interacting with the municipality electronically (SKDS 2016). Similarly, the quality of internet access and access to the necessary facilities is believed to be adequate in Tukums. There are 30 locations where the public can access the internet free of charge. The quality of connections is varied, but it is generally good in the libraries, while cultural houses have poorer connections.

While no explicit questions or challenges have been formulated in official planning documents regarding the role of e-services in strengthening linkages between urban and rural areas, the (material) divide between the rural (poorly connected) and the urban (well connected) seems to be implicit. Providing the necessary infrastructure to maintain connections between communities living in various parts of Tukums municipality and providing services that would allow people to remain in Tukums, whilst taking into account differences in demand and opportunities of access, is crucial. **Consequently, the case study should address various economic and social aspects, and the impact of a greater reliance on e-services on different stakeholders and their willingness to continue living in Tukums.**

3. Main Insights

3.1. Indications of the application of the new concept of 'New Localities'

The approach envisioned by Tukums municipality is in line with the current shift in advanced countries towards the provision of public services by employing ICTs and other web-based communication technologies to improve and/or enhance service delivery in a territorial unit. The ultimate goal of the shift towards e-services is to be able to offer a range of public services to residents in an efficient, accessible and cost effective manner, irrespective of where in Tukums municipality they live. This approach would allow citizens to interact with public institutions via computers or other ICTs (e.g. smartphones, tablets) to obtain services at any time and any location. Furthermore, it would reduce the need to physically travel to the institution or service in question and, consequently, lighten the load on local infrastructure. At same time, however, it would keep rural inhabitants and remote areas connected to urban services and facilities.

It should be noted, however, that the question of service access (of remote areas) is seldom discussed in planning documents in relation to the use of ICTs. Despite the growing awareness that e-services will be important, a focused discussion of such services in relation to articulating a coherent vision of regional connectivity and territorial coherence remains only implicit in planning documents. However, it is possible to identify at least two perspectives of space with regard to a discussion of e-services in Tukums municipality. These suggest the importance of material foundations (e.g. infrastructure, broadband cables) for strengthening connections between urban and rural areas and fostering social cohesion.

Official planning documents (e.g. *Development Plan 2015-2021; Sustainable Development Strategy 2033*) approach the municipality from the perspective of absolute space that

treats Tukums as a territorially bound unit. These documents do not explicitly address the provision of e-services in urban or rural areas, but they discuss the provision and availability of services and access to ICTs in Tukums as a whole, and highlight progress made in creating new public internet access points (PIAPs) both in the city of Tukums and more remote areas. For example, in the summer of 2015 a project co-financed by the European Regional Development Fund *Development of public Internet access points in Tukums* was completed. The number of PIAPs was increased as a result of the project. The necessary hardware was either replaced or upgraded at 9 locations, and 9 new PIAPs were created to ensure public availability of internet access throughout the municipality. This approach to Tukums (as a territorial unit) is also evident in the case of social surveys. For example, the study measuring the e-index (see below) decomposes Latvia into municipalities, but their internal diversity or connections are not discussed.

Official planning documents also operate in terms of <u>relational space</u>. One of the goals outlined in the municipality's planning documents is to maintain connections and strengthen relationships between people located in different parts of the municipality irrespective of whether they live in cities, villages or any of the parishes. The plan is to achieve this with a network of services, infrastructure and transportation services. While these documents do not explicitly oppose or differentiate between urban and rural areas, the emphasis is on improving service accessibility for people living in more remote areas so as to fully integrate them into the flows and interactions between urban and rural areas in Tukums municipality. For example, it is deemed crucial that (i) all parts of Tukums municipality have access to good quality phone and internet connections and (ii) services are available in all villages so as to foster social cohesion.

3.2. Insights related to the broad area of 'Smart Development'

A systematic strategy for the use of e-services in strengthening urban-rural linkages has yet to be articulated. However, existing practices indicate a solid foundation upon which innovative approaches to embedding ICTs in the process of improving flows and interactions between urban and rural areas can be built, even though recent results in a study on e-government and e-infrastructure suggest that the situation may be precarious.

Compared to other municipalities in Latvia, Tukums has been active in the deployment and use of ICTs in official contexts. For example, an important source of information and space for communication about Tukums Council is the homepage www.tukums.lv. A survey carried out in 2016 found that just under half of all respondents (45%) used the official website to obtain information about the work being done by the municipal government (SKDS 2016). Furthermore, recent data published by the Central Statistical Bureau of Latvia suggest that this number may have grown as an increasing percentage of people interact with public institutions online (Central Statistical Bureau 2018).

The city website was developed in 2015 and is regularly updated with new sections. In addition, for a number of years, the municipal government of Tukums has focused on providing up to date information for tourists online (e.g. www.visittukums.lv) to make the

information available on a daily basis and reduce the need for tourists to visit the tourism information centre.

The most recent iteration of the E-Index study indicated that e-infrastructure and e-services in Tukums municipality are generally above average, though they have declined since 2014. The study looked at several aspects of e-infrastructure, e-governance and e-services in all the municipalities in Latvia and combined them into a single measurement - the so-called e-index. On the whole, Tukums municipality performed above average, tough it fell from 7th place in 2014 to 19th in 2017 (SKDS 2017)

Among the most significant drops is the quality of e-infrastructure, which dropped from 1st place in 2014 to 12th place in 2017. This is further compounded by the low number of computers per capita and comparatively low levels of computer skills. Attendance of computer courses for the unemployed has declined since 2014, and computer courses targeted at the general public remain poorly attended, though no specific reasons are provided to explain this. Furthermore, the e-governance rating for Tukums is below average, having fallen considerably compared to 2014; a comparatively low number of official forms are available on the official website, though some of the services listed on the national platform *latvija.lv* can be accessed via the official website (http://tukums.lv/lv/pakalpojumi-un-veidlapas).

E-correspondence accounts for a comparatively high share of incoming official correspondence with the municipality (65%), and it has grown considerably since 2014. The process of submitting various documents and forms (e.g. related to construction projects) and receiving official responses online has been simplified. However, less than half of e-correspondence is signed with an e-signature, and the proportion has declined since 2014. What is more, the profiles of Tukums municipality on social networks have a low number of followers compared to other municipalities, suggesting that few residents use these channels of communication.

In summary, Tukums has a good foundation to provide a greater range of public services online and a significant number of inhabitants appear to be willing to engage with the municipality online. However, more attention needs to be paid to the internal heterogeneity of Tukums municipality and the obstacles that prevent some inhabitants from engaging with public institutions via ICTs. This would allow for a targeted use of e-services where there is demand and the potential to embed them in everyday connections between urban and rural areas.

4. Data Sources and Indicators

Data / Indicator	Source
Data on public perception of the municipality and public services	*Pašvaldības darba vērtējums un pakalpojumu izmantošana*, http://tukums.lv/images/stories/2016.gads/Aktu%C4%81li/SKDS_aptaujas_rezult%C4%81ti.pdf , social research centre SKDS
Data on municipal e-infrastructure, e-governance and e-services	*Latvijas pašvaldību e-vides mērījums 2017*, https://www.eindekss.lv/lv/6-rezultati?download=112, social research center SKDS
Data on the use of online facilities to interact with public service providers	*Sadarbība ar valsts vai sabiedrisko pakalpojumu sniedzējiem izmantojot internetu, iedzīvotāju grupu dalījumā,* https://www.csb.gov.lv/lv/statistika/statistikas-temas/zinatne-ikt/datori-internets/tabulas/itmg140/sadarbiba-ar-valsts-vai-sabiedrisko, Central Statistical Bureau
Data on the use of ICTs in households	*Informācijas un komunikācijas tehnoloģiju lietošana mājsaimniecībās 2017. gadā*, https://www.csb.gov.lv/lv/statistika/statistikas-temas/zinatne-ikt/datori-internets/meklet-tema/164-informacijas-un-komunikacijas-tehnologiju, Central Statistical Bureau

5. Critical Appraisal of Data Use

Basic statistical data on digital infrastructure in Tukums are publicly available. Much of the available data is about Tukums as a whole, and in some cases data is only available about the statistical region (Pierīga), rather than the municipality. Furthermore, while reports indicate differences between rural and urban areas (e.g. quality of internet connection), they are quite general. In particular, information on the provision and demand for e-services is limited, indicating a knowledge gap that will need to be addressed as part of ROBUST.

6. References

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