

RURAL SETTLEMENT PLANNING IN LATVIA: CRITERIA, PROCESSES, CHANGES OVER TIME

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Abstract

The aim of the study is to evaluate the main aspects of rural settlement planning in the Republic of Latvia. The object of research is rural settlements, specifically - villages. The article analyzes the development of rural settlements in Latvia. Types of classification of settlements, their official classification and changes over time are evaluated. The study found that the population is decreasing in the entire territory of Latvia, with the exception municipalities around the state capital Riga. This process also affects the structure of rural settlements in the counties, the number of villages and their role as development centers decreases. As part of the study, an analysis of the location and development of rural settlements in the Ventspils municipality, which is located in the north-west of Latvia, in the Kurzeme planning region, was carried out. According to the data of the State Land Service, the number of villages in the Kurzeme planning region decreased by 56, from 456 villages in 2016 to 400 villages in 2024. Among them, the number of villages in Ventspils municipality decreased by 38 during this period - from 92 villages to 54 villages.

Key words: rural settlement, village, development planning, population.

Introduction

The challenging demographic processes can be observed throughout Europe, as a result of which rural areas are emptying, aging and, naturally, it is increasingly difficult not only to restore, improve and provide the necessary infrastructure and services, but also to maintain them at the current level. To address the aforementioned challenges, various planning approaches are being emphasized. These approaches prioritize the engagement of a strong and interested community, alongside other resources available within the local territory, which can be leveraged to foster development. Community initiative and participation play a decisive role in village planning (Zamarina, 2020). However, the inhabitants of an area do not automatically constitute a community. A community is formed by the civically active part of society and its mutual relations, including not only people with similar interests - in the specific case, the development of the local territory - but also a network of institutions that bring together different social groups and where mutual relations are formed - local shops, schools, churches, non-governmental organizations, etc. (Zamarina, 2020).

The importance of the community and its connection with village planning issues has been emphasized in several foreign studies devoted to the problems of rural development. (Rural Movements of Europe, S.a.). The village movement is based on efforts to build and develop communities and inspire residents to participate in the growth of local territories, thus strengthening democracy, promoting social inclusion, creating new business, service and employment opportunities. In recent years, smart village planning has become a topical approach to village planning all over the world. Conceptually, the term "smart village" refers to rural settlements and communities that develop based on local strengths and resources (Zavratnik et.al., 2018). In Latvia, the campaign on the concept of smart villages and its application in rural development, adopting the European experience, was launched in 2021. The campaign was launched by defining the term smart villages, as well as, based on the European experience, determining the analysis of five criteria in the assessment of community development according to the principles of smart villages - management and decision-making in the community, population and its activity, implementation of innovative solutions, interaction and cooperation, identification and use of resources (Experiences of Smart Villages ..., b.y.).

The formation of communities and the active participation of residents in the development of villages and solving various problems attract residents to their places of residence, promoting pride in their homeland, its history, traditions, and thus reducing the outflow of residents to cities or even abroad. Therefore, the smart village movement plays a major role in rural development and maintaining the population. There is also a continuous decrease in the population in Latvia, as evidenced by the collected data on changes in the population in Latvia in the last two years (Tabl. 1).

Table 1

Population changes in the planning regions of the Republic of Latvia in the period from 2021 to 2023

No	Planning region	Population by year			Difference 2023 - 2021	
		2021	2022	2023	population	%
1.	Kurzeme	280 433	277 130	276 317	- 4 116	- 1.5
2.	Latgale	786 673	773 902	775 692	- 10 981	- 1.4
3.	Riga	853 796	850 353	860 142	+ 6 346	+ 0.7
4.	Vidzeme	324 741	321 666	321 890	- 2 851	- 0.9
5.	Zemgale	249 149	246 435	246 483	- 2 666	- 1.1
Total in Latvia		2 494 792	2 469	2 480 524	- 14 268	- 0.6

(Source: compiled by the authors to the data of Central Statistical Bureau of Latvia)

As can be observed, the population of Latvia is declining across most of its territory, with the exception of municipalities surrounding the capital, Riga, where it is increasing. Just in the last two years, the population of Latvia has decreased by almost one percent, the most in the Kurzeme and Latgale planning regions - by 1.5% and 1.4%, respectively. The most common reasons are migration, also the economic and social situation, as well as the low birth rate. As a result, rural settlements are also becoming empty. Therefore, the authors aimed to investigate the current state of rural settlements and their development trends in rural areas of Latvia.

Methodology of research and materials

Rural settlements, specifically villages, have been chosen as **the object** of this research. **The aim** of the study is to evaluate the main aspects of rural settlement planning in the Republic of Latvia. To achieve this goal, the following **tasks** have been set: 1) to analyze regulatory acts and special literature on settlement planning, 2) to analyze the structure and dynamics of population distribution and rural settlements in Latvia; 3) to evaluate the structure and development of rural settlements on the basis of a selected administrative territory.

In the research the laws of the Republic of Latvia and other regulatory documents that determine the classification of settlements, their criteria, previously conducted studies on the classification of settlements have been investigated. Also data, maps and other cartographic materials of the Central Statistical Bureau of Republic of Latvia, the Latvian Geospatial Information Agency and the State Land Service were used in the analysis. The research uses the statistical analysis method, the document analysis method, as well as the descriptive monographic method.

For a more detailed analysis and visualization of the research results, the Ventspils municipality, located in the northwest of Latvia, by the Baltic Sea, was chosen as the research area. Ventspils municipality, after the administrative territorial reform, is the tenth largest municipality in Latvia. The municipality consists of 12 rural territories and the town of Piltene. The total area of the municipality is 2457.63 km², its territory is crossed by the main state highway A10 Riga - Ventspils, several state highways of regional and local importance, as well as the railway line Riga - Ventspils. The coastline of Ventspils municipality along the Baltic Sea stretches for less than 97 km. The sea coast with its wide beaches affects business sectors in the coastal rural territories (Jurkalne, Uzava, Varve and Targale rural territories), where businesses are often related to tourism and fishing. Jurkalne's steep bank has become one of the most popular places for recreation (Mucenieks, 2022). The formation structure of settlements in Ventspils municipality was affected by geographical factors - forest massifs, swamps, separate agricultural lands, the sea coast, historical factors and transport structures - road and railway network. A more concentrated population structure has developed around the city of Ventspils, along the highways and on both sides of the Venta river. In the eastern and southern parts of the municipality, where the territory is covered by large forest massifs, there is a relatively rare population (Mucenieks, 2022). According to the data of the Office of Citizenship and Migration Affairs Republic of Latvia (Population of the Republic..., b.y.), at the beginning of 2023, 10,512 residents had declared their place of residence in the Ventspils municipality. The population in the municipality continues to decrease.

Discussions and results

Within the framework of the study, the types of classification of settlements, their official classification and changes over time were evaluated.

1. Concept and classification of settlements

On June 10, 2020, the Saeima of the Republic of Latvia carried out another administrative reform by adopting a new Law on Administrative Territories and Populated Areas. The law provides a definition of a populated place: a populated area is a territory which is inhabited by people, where material pre-conditions for residence therein have been established and to which the relevant status of populated area has been granted according to the procedures specified by laws and regulations (LR Saeima, 2020). It should be noted that exactly this definition of a settlement already existed before the adoption of this law, however, this law determined a new classification of settlements. According to it, there are the following settlements in Latvia: cities and towns, villages, small villages and farmsteads (Fig. 1).

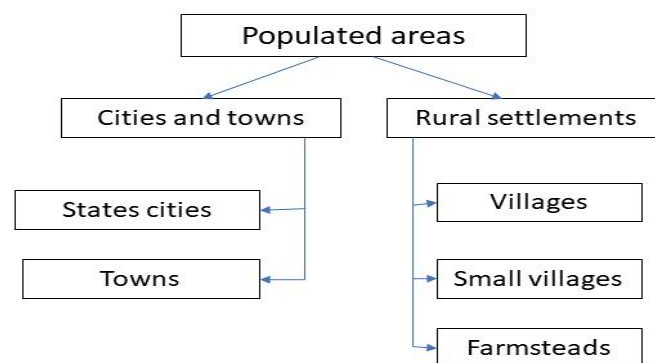


Fig. 1. Classification of Latvian populated areas since 2021

(Source: compiled by the authors to the Law on Administrative territories ..., 2020)

The law was applied in 2021, and according to it, cities are divided into State cities and municipality towns. There are 10 State cities: Daugavpils, Jelgava, Jekabpils, Jūrmala, Liepāja, Ogre, Rēzekne, Rīga, Valmiera and Ventspils, with Rīga as the capital. Apart from these state cities, there are 71 municipality towns in Latvia. The law defines 3 types of rural settlements: villages, small villages and farmsteads.

The law stipulates that the status of a village can be granted to a part of the municipality territory where there is or is planned to be a concentrated settlement, people live permanently and relevant infrastructure is established. In addition, it is stipulated that if the village has more than 5,000 permanent residents, then the council of the relevant municipality may, in accordance with this law, submit to the Cabinet of Ministers a proposal for determining the status of a city for the relevant village.

The law defines a so far unclassified settlement as a small village, and it is defined as a historically established settlement with dominant entertainment or dominant concentrated construction, which does not have a defined boundary in the municipality's territorial planning and whose name is included in the Latvian Geospatial Information Agency's Place names database.

A farmstead, on the other hand, is defined as a single detached residential building or several detached residential buildings, as well as farm buildings functionally connected to this building or buildings in the territory where the land is primarily used for agricultural or forestry purposes.

Before the adoption of the Law on Administrative Territories and Populated Areas (2020), an assessment of Latvian villages was carried out. The study was organized by the Ministry of Environmental Protection and Regional Development and when preparing the draft of the new law, according to the summarized results, it was explained that out of 6,314 villages registered in the State

Register of Addresses, 4,877 (77.2%) villages did not meet the status of a village at that time, that is, they there was no concentrated construction and the village boundaries were not defined in the planning of the municipality's territory (Turpmāk Latvijā ciemi..., 2018). However, revoking the village status of these settlements would undermine the usual addressing system, and changing addresses would create a burden for municipalities and the State Register of Addresses. Residents would also experience inconvenience.

As the Ministry explained, such a situation had arisen because the previous law, when determining village status norms, did not consider the historically formed actual situation of villages, because villages in Latvia are very different both in terms of the composition of the population, the existence of infrastructure facilities, the character of the population, and the density of buildings, as well as other characteristic features. Although the conclusions of the conducted research already indicated this situation. The situation was also complicated by the fact that several normative adopted the same requirements for the territories of cities and villages, for example, the width of the guard lanes, determination of building permits, accuracy of cadastral surveying and other requirements (Turpmāk Latvijā ciemi..., 2018).

According to the Ministry of Environmental Protection and Regional Development information, considering the diversity of villages in several municipalities (for example, in the territories of Līvāni, Krāslava, Preiļi, Dundaga, Vecumnieki, Balvi, etc. municipalities), two types of village groups have been formed. The first is villages that met the requirements of the previous Law on Administrative Territories and Populated Areas (2008), and the second is parts of rural territory that have a common name but no concentrated construction and no boundaries are marked in the graphic part of the spatial plan. Therefore, in accordance with the task given by the Cabinet of Ministers and the long-standing practice of several local governments, the Ministry of Environmental Protection and Regional Development proposed, while maintaining the village status of inhabited places, to define two subgroups of villages - the village of concentrated construction and the historical village (small village).

The status of a village of concentrated construction was granted to an existing or planned settlement in which people live permanently and relevant infrastructure has been created. For such a village, the boundaries of the territory of the village must be determined in the regional territorial planning, as well as the regional council determines the addresses and the name of the village included in the village.

On the other hand, the status of a historical village is granted to a historically established settlement with dominant entertainment or dominant concentrated construction, the name of which is included in the Place names database of the Latvian Geospatial Information Agency. The boundaries of such a village are not defined in the regional territorial planning, but the regional council determines the name of the village and the addresses included in the village. The Ministry also stated that the historical villages are one of the cultural and historical values of the municipality, which should be preserved for future generations, and which serve as an element of the address system, are used in the social environment and serve as an identifier for orientation in the municipality, which is used by the assistance services, as well as people in everyday communication.

The concentrated establishment villages (LR Saeima, 2020) sets the same village status criteria as before the adoption of the law, so municipalities that have complied with the requirements of regulatory acts in determining the status of villages will not have to make any amendments to the development planning documents. On the other hand, municipalities will apply their regulatory act to historical villages.

2. Village status and criteria for its determination

Among the inhabited places, villages have the greatest diversity in terms of the number of inhabitants, the concentration of buildings and other indicators in Latvia. Therefore, it is essential to find out the criteria for determining the status of the settlement. Nowadays, the status of the village is confirmed by the local municipality based on the spatial plans, which define the border of the village and justify the need for the establishment of the village. Most often, they are historically established rural settlements.

From the definition of a village provided in the law, it can be concluded that the indicators determining the status of a village are more qualitative - the concentration of buildings, permanent residents and relevant infrastructure, but it does not determine quantitative indicators that would allow determining whether a given territory is considered a village, for example, the density of buildings, the minimum population number, what infrastructure provision. Looking at the definition of a village in the context of the definition of a city as a settlement, it can be concluded that 5,000 is the number of inhabitants that separates cities from villages, at which the municipality can request to grant the village the status of a city (LR Saeima, 2020). So, the Law on Administrative Territories and Populated Areas does not allow for an unambiguous definition of the concept of a village, but provides a general idea of its features.

In addition to the definition of villages established by the law, various interpretations of the criteria for defining a village have been formed in Latvia until the adoption of the mentioned law. For example, in the study of J. Turlajs and G. Millins (1998) on Latvian settlements emphasized the built-up parameter, and a village was considered a rural settlement with concentrated settlement, in which the distance between built-up areas does not exceed 200m. The book "Latvijas ciemi. Nosaukumi, geografiskais izvietojums" authors, in turn, emphasize the historical context, and a village is defined as a rural settlement with a historically unified, compact or recreational inhabited area and a unifying name (Latvijas ciemi. Nosaukumi ..., 2007).

In order to distinguish villages according to their characteristics - the number of inhabitants, the existence of infrastructure facilities (state and municipal institutions, schools, shops, etc.), the location of farmsteads (dense or recreational), the nature of the population (seasonal or permanent) - and thus improve the understanding of this concept Latvian Geospatial Information Agency and the Faculty of Geography and Earth Sciences of the University of Latvia developed a classification of villages, defining 6 types of villages:

1) large village – a rural settlement with compact buildings and a unifying name. It usually has developed infrastructure - school, shops, medical institutions, post office, etc. – and at least 400 permanent residents. If the village has only a few infrastructure objects, its population must be at least 500, but if there are none at all - at least 600, so that the village can be considered a large village. Large villages in Latvia are most concentrated in the central part, especially around Riga;

2) medium village - a rural settlement with compact or semi-compact construction and a unifying name with 40-400 permanent residents, if the village has infrastructure facilities, or 100-600 residents, if there are none;

3) small village - a rural settlement with a unifying name, which has at least 3 compactly located residential houses. Villages with a population of up to 40, if there are infrastructure objects in the village, or up to 100, if there are none, qualify for the status of a small village. Small villages are the most common type of villages in Latvia. These are mainly centers of former manors and ancient, now shriveled villages;

4) scattered village (skrajciemi) – a group of at least 3 existing farmsteads with a unifying name. Each house can have its own separate name. In nature, skrajciemi mostly do not look like villages, but they are not quite separate farmsteads;

5) summer cottage village – a rural settlement with compact buildings and a unifying name, but mainly seasonal population;

6) care village – a rural settlement with compact or semi-compact buildings and a unifying name, where the majority of residents are those living and working in care institutions (Latvijas ciemi. Nosaukumi ..., 2007).

As can be seen, in this case too, interpretation is possible in the assessment of the level of infrastructure, however, the developed classification provides a relatively more accurate, more realistic picture of the possible variations of the villages. In this classification, the unifying elements for all types of villages are rural area, unifying name and built-up, although its density can vary greatly.

Only about 12% of all villages are large and medium villages, most are small villages, the number of which has decreased rapidly in recent years. On the other hand, summer cottage villages, especially near Riga, are turning into permanently inhabited villages. In addition, the design and construction of

completely new villages is rapidly expanding in Pierīga and some other places (Latvijas ciemi. Nosaukumi ..., 2007).

3. Structure and dynamics of villages in Latvia

Since 2016, the State Land Service has recorded all Latvian villages by municipalities from the Address Register (Ciemu skaits, 2016-2024). Gathering these data within the framework of the research, we can conclude that there is a significantly larger number of villages in Latgale than in other planning regions, while the smallest number of villages is in Rīga and Zemgale planning regions. However, a decrease in the number of villages can be observed in all planning regions, within eight years the largest decrease in the number of villages (-56 villages) was in the Kurzeme planning region, and the least (-19 villages) in the Latgale planning region.

Table 2

The number of villages in the Republic of Latvia from 2016 to 2024

Planning region	Number of villages as of January 1			
	2016	2020	2022	2024
Kurzeme	456	412	401	400
Latgale	5105	5104	5086	5086
Rīga	217	207	182	182
Vidzeme	393	343	357	357
Zemgale	274	246	246	245
Total in Latvia	6445	6312	6272	6270

(Source: compiled by the authors to the data of the State Land Service)

Table 2 lists all the villages included in the Address Register. But since 2022, information on the official division of villages has been available in the State Land Service. According to the law (LR Saeima, 2020), those territories are listed as villages, where there is or is planned to be a concentrated building, people live permanently, relevant infrastructure has been established and the boundaries of which have been defined in the spatial planning of the municipality. The village council grants and revokes the village status to these rural settlements. On the other hand, small villages are listed as historically established settlements, which do not have defined boundaries in the regional planning and whose names are included in the Latvian Geospatial Information Agency's Place names database. As can be seen in Table 3, the majority of the villages listed in the Address Register as of January 1, 2024 are small villages, there are especially many small villages in the Latgale planning region, their number is many times smaller in the other regions (Table 3).

Table 3

The number of villages by their types, as of January 1, 2024

Planning region	Number of villages		
	villages	small villages	total
Kurzeme	350	50	400
Latgale	286	4800	5086
Rīga	165	17	182
Vidzeme	329	28	357
Zemgale	227	18	245
Total in Latvia	1357	4913	6270

(Source: compiled by the authors to the data of the State Land Service)

4. Structure and development of rural settlements in Ventspils municipality

In order to more closely evaluate the structure of villages and its dynamics, an analysis of the location and development of rural settlements in the Ventspils municipality, which is located in the north-west of Latvia, in the Kurzeme planning region, was carried out as part of the study.

However, it should be noted that there are differences between individual national databases in the enumeration of villages. According to the data of the State Land Service, the number of villages in the Kurzeme planning region decreased by 56 within 8 years, from 456 villages in 2016 to 400 villages in 2024 (Tab. 2). Among them, the number of villages in Ventspils municipality decreased by 38 during this period - from 92 villages to 54 villages (Tab. 4). According to the data of the State Land Service, in 2016 there were 92 villages in the Ventspils municipality, but in 2022 there was only 54 villages, and none of them is classified as a small village.

On the other hand, according to the database of the Latvian Geospatial Information Agency, there are 100 rural settlements in the Ventspils municipality. The Agency's Place names database maintains information on the names of villages, which are classified as large villages, medium villages, small villages and the group of farmsteads (skrajciemi). There is also a classification of villages according to their functions, for example, summer cottage village (Fig. 2).

Table 4

Number of villages in the Kurzeme planning region, on January 1, 2024

Municipality	Number of villages		
	villages	small villages	total
Dienvidkurzeme municipality	66	3	69
Kuldīga municipality	40	0	40
Saldus municipality	36	0	36
Talsu municipality	109	35	144
Tukums municipality	45	12	57
Ventspils municipality	54	0	54
Total in planning region	350	50	400

(Source: compiled by authors from the State Land Service, 2024)

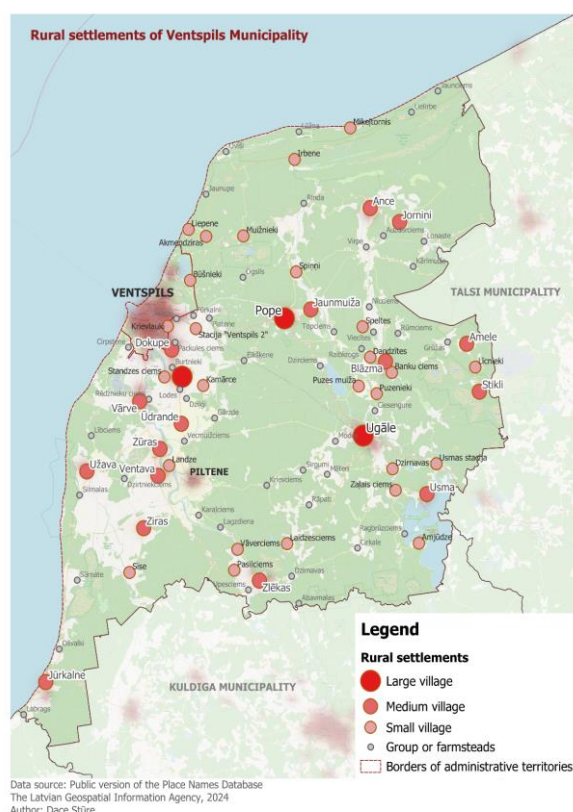


Fig. 2. The current distribution and location of rural settlements in Ventspils municipality, 2024
(Source: Public version of the Place names database of Latvian Geospatial Information Agency)

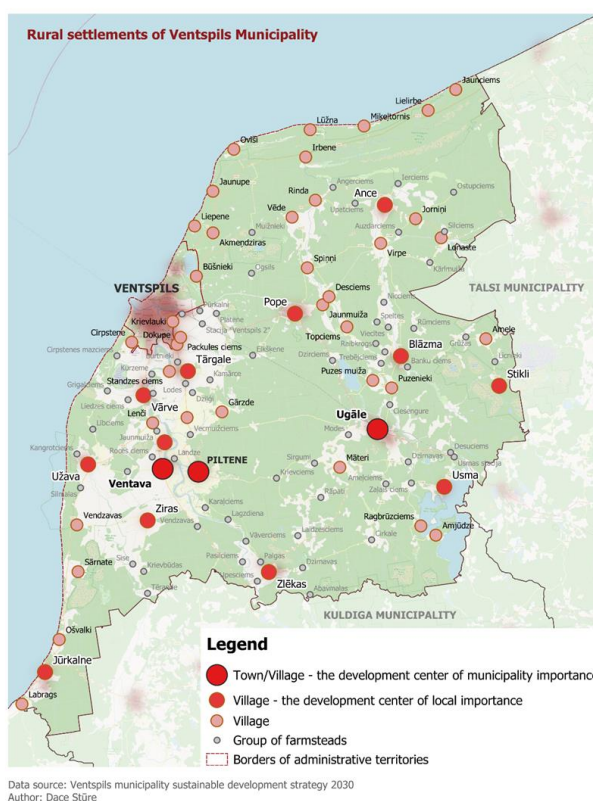


Fig. 3 The planned division and placement of rural settlements in Ventspils municipality, 2030
(Source: Ventspils municipality sustainability development strategy, 2030)

In order to preserve the settlements structure, in the development planning document of the local municipality, for example, in the sustainable development strategy of Ventspils municipality 2030, towns and villages are defined as development centers depending on their level of development, creating a polycentric development structure. The population structure of the municipality is made up of conditionally three-level development centers:

- development centers of municipal importance;
- development centers of local importance;
- villages (Fig. 3).

As it can be observed from images above, each of these centers has planned to maintain a certain amount of services and infrastructure. Also, rural settlements are preserved as suitable places for the development of neighborhoods and services in the future, even if almost no one lives there permanently. It can be concluded that, although the number of settlements in Ventspils municipality is decreasing, small villages and groups of farmsteads, which are planned for development, play an important role, especially on the Baltic Sea coast.

Conclusions and proposals

1. As in the whole of Europe, the population of Latvia is also decreasing. In the last two years, the population of Latvia has decreased by almost 1%. The population is decreasing throughout the territory of Latvia, with the exception of Pierīga municipalities, where a small increase of residents is observed.

2. Until the adoption of the Law on Administrative Territories and Populated Areas in 2020, several studies on the classification of settlements in Latvia have been conducted, with particular emphasis on too broad use of the village as a settlement for settlements that are very different in terms of population, construction, and significance. According to the Ministry of Environmental Protection and Regional Development data, 77% of the villages registered in the State Register of Addresses did not match to village status, as they did not have a concentrated structure, nor were there defined boundaries in the territory development plans.

3. Analyzing the distribution of villages by regions of Latvia, it was found that the largest number of villages is in the Latgale planning region, where it many times exceeds the number of villages in other regions. Most of the villages of the Latgale planning region are small villages. Like the population, the number of villages in all regions is gradually decreasing.

4. In the Kurzeme planning region, most of the villages consist of concentrated inhabited area, and only a small part (12.5%) consists of small villages or historical villages. In the Ventspils municipality, there are no settlements corresponding to the status of a small village.

5. There are differences in the accounting of rural settlements between Latvian state institutions.

6. When planning the development of the territory, municipalities try to preserve the existing infrastructure and services for further development. This is evidenced by the practice of the Ventspils municipality, where rural settlements are preserved as suitable places for the development of neighborhoods and services in the future, even if almost no one lives there permanently.

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