

The analysis of socio-economic situation in Estonian southeastern border area, which was conducted by The Centre for Applied Social Sciences (CASS) of the University of Tartu, and was completed with the support of the Ministry of the Interior and Defence, took into consideration the links between border security and communities' vitality. The study was conducted in the border zone of South-East Estonia in August–September 2022. This border zone itself is a sparsely populated land strip 85 km long and 2–3 km wide.

This study aimed to map the socio-economic and cultural situation of the South-Eastern Estonian border zone, the nature of settlement and land use in the border areas, technical infrastructure, community relations and the values, needs and wishes of the inhabitants that are more important from the point of view of internal security and border security, as well as the will to protect, to formulate bottlenecks and formulate solution proposals based on them.

Both quantitative and qualitative methods were used in the research. To answer the research questions, registry and spatial data (GIS – geographic information systems) analysis was combined with fieldwork in border areas. In the course of the fieldwork, the population of the border zone of South-East Estonia was interviewed and observations were made regarding the infrastructure of households.

This border zone is characterised by high emigration, a small number of children and young people, a 'bride drought'<sup>1</sup> and a very large over-representation of the 50–65 age group. In quite a few villages, the human population has now disappeared, while in some others the local population has been replaced by foreigners across the border. In the optimistic scenario, the population of the

border zone will remain at 1,880 people in 2035 and in the pessimistic scenario 25% less people will live in the border zone compared to today. From the point of view of the state of Estonia, those sections of the border where there are no natural obstacles (water bodies, forest and swamps) and no or few people living in and where the landscapes are open to access from across the border are to be considered more vulnerable.

The incomes of the people living in the border zone is 27% below the Estonian average. In some cases, only a third of working-age residents are employed. Non-working residents are, as a rule, beneficiaries of a pension for incapacity for work or are related to the shadow economy or have jobs abroad. The provision of key services (education, medical care, public transport and trade) is unsatisfactory. Telecommunication in the border region has many coverage holes and the internet is slow. The vast majority of residential buildings in use are over 60 years old, in a mediocre state and without modern amenities.

However, life in the border zone must continue. To this end, it is necessary to allow the cultural continuity of the Setos to continue. It would be necessary to deal with the marketing of the place, which would attract young people to the rural region on more favourable loan terms, as well as creating better living and working conditions. First and foremost, the state should support border guards, members of the Estonian Defence League (home guard), rescuers and other activists relevant to the community and the state in the construction of border residences. Targeting strategic investments into the housing stock, ensuring the technical supply of better residential buildings in the border zone, the creation of so-called border guard households and ensuring public services through the application of border zone regional wage coefficients will enable the preservation of community life and through it contribute to border security.

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<sup>1</sup> 'Bride Drought' – the situation where a region has significantly fewer 20- to 34-year-old women than men of the same age group.