

Delegation Brandenburg on the topic 'Sustainable development within the framework of Saksa Kevad'

Report on the fact-finding mission to Estonia from 18 - 20 September 2024

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How is Estonia addressing these crucial contemporary and future challenges? At the invitation of the Ministry of Agriculture, Environment, and Climate Protection and the German Embassy in Tallinn, the Climate Protection Manager, Alexis Schwartz, had the opportunity to participate in a delegation visit to the northernmost of the three Baltic states in late September, where he engaged in discussions with representatives from academia, government, and business.

Estonia is a member of the EU since 2004 and with a population of approximately 1.3 million, shares several interesting similarities with Brandenburg. Like Brandenburg, Estonia has two major urban growth centres—Tallinn and Tartu—while its rural areas are becoming increasingly sparsely populated. Both regions face similar challenges in ensuring adequate essential public services and infrastructure, particularly in healthcare and public transport. In Estonia's northeastern region of Ida-Viru, which borders Russia, a structural transformation is underway, like that in Lusatia. Over the coming years, oil shale mining, a highly polluting energy source, will be phased out. Therefore, a key task for the next few decades will be to create well-paid jobs in future-oriented industries.

Compared to Brandenburg Estonia faces two challenges in its energy transition. First, as a small economy, the country relies heavily on foreign investment, which has slowed considerably since Putin's invasion of Ukraine, as Russia's unpredictable military aggression has raised concerns about the security of investments. Second, wind energy—an alternative source of electricity—is currently not viable in large parts of the country due to national security concerns. Wind turbines could interfere with the proper functioning of military surveillance equipment, which Estonia depends on heavily.

Despite the military insecurity and economic pressures, the country's ecological transformation is progressing. In urban areas, heating networks are being modernised and expanded, while former overhead power lines in Tallinn are being repurposed into natural corridors featuring wildflower meadows, cycle paths, and new tram lines. The fleet of vehicles for the city's free bus and rail network is being gradually converted to renewable energy. Notably, electric mobility has been a cornerstone of Tallinn's urban transport for 99 years, thanks to its trams and trolleybuses.

Discussions with various hosts also revealed that a deep connection to nature is integral to Estonian culture. For generations, much of the urban population has spent the short growing season in summer houses, where they cultivate a significant portion of their own food, including fruit, vegetables, berries, honey, and mushrooms.

In stark contrast to this traditional lifestyle is Estonia's rapid digitalisation, which took off shortly after the country's re-establishment in the 1990s. Two decades ago, the nation was already almost entirely covered by free Wi-Fi. A representative of the E-Estonia Briefing Centre—a hub for information on Estonia's digitalisation—proudly explained that only two state services still

require a visit to the office: marriage and divorce. But, from next year, even these will be managed electronically.

The electronic ID card serves as a health insurance card, student ID, public transport ticket, and a key to all administrative services. The system begins with pregnancy: as soon as it is confirmed, a digital file is created. Citizens can log in online to check the start and end dates of the legal protection for pregnant women and paid maternity leave. When a child is born, a personal number is automatically assigned, and the child's profile is linked to the parents' record. Medical diagnoses and prescriptions are stored digitally, enabling medications to be collected from pharmacies using the ID card. Tax declarations take just three minutes online in Estonia. For businesses, tax declarations can often be completed quickly without the need for an accountant. Vehicles are registered or deregistered online, parliamentary elections conducted via smartphone using the e-ID, and even property transactions are conducted digitally, with notaries joining via video.

But, what about people who struggle with the Internet and digital technology? Estonia provides straightforward assistance. In addition to numerous practical courses to build digital skills, government offices are open for citizens to conduct their official business, offering in-person support where staff assist citizens in completing their administrative tasks step by step on computers. Speaking of government: Estonia has published an online "Tree of Truth," which visually displays the status of administrative processes. The colour of each leaf indicates whether a public service is functioning well or requires improvement, ensuring complete transparency in state administration.

When asked about data security and personal autonomy, the host laughed briefly and explained: "Our databases are so secure that no hacking attempt has ever succeeded. They comply with the stringent requirements of the European General Data Protection Regulation. Do not assume your country knows less about you just because the data is stored in different places. Your government knows everything about you. So why not make the data user-friendly and easily accessible for citizens?"

After three incredibly insightful days, the delegation returned to Brandenburg with bags full of answers—and even more new questions. The unanimous consensus among participants was that Estonians are exceptionally friendly and forward-thinking, and that the country is undoubtedly worth a visit.