

# **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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During the "German Spring – Saksa Kevad," we had the privilege of joining a delegation that included representatives from Brandenburg's ministries, municipalities, and research institutions. Together, we engaged in discussions with Estonian government officials, business leaders, researchers, and NGOs on the topics of sustainability and digitalisation. The following report is a chronological summary of the key insights gained from these exchanges.

We engaged in discussions with Prof. Helen Sooväli-Sepping from Tallinn University of Technology, as well as Heidi Tamm and Shimin Huang from the Stockholm Environment Institute (SEI) focusing on the challenges faced by Estonia's rural areas, which are sparsely populated and less developed compared to urban centres with their IT start-ups. Another key topic was the training of specialists in sustainable development at Estonian universities. It became clear that degree programmes with a strong professional focus tend to attract more students, as they offer better employment prospects.

At the German Embassy, we were briefed on the current political situation in Estonia. A major issue is the Russian invasion of Ukraine, which has driven up energy prices across the country. Estonia remains heavily reliant on fossil fuels, with renewable energy development receiving insufficient support. While the construction of a nuclear power plant is being considered and supported by the public and industry, it would require significant time and investment. Large-scale infrastructure projects like Rail Baltica also face challenges, as they depend on the comparatively limited budgets of the Baltic states.

Estonia's digital leadership was showcased at the E-Estonia Briefing Centre, where we were introduced to the government's digital services. All these services are accessible through a centralised platform with just a few clicks. In addition, the government takes a proactive approach to managing benefits, such as child allowances, which are automatically processed and transferred to the bank account without needing an application. This level of digitalisation has significantly enhanced quality of life, particularly in rural areas where administrative offices are often distant. Moreover, it has proven economically advantageous, as projections indicate that the time saved in work hours has more than compensated for the initially high investment costs.

We met with representatives from the Ministry of Regional Affairs and Agriculture's Department for Local Governments and the Ministry of Climate's Green Transformation Department. Our discussions focused on challenges shared by both Brandenburg and Estonia. Estonia is facing significant demographic shifts driven by an ageing population and growing urban-rural divide. To address these issues, the country has implemented a regional administrative structure to facilitate collaboration among municipal administrations, ensuring that local authorities in sparsely populated areas can offer the same level of public services as larger municipalities. Additionally, the significant proportion of the Russian-speaking population presents challenges, particularly for the education system. So, to promote integration, greater emphasis will be

placed on teaching and encouraging the use of the Estonian language. The overarching goal is to ensure that all citizens can lead a "good life," which means acknowledging the differences in lifestyles and needs between urban and rural communities. Progress towards this goal is measured using sectoral SDG indicators, which are accessible online via the "Tree of Truth." (<https://tamm.stat.ee/?lang%3Den=&lang=en>).

In discussions with Mr. Meelis Kuusk and Mr. Hardi Murula, we explored the Ida-Virumaa region, known for its oil shale industry, which plays a crucial role in Estonia's economy.

The region's sustainability transformation is particularly complex, further complicated by the geopolitical situation with Russia. A large portion of the local population remains culturally distinct from the rest of the country, and securing livelihoods during the industrial transition presents a significant challenge. The expansion of renewable energy is slow, with biomass utilisation playing a significant role, which could raise additional ecological concerns. The development of solar and wind energy is hindered by a lack of specialised companies and insufficient capital. Moreover, securing the region's status as an industrial hub, retaining skilled workers, and preventing depopulation remain additional challenges. The proximity to Russia discourages companies from investing in the region, although a new magnet production facility offers the potential for European independence from China in this sector. Former mining sites are being repurposed for cultural activities, such as water sports.

The following day, we met Krista Kampus from Tallinn's city administration to discuss challenges in urban sustainability arising from the distribution of property and real estate ownership among the city, government, and private individuals. A noteworthy project involves repurposing a former electricity grid corridor for biodiversity initiatives. Also of interest is the free public transport in Tallinn, although its economic sustainability is questionable, as encouraging residents to use it remains a challenge.

Finally, we visited BOLT's headquarters, where various companies presented their contributions to the Green Tiger (Rohetiiger) initiative. The programme seeks to promote sustainable economic transformation, often leveraging digital solutions.

## **Collaboration**

Unfortunately, we are not currently involved in any capacity that would allow for realistic collaboration with the Estonian representatives. However, we valued the opportunity to network with German delegates and gained valuable insights into international cooperation.

One potential idea on our part is to revive the Studium oecologicum (Ecological Studies) at the University of Potsdam, though on a private basis and not through the Youth Forum. The insights into various sectors gained during this trip could prove instrumental in pursuing this endeavour.