

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

Travel Report on Estonia by Karsten Wittke (City of Baruth/Mark)

Introduction/Motivation

As the coordinator for municipal development policy in the Global Sustainable Municipality of Baruth/Mark, I was pleased to accept the invitation to join the Brandenburg delegation on an informational trip to Estonia. Since 2018, I have been working with the municipality in the field of local and global development policy. Baruth/Mark signed the Model Declaration for Global Sustainable Municipalities in 2019, and I was particularly keen to learn how sustainability, the 17 Sustainable Development Goals, and the 2030 Agenda are being put into practice in Estonia.

Preparation for the Trip

The strategic preparation for the trip was highly successful, particularly given the tight timeframe of just three days. Despite the challenge of presenting the complexity of the topic in all its facets for an entire country, making it tangible, and enabling as many discussions and activities as possible for the delegation, the organisers managed this with great success. Special thanks go to the team at the German Embassy in Tallinn for their thorough preparation, and to Mr. Lobinger and Mr. Pohlmann for their excellent organisation. The composition of the Brandenburg delegation was also well-chosen, representing a variety of perspectives on sustainable development from the ministerial, academic, municipal, and civil society sectors. Personally, I was particularly pleased with the participation of the Youth Forum on Sustainability.

The Programme

The programme was very well chosen and struck the right balance, allowing for both adequate professional information and exchanges at eye level within a challenging but manageable timeframe.

All encounters and exchanges of perspectives between Brandenburg and Estonia, both theoretical and practical, concerning the implementation of the Sustainable Development Goals, were highly informative and productive for everyone involved. The discussions were conducted in a very serious manner, with critical questions informed by Brandenburg's own experiences. A particularly thoughtful decision was to travel from Tallinn to rural areas to visit and experience various project initiatives. This was especially significant, as Brandenburg is similarly characterised by rural areas where implementing and communicating sustainability

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from a municipal perspective remains an ongoing challenge, particularly in terms of the effectiveness of sustainability strategies.

The delegation had the opportunity to engage in discussions with representatives from academia, civil society, NGOs, ministries, the municipal administration of Tallinn, and a sustainability-focused business association comprising start-ups and young Estonian-based companies.

For me, the most impressive aspect was to learn about possibilities of Estonia's digitalisation strategy, which facilitates communication and coordination among all these diverse actors in a way that was truly fascinating for someone used to working within the local government framework. The introduction to the digitalisation concept at the start of the trip was invaluable and significantly enhanced our understanding of Estonian methodologies.

Insights from Dialogues and Discussions on Sustainability

The primary focus was on professional information exchange, which provided me with a valuable snapshot of Estonia's unique approach to implementing sustainability. Three aspects particularly stood out to me:

1. Pragmatism in Communication and Implementation of the Sustainability Agenda

In my view, sustainability and the goals of the 2030 Agenda are not regarded in Estonia as an ideologically rigid dogma but rather as a balanced compromise that accommodates the diverse interests of all stakeholders in pursuit of a sustainable future. If a 50% CO₂ reduction by 2040 is to be communicated more effectively as a goal, this approach will be implemented. If the goal is to reduce individual car traffic in the capital, Tallinn, public transport is made free for residents, while cars are not banned. If investors wish to build a modern city district, a designated development zone outside the historic old town will be assigned. Similarly, when a green recreational corridor is established in Tallinn, it will be legally protected from development. In rural areas, sustainable NGOs are working on projects related to value cycles, food, and social sustainability. Young Estonian companies have embraced sustainability and value cycles as their unique selling point (USP) and have organised themselves in a green business association called Green Tiger. This exemplary list could be extended further, and a comparison with Brandenburg would be an interesting exercise.

2. The Tree of Truth

One of Estonia's notable achievements in creating accessible and straightforward symbols and narratives for sustainability is the "Tree of Truth". While German municipalities rely on the extensive and somewhat cumbersome Bertelsmann Atlas as a foundation for sustainability strategies, Estonia has created a more user-friendly visual icon. The tree's leaves reflect the actual progress in implementing the sustainability goals outlined in Estonia's strategy, guided by specific indicators. A green leaf signifies a target has been achieved, a yellow leaf indicates work is in progress, and a red leaf denotes that the goal has either not been addressed or has not been met. The Tree of Truth is, of course, digital and accessible at any time, with real-time updates that ensure

transparency in sustainability efforts. Interestingly, the structure of the indicators underpinning the leaf colours mirrors that of the Bertelsmann catalogue.

3. Sustainability as Part of the Estonian Identity

I had already mentioned the ideological tensions surrounding sustainability, as seen in our citizen dialogues in Baruth. Topics such as climate protests who glue themselves to the streets, extensive restrictions, and a perceived resistance to being told how to live have complicated the discourse on sustainability. In contrast, Estonia appears to approach sustainability as a national endeavour, taking pride in sustainable actions and achievements, which are actively promoted as part of its branding for the country, its businesses, and municipalities. After our discussions, this represents a notable departure from the experiences in Baruth and Brandenburg. Perhaps this perspective is rooted in Estonia's relatively young history. The country has positioned itself with forward-thinking strategies to counterbalance a powerful historical neighbour, Russia, while embracing the global objectives of the UN Agenda 2030. This approach not only bolsters its sustainability efforts but also reinforces societal cohesion as an independent state and parliamentary republic within Europe.

Perspectives on Sustainability Dialogue Between Estonia and Brandenburg

I would welcome the continuation of the dialogue that began during this trip and encourage ongoing exchanges between sustainability actors and initiatives from Estonia and Brandenburg.