



Cross border cooperation seminar in Valga, 31 October 2018

Introduction

On 31 October Estonian-Latvian cross border cooperation seminar took place in Valga, focusing regional development challenges and priorities.

Around 25 people: Latvian and Estonian municipal employees, NGOs, interest groups, and concerned citizens met to discuss and make proposals how to tackle common challenges identified jointly by the border regions and to exploit the untapped growth of the area.

The seminar was jointly organized by Valga municipality and Interreg Europe EPICAH project.

Presentations

The seminar was opened by Valga/Valka twin town mayors – **Mr. Margus Lepik and Mr. Vents Armands Krauklis** by a thought that Valga-Valka become closer every day (in geographical terms town councils are also only 400m apart). Municipalities have everyday practical need for cooperation; other municipalities in the region do not see this practical need so much.

The mayors said that they have very good cooperation in municipal level, but in state level there are many more obstacles. Still, the border municipalities do not utilize their special location well enough yet; the task of local administrators would be to find ways how to give more opportunities to business, social groups while using also vicinity of the border as possibility.

There are national cooperation institutions, such as Estonia-Latvia parliamentary group, Government Commission, Interreg Estonia-Latvia program; also some municipal agreements – however not all of this formalized network is well used for improved cooperation.



The presentations by **Mrs. Laila Gercane** (Vidzeme Planning Region, Latvia) and **Mr. Rivo Noorkõiv** (Geomedia, Estonia) represented Latvian and Estonian interests, respectively, and demonstrated that there is considerable overlap in terms of future developmental needs and opportunities.

According to Ms Gercane the weight between the sustainable development pillars (environmental, social, and economic) in the border region projects is not in balance. The environment is dominant, the social sector is weaker, and the economic sector is even weaker.



Vidzeme development priorities 2030 and proposed Estonia -Latvia cross-border cooperation priorities are: Education, Social security and health care, Sustainable economy innovation environment, Accessible region and finally attractiveness of places.

Ms.Gercane said that the new Estonia Latvia Program should be clearly focused on core area (border area, Valga/Valka) where real challenges are faced and bring significant, long-lasting changes, having influence on the territory.

Mr Rivo Noorkõiv talked about the perspective of Estonian-Latvian cooperation based on the development plans of the local governments in the border region. In general, border municipalities do not see added value of the vicinity of the border, excluding Valga-Valka municipalities, where urban space is of distinct character. He also stressed that there is no need for declarations, but to develop real content for cooperation, to give them economic dimension, and to identify what is the expected benefit that is expected from cooperation.

Common topics with cooperation projects potential according to Ms.Gercane and Mr Noorkõiv are:

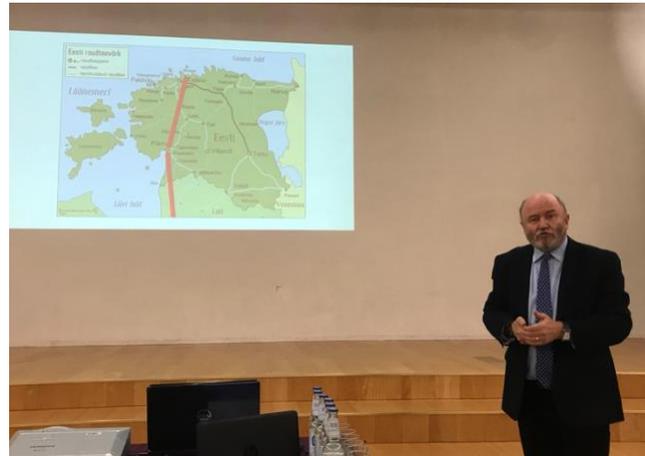
- Public service provision: (vocational)education, health care, labour market and rescue services
- Attractiveness of the region/ tourism: light traffic routes, hiking trails, small harbours, common marketing efforts etc.
- Heritage: Art, culture, twin town as EstLat cultural hub; houses under heritage protection; Small-scale culture and sports projects,
- Environment: cleaning the rivers,
- Entrepreneurship and cooperation between entrepreneurs

Other possible cooperation topics:

- Sustainable economy/ business and innovation environment,
- Accessible region,
- Cross-border planning (incl. connecting Valga-Valka urban spaces),
- Tax policy (special investment zone),
- Estonian-Latvian house in Valka, empowerment the activities of Estonia-Latvia Institute (language and culture studies and events, business contacts).

In the following, Member of European Parliament for Estonia – **Mr Igor Gräzin** - presented his idea for Border-crossing municipality -Walk. He was concerned that some forms of regional cooperation European Union is offering (also money) are underused by regions.

He proposed ideas, how to better utilize this region's underused railway network, which could help in making Riga, Tartu and Tallinn more accessible. Additionally, the idea of making the border a special tax zone was floated, as well as the more dramatic idea of establishing the region as a special self-governing region within Europe.



Discussion

With the help of the moderator Mr Peeter Unt the new EstLat program period possible project ideas were discussed during the last hour of the seminar.

Mr Unt informed that the new program projects have to fit under Policy objective 5: a Europe closer to citizens by fostering the sustainable and integrated development of urban, rural and coastal areas and local initiatives. More specifically physical regeneration and security of public spaces; also protection, development and promotion of:

- public tourism assets and related tourism services
- cultural heritage and cultural services
- natural heritage and eco-tourism.

The *participants* proposed that rescue services, first aid are good examples of cross border cooperation so far. Twin town Valga/Valka is proud of their joint public space and joint cultural events, town festivals and fairs. This year joint New Year celebration is in plan. There have been also numerous tourism related initiatives/ projects.

Among the most hot topics for border municipalities, where cross border solutions and project could be developed are:

1. Culture:
 - Estonia-Latvia house to empower the activities of language and culture studies and events, business contacts
 - Military museum development
2. Environment
 - Cleaning Pedeli river (rain water management/cleaning; Some household are not joined central water system)
 - Joint management plans



3. Sports / free time
 - Jaanikese motor center (adventure tourism)
 - activities and summer camps for children, sport events
4. Health care
 - Valga hospital, which could offer services also Latvians (but here budget issue arise)
5. Tourism development activities, which should have a strong entrepreneurial component.

Municipality leaders stressed, that national governments should understand the twin town special status and special agreements /tax areas etc. should be adopted for the region. Also new period EstLat program should have a special quota for Valga/Valka municipality.

The Valga-Valka Cooperation seminar was the first step in deciding what areas and issues are the most important for the region, having in mind new period of Interreg Europe EstLat Program. The new, more detailed discussions will continue in early 2019.

The event was co-finance by Interreg Europe project “Effectiveness of Policy Instruments for Cross Border Advancement in Heritage – EPICAH” (/www.interregeurope.eu/epicah/)