



GERMAN-BALTIC CONFERENCE Tallinn 2021

“EUROPE SHALL HEAR YOU”

European Answers how to shape our Future

– POLICY PAPER –

**Cluster B – For few or for all? How can we
ensure active participation in a digital
society?**

The Conference is organized by:

German-Baltic Academic Foundation. German-Baltic Youth Office

The German-Baltic Academic Foundation promotes exchange and cross-cultural understanding between young adults from Germany, the Baltic States and Russia on the basis of democracy and human rights. For this purpose, we award scholarships, organize seminars and congresses, arrange internships and facilitate networking of participants and scholarship recipients through alumni work. In the context of the shared history, the Foundation aims to continuously develop towards becoming a German-Baltic Youth Office (Deutsch-Baltisches Zukunftsforum / „DBJW“).

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Abstract

This policy paper discusses how we can ensure active involvement in digital society through the use of modern information and communication technology (ICT). The participants chose different topics in the realm of ensuring an active participative society:

1. Digital Elections (e-voting)
2. Inclusive Public Services for People with Disabilities
3. Making the Acquisition of Public Transport Tickets in Lithuania Accessible for Everyone
4. Providing Support for Teachers How to Use Digital Learning Tools
5. Political Education
6. Raising Awareness for Health Education and COVID-19 Consequences
7. Corruption and Tax Evasion as Two of the Biggest Public Issues in Lithuania
8. Inclusion of elderly in a digitized society

Each of the topics in this policy paper has two major parts where the participants first discuss the problem and its importance and then provide policy recommendations accordingly.

1. Digital Elections (e-voting)

Matin Karimi

Problem Statement: How to ensure that digitalization of elections (e-election) will not exclude tech inept citizens or the ones with disabilities from participation in election?

The Importance of the Problem: Addressing this issue is important because participation in the election is a basic democratic right of all citizens in a sovereign country. Besides, digitization of the elections also helps in terms of scalability and transparency. However, there are legit concerns regarding espionage (hacking) and technical error in the system. It is also worth mentioning that digitalization of the elections will not solve the fundamental problems associated with democracy and the broader economic and political system.

Policy Recommendations:

1. Hold participatory discussions

Prior to the introduction of an e-election, it is important to hold participatory discussions and debates at different levels in a society. For instance between citizens and civil society (including think tanks), political parties, and the federal/central government (including parliament). Following the debates at different levels, the final decision should be made in light of the constitutional framework.

2. Build cohesive technical and operational framework

After certain agreements, it will be vital to come-up with a legal/policy bill for the e-election and a technical and operational framework.

3. Conduct several pilots and tests at different levels

Introduce e-election possibility after several rounds of piloting (this piloting should be at different levels, including tech system, functionality/operability, and participation). However, it is equally important that the paper-based election system also remains operable for those citizens who still prefer paper-based voting. A good example for lessons learned could be Estonia.

2. Inclusive Public Services for People With Disabilities

Matthias Kapp

Problem Statement: How can we make digital public services accessible and easy-to-use for all citizens?

The Importance of the Problem: Confident use of digital media, online applications and digital public services (e.g. applying for foster care) is an important issue when it comes to equal opportunities in our society. Those who cannot benefit from these accesses due to certain physical or mental disabilities remain excluded from these opportunities and are disadvantaged.

Rethinking is necessary so that digitization is not adapted for individuals, but is implemented from the outset so that everyone can participate. In Germany legal pressure is driving the implementation of barrier-free digital services through the Online Access Act.¹ Nevertheless, the public administration lacks not only resources and competencies, but also the appropriate personnel to make implementation barrier-free and user-friendly for all.

¹ [BMI - Homepage of the Online Access Act](#)

On the contrary, the Baltic state Estonia has already digitized 99% of their public services and are one of the leading countries in the UN e-Government Survey 2020.² Even if Estonia's services are accessible in multiple languages (Estonian, Russian and English), there is no offer for disabled people to independently master them. The NGO inclusion europe presented a possible disability strategy stating that “persons with disabilities [should] have the same right as other EU citizens [...] to participate in political life”.³ Additionally, the strategy states that equal opportunities in access to justice, education, culture, sport and tourism should be possible for disabled people. Estonia still has a lot to improve regarding these goals, especially in the development of digital public services.

Policy Recommendations:

1. Special curriculum for universities focusing on educating public servants:

The curriculum should provide a basis for both university didactics and specialist practical training. In addition, it might serve as a building block for the continuing education of IT specialists and managers. Based on a needs analysis, this model curriculum might contain the resulting requirements as well as the means and methods to implement these requirements. In doing so, the most diverse types of disabilities are deliberately taken into consideration in order to create digital accessibility for every type of disability.⁴

² [Estonia among top 3 in the UN e-Government Survey 2020 — e-Estonia](#)

³ <http://www.inclusion-europe.eu/european-disability-strategy/>

⁴ For further information see: [Hochschule Bremen gründet Institut für digitale Teilhabe](#)

2. Train public servants regarding their skills to include all members of society:

Additionally to teaching upcoming public servants there is a necessity to train employees in the public sector on the job through specific sensibilizing them for people with disabilities and also through additional courses to strengthen their knowledge in this sphere.

3. Citizen centric approach using agile project management and user tests for more accessibility:

Through building up a pool of test persons, public administrations should test the requirements of their new upcoming digital services to test the implementation of projects considering their accessibility. Test persons might differ from each other in their type of impairment or use of assistance technologies, age, gender and possibly other categories. This approach goes hand in hand with the public administration moving towards agile approaches when implementing new projects. Instead of trying to plan all the details of a project up front, Public administrations must rely on quickly building prototypes that are tested by real users.

3. Making the Acquisition of Public Transport Tickets in Lithuania Accessible for Everyone

Roberta Bartkutė

Problem Statement: How to make sure that people, not having a possibility to acquire electronic tickets, would be able to use public transportation in Lithuania easily?

The Importance of the Problem: To align with environmentally-friendly modernisation, new electronic tickets for public transport were introduced in many countries, Lithuania, too. Before the corona-crisis, people had an option to buy paper tickets on the bus. Because of hygienic measures taken to reduce the unnecessary contacts, this option was made impossible. Because of this measure two groups of people were particularly affected:

- People, who don't live in a particular city and therefore are not interested in paying for an electronic card which is to be topped up at ticket-selling locations in the city.
- (Older) people who don't use smartphones or/and computers and as a result cannot download and use particular apps for buying the tickets.

Most often these two groups are represented by the same people, that is there are a lot of old people, also from villages, who, for example, come to Vilnius or other big cities to see a doctor and who do not know how to acquire a bus ticket.

Policy Recommendations:

1. Stay hybrid - don't digitize everything!

Introducing a possibility to buy paper tickets at other selling-points like kiosks or supermarkets.

2. Free transport for elderly people

Take an example from Šiauliai, where people over 75 years old can use public transport for free. Such a possibility should be offered to people from at least 65 years old, taking into consideration that average life expectancy in Lithuania was 71.5 years for men and 81 years for women.⁵

3. Giving Vilnius resident cards (or the cards of other cities) to pensioners for free

Now it costs 1,5 Euro and people who come to the capital irregularly don't want to pay this fee, which is understandable taking into consideration the average pension in Lithuania.⁶

4. Introducing a common European application

There is a necessity to merge different digital public transportation applications. Through this tourists and foreigners could easily travel and use public transportation without any hurdles (e.g. young digital savvy tourists).

⁵ <https://osp.stat.gov.lt/lietuvos-gyventojai-2020/mirtingumas/vidutine-tiketina-gyvenimo-trukme>

⁶ <https://socmin.lrv.lt/en/news/approved-budget-of-2021-child-money-pensions-allowances-and-the-minimum-wage-will-increase>

5. One card for all cities

Introduce a possibility to use a transportation card of one Lithuanian city in another one. For instance, older people living in Siauliai have a card which they use for taking busses in Siauliai. If the same card would be possible to use in Vilnius, they would not have to buy Vilniečio kortelė. Since they know how to use the cards of Siauliai, it would reduce the problem of not being able to buy a paper ticket in Vilnius.

4. Providing Support for Teachers How to Use Digital Learning Tools

Anna Lelkes

Problem Statement: How can teachers and schools be supported to apply new digital teaching methods in the light of the pandemic crisis based on the example of Finland?

The Importance of the Problem: Teachers cannot be expected to suddenly switch from in-person teaching to remote teaching if they haven't been familiar with digital schooling before, which is the case in many European countries. When schools had to close due to Covid, teachers were often left alone to find out themselves how to pursue the transmission of education without having the competence of knowing how to use digital teaching tools. Sometimes, schools even could not provide those tools.

The origin of this problem is probably to be found in the roots of teachers' training, how they have been educated at university and how they have been prepared to teach, etc. Other socio-economic aspects can shape the context, such as how much they are honoured in the society (the reputation of teachers' job), how much they earn, therefore how motivated they are to invest more energy (and maybe also passion) into teaching, how open they are to learn new methods, what are their (or schools') financial possibilities to use license-based, more professional teaching tools.

Policy Recommendations:

1. Integrating the use of digital tools into the academic studies and training of teachers:

In order to apply digital tools, teachers have to know how to use them – which is the key for the digital transformation of education. In Finland, 74% of the teachers reported in a survey conducted by OECD that Information-Communication-Technology (ICT) skills were included in their professional development activities and for 56% ICT use for teaching purposes was included in their formal education and training.⁷

2. Ensuring that both parents and teachers are familiar with the use of teaching apps:

The cooperation among teachers and between teachers and parents is of major importance as well that should be strengthened by school administrations. A lot of Finnish schools for example already had ICT support before so that teachers could exchange and share notes and experiences, while during Covid, there was a strong cooperation between teachers and parents to ensure that home-schooling works in an efficient way.⁸

⁷ <https://www.oecd.org/education/Finland-coronavirus-education-country-note.pdf>

⁸ <https://finland.fi/life-society/as-finnish-teachers-move-classes-online-family-routines-change/>

3. Special funding for digital education:

National governments shall set up a special fund for digital education purposes in cooperation with the European Union that could set a line of recommendations for member states on how to enforce the transformation of digital education. The Finnish National Agency for Education has been investing during the pandemic to support equipment for schools in areas that are affected by the pandemic situation such as information for teachers on how to ensure student welfare, how to organise classes, international cooperation, etc.⁹

⁹ https://www.oph.fi/sites/default/files/documents/distance-education-in-finland-during-covid19_initial-observations.pdf

5. Political Education

Michel Wicke

Problem Statement: Political participation is lower due to a lack of political education. This is especially noticeable for less educated people.

The Importance of the Problem: Political education in the EU is necessary to encourage people to become active and to help shape democracy. It doesn't mean that young people don't want to participate: Rather, it shows that most express a clear desire to participate and influence the decisions made by society, but they want to do so in a more individual and unique way, outside old participatory structures and mechanisms.

Thus, the use of the internet plays an increasingly important role in gathering information, expressing opinions and influencing decision-making processes. Therefore, it is important to promote activities that lead to increased participation of young people in democratic processes.¹⁰ It is proven that education leads to a more engaged person.¹¹ But there is a problem: The responsibility for education and training systems lies with individual states. But the role of the EU is to support and supplement their capacity (Art. 165). The article describes ways how „the development of quality education by encouraging cooperation between Member States and, if necessary, by supporting and supplementing their action“.

¹⁰<https://www.dji.de/themen/jugend/jugend-und-politik.html>

¹¹https://pure.mpg.de/rest/items/item_1867815/component/file_1867810/content

Policy Recommendations:

1. Young people need easy access to information

There is a necessity to inform young people about their participation possibilities. Then they can make decisions about their participation based on this information. This can be made possible by means of an Internet site. However, this website should also have the possibility to enter into a common dialogue in an easy and uncomplicated way. This makes it possible to get in touch with like-minded people of the same age, to exchange opinions and to organise projects via the internet. In addition, the website should function as an archive of former projects. All in all, it would be a mixture of Wikipedia, for reliable information on participation opportunities, an online forum for the exchange of information and a voting platform.

2. Topic of citizenship should be included in classrooms

We need to discuss whether the topic of citizenship should be integrated into existing school subjects (training in youth participation, human rights, etc.). However, this also means that teachers and educators need to be trained in how to promote youth participation.

6. Raising Awareness for Health Education and COVID-19 Consequences

Sofija Marija Barcevičiūtė

Problem Statement: Health education is not taken seriously enough or presented as an interesting topic for young people. Taking a look at European statistics problems were consistent for a long time (e.g. suicidal attempts). Since this year (through the outbreak of Covid-19) interest has been increasing.

The Importance of the Problem: To have a sufficient education about health issues has several benefits.

For instance:

- Less health problems
- Easier to catch a health problem if we know the first symptoms of a disease
- Easier to stop big problems like obesity and suicide

Besides, insufficient resources for an increase in health education might for instance lead to:

- People find out their disease in a late state or don't understand that the symptoms they have is a symptoms of disease
- Health problems are hard to conquer when a lot of people have the same problem – Too many health problems to conquer and none of them can be concentrated on.

Policy Recommendations:

1. Create a platform for patients and doctors

Create a European platform where people and doctors can make appointments for patients via video conference tools. Especially, when the pandemic affected mental health.

2. Use digital platforms

Make influencers and youtubers speak about what they have experienced. To make young teenagers think about their health.

3. Raise awareness at schools

Bring doctors or medicine students to school to speak about the consequences of poor health.

4. Campaigning for attentiveness

Making a European campaign that announces health as one thing we have. Create more initiatives like covid-19 vaccine certificates. And it has to be online for everyone to see.

7. Corruption and Tax Evasion as Two of the Biggest Public Issues in Lithuania¹²

Erika Jurkšaitė

Problem Statement: Corruption and tax evasion do not only weaken the state itself but also the belief of the population in state structures. Thus, corruption and tax evasion leads to a delegitimization of the state.

The Importance of the Problem:

- Redistribution of income and wealth: A lack of redistribution in the country makes people lack opportunities, such as social improvements, better education, schools, health care system etc. Redistributed money improves all aspects of our daily lives that could be missing by corruption and tax avoidance.

¹² Sources:

<https://www.worldbank.org/en/topic/governance/brief/anti-corruption>

<https://www.15min.lt/verslas/naujiena/finansai/turtingiausio-lietuviu-nerijaus-numaviciaus-mokesciai-gali-atitekti-tik-jungtinei-karalystei-662-609583>

<https://stt.lt/naujienos/7464/lietuvos-korupcijos-zemelapis-2020-stebimos-kysininkavimo-mazejimo-tendencijos-bet-korupcijos-problema-islieka-aktuali:3066>

- Trust in the nation: Speaking about it, this has a big impact on people’s trust in their own country, respect and belief in it. There is some sort of herd psychology here – if more people use corrupt practices, it is more acceptable and more people are likely to do it. Bribery may help get children into a better school or somebody visit a doctor sooner when actually someone else is in line waiting for much longer. Losing to corruption in the public sector does have a very damaging impact to the whole system, education, healthcare and wealth distribution.
- Tax evasion: This is a common practice in Lithuania where from smallest companies to bigger ones avoid paying taxes. Owners of bigger companies tend to relocate to countries with a lower tax cap and re-register their businesses to save on taxes. Smaller businesses pay salaries in envelopes or find ways to declare lower expenses and earnings. This often takes away millions from the state budget leaving it missing all the benefits. For instance, the richest man of Lithuania N. Numavicius has been a resident of the United Kingdom since 2016 paying taxes abroad.

Policy Recommendations:

Corruption and tax evasion have been major issues in many countries for decades, especially in the post-socialist space. And this was never easy to fix.

Digitization can help tackling both: Creating a digital bureaucracy might make (tax) data better available for the public and thus lead to higher transparency. States would be enabled to exchange tax data quickly and on a reliable basis in order to find structures of international corruption and tax evasion.

Also, setting up bigger fines could stop more people from doing it and double think before doing so. As an example, tougher road enforcement and bigger fines in western and Scandinavian countries stop people speeding. Also, some anti-money laundering projects and more public attention to the problem can cause awareness.

Conclusion:

Corruption and tax evasion are still big issues stopping people from many opportunities and the country reaching its best potential. Digitization of the bureaucracy, higher fines, public and international awareness is one of the main solutions to fight both.

8. Inclusion of Elderly in a Digitized Society¹³

Ana Beatriz Paes

Problem Statement: Internet demographics show that mostly internet access and usage is discriminated by age: the older a person is, the less likely it is for them to be digitally included. Considering the fact that over 20% of the European population is over 65, and this is a growing statistic, this is an issue worth considering. Today, the European average of adults of 50+ years of age is 48%, and that number falls to 34% in Southern and Eastern European countries, while it rises up to 81% in Northern countries. In contrast to this, while both those regions have around 20% of the population in the over 65 age group (although Italy has 22% against 16% in Norway), the perceived quality of life, on a scale of 12 to 48 points, is 5 points higher in the Northern countries as in the Mediterranean.

¹³ Sources: <http://www.share-project.org/press-news/share-research-findings/new-scientific-findings/challenge-of-e-inclusion-in-europe.html>
<https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/cache/infographs/elderly/index.html>
<https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/web/employment-and-social-inclusion-indicators/digital-inclusion>
https://archive.telecentre-europe.org/wp-content/uploads/2012/05/IG-EurostatDigitalInclusion_WeAreWhatWeDo_DEF.pdf
<http://diposit.ub.edu/dspace/bitstream/2445/111508/1/664788.pdf>

The Importance of the Problem:

Older people are still citizens and should be involved in what is happening today in society. If they're not able to seek information on their own, they're more susceptible to fake news and propaganda;

Older people are also more inclined to suffer from loneliness. In Europe, 31% of the elders over 65 live alone, and loneliness has been increasingly seen as a risk factor, as awareness regarding mental health has risen;

The changes in technology happen increasingly fast. Normally, younger people learn to use new tools and apps through usage, which usually happens within a context of contact and socialization. During the pandemic, we saw the rise of new uses that occurred as a result of needs in the spheres of work and education. Elderly people aren't included in those environments, so any changes may take too long to arrive in their circles.

Policy Recommendations:

Engage younger people in programs of teaching and assisting older people on how to access the internet. Such a program, publicly funded and in schools, could help older people feel less lonely and give younger people a sense of responsibility. Being publicly funded, the program has the possibility of covering social-economic challenges, such as access to computers and/or internet providers, but while 23% of the inhabitants of the EU don't have access to internet because they can't afford it, 32% don't have it because they don't have the skills necessary, which is why assistance and teaching is a very reasonable solution to be implemented.

This activity can be implemented as an extracurricular to the students as a way to increase awareness in the usage of technology. While many young people today use it recreationally, having to teach older people how to communicate with family, access news or even online learning platforms may help younger people know how they can better use the internet to their advantage and personal growth.

Digital inclusion can help the elderly population in many ways. They can pursue new interests or remain active after retirement, keep in touch with family, and also be up-to-date regarding the news and political developments of their own countries.