



REPUBLIC OF ESTONIA
MINISTRY OF REGIONAL AFFAIRS
AND AGRICULTURE



Enhancing rural stakeholder participation in Estonia's Partnership Plan

Rural Pact Policy Action Lab 'Anchoring rural areas in the National and Regional Partnership Plans' 2028-2034
3 June 2026, Brussels

Panel (slides 2-10)
Sources & context-related appendices (slides 11-44)

Aare Kasemets, PhD

Adviser in regulatory impact assessment and civic engagement
Department of Strategy and Finance / Interreg Coop4RURALGov

E-mail: aare.kasemets@agri.ee

LinkedIn: <https://www.linkedin.com/in/aarekasemets/>



Context: some key questions

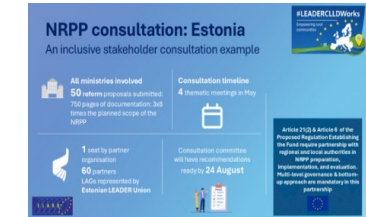
Estonia is a relatively small EU, OECD, and NATO Member State. In discussions within the EU Network for Rural Development, one of the key questions for Estonia has been **how to make regional and rural impact assessment, together with local stakeholder engagement, a routine part of decision-making across government, in all ministries?** This is also one of the ‘wicked’ challenges in the debates on the Estonian National Partnership Plan 2028-2034.

The core of this question is **not how** to be perfect in assessing the rural impacts of every EU and/or national draft regulation, **but how** to restore institutional credibility and strengthen the legitimacy of public policies – because without trust, words, even laws, lose legitimacy and authority. At the heart of this is the “invisible” trust in institutional values such as equal rights and opportunities for every person, family, and community.*

Those direct and hidden questions led us together with the Spanish Navarra, Bulgarian Bratisgavo, Irish Galway and Estonian Tartu regions, to the INTERREG project Coop4RURALGov.

Today,

my task is to explain **why** Estonia is one of the good examples of inclusive consultation in ELARD’s recent NRPP consultation study, and **how** we try to support the rights and opportunities of rural communities in the National Partnership Plan (**NPP**), believing that... both EU and national **rural policies become meaningful at the level of places, municipalities, and villages**, where places, people, interests, and hopes are real and concrete, **with names...**



*All sources: slide 12. This presentation is a follow-up to Aare Kasemets (2026) “Rural proofing ecosystem and stakeholder engagement in Estonia: some examples” (OECD seminar 1.4.2026, slides via www.ETIS.ee)

How coordinated is coalition-building between rural networks at national and EU level, and how to amplify the impact of rural actors?

..... AEIDL Committee of Regions (CoR) **Rural Pact Community Network** EU CAP Network Interreg COPA-COGECA, etc

EU (27+) > EUROPEAN PARLIAMENT >> EUROPEAN COMMISSION (DG REGIO, DG AGRI, etc) > EU common policies, e.g. MFF2028+ & NRPP 2028-2034



The House of the *Riigikogu* Tallinn, Estonia

ESTONIAN PARLIAMENT (RIIGIKOGU) and CENTRAL GOVERNMENT
 (11 ministries: **The Ministry of Regional Affairs & Agriculture** (regional rural, municipality & public transport policies; agriculture, fisheries & food policies); **Ministry of Education & Sci** (e.g. youth policy); **Ministry of Social Affairs** (e.g. health care), **Ministry of Interior** (e.g. crisis preparedness) etc



The House of the Government of the Republic of Estonia

Estonian Villages Movement *Kodukant* (15 counties) and its *Maapäev*, Rural Parliament

LEADER Union, Local Action Groups (26)

Networks of Regional Development Centers (15), **universities** (5+), consultancy firms etc

Estonian Associations of Cities and Municipalities (78, e.g. ca 64 are **rural municipalities**)

Networks of agricultural, forestry, fisheries & food & rural, agro etc tourism business organisations



Source: Aare Kasemets (2026), see slides 20-28.

What could be the role of rural proofers and spatial data in building rural policy coalitions? We need evidence-based, bottom-up 'pressure' on national governments and the European Commission 😊

The data alone are not enough. How can we use the Rural Pact and the "Right to Stay" strategy to increase the visibility of local communities and strengthen their voice and influence on the political agenda? 😊

What changes will the NPP 2028+ drive?

Example: Estonia's governmental advisory bodies for regional & rural policy need reform

In 2026, the **Ministry of Regional Affairs and Agriculture's** Partner Days list includes over **350** different stakeholders from NGO business, academia etc. Ministry has also **22 advisory bodies**, **ca 10** of them are related to **rural policy ecosystem**



Riigikogu – The Parliament:
12 standing committees

Laws & money
€€ & €
PM & National Government co-decisions: draft strategies, draft laws, EU policy inputs, EE state budget / MFF28+

- * Agricultural and Rural Council
- * Fisheries Council
- * Islands Council
- * EU/EE EMFF strategy 2023-27 committee
- * EU/EE CAP strategy 2023-27 committee
- * EE Rural Network Partners' Round Table
- ** South-Estonian and Central-Estonian Regional Development Agreement Councils (with OECD)
- * Regional Policy Cooperation Expert Council
- *?+ Regional & Rural Policy Council 2027+?

- Ministry of Culture
- Ministry of Foreign Affairs
- Ministry of Education & Research
- Ministry of Economic Affairs & Communications
- Ministry of Climate & Energy
- Ministry of Finance
- Ministry of Justice & Digital Affairs
- Ministry of Regional Affairs & Agriculture**
- Ministry of Social Affairs
- Ministry of the Interior
- Ministry of Defence

Regional, rural, and island policy-related advisory bodies are quite fragmented, LEADER is represented in most of them. The NPP28+ process will drive structural changes in ministries & advisory bodies.

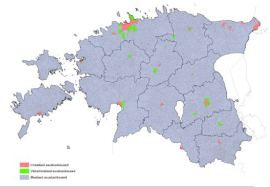


Common rules and guidelines for the strategic planning, draft legislation, EU affairs, state budget and related **impact assessment & stakeholders engagement** (in The Government 9 stages > in The Parliament 3 stages).



Estonian National Partnership Plan 2028-2034

5 specific objectives & 33+ sub-objectives (draft)



1. Supporting sustainable resilience in all regions	10 sub-objectives: Regional development (urban–rural balance, mission of ‘polycentric Estonia’), living environment, services and infrastructure; sustainable competitiveness; industry and supply chains; just transition, green transition (2030–50 objectives); digital transition, ICT; science, research, innovation; capital-based financing instruments; affordable housing; transport infrastructure, TEN-T; sustainable tourism; water management, nature, biodiversity.
2. Supporting defence capability and security in all regions	3 sub-objectives: Defence industry and military mobility (including TEN-T); preparedness for crises and disasters; internal security, cybersecurity and civil protection
3. Strengthening social cohesion in all regions	6 sub-objectives: Employment and equal opportunities; quality working conditions; skills and lifelong learning; social protection and poverty reduction; access to services (health, longterm care, childcare); demography, labour shortages, regional disparities; mitigation of social impacts (buildings, transport).
4. Preserving quality of life in all regions	10 sub-objectives: Fair income and competitiveness in agriculture; food security; vitality of rural areas and generational renewal; crisis preparedness, knowledge, digital and green transition; sustainable fisheries and blue economy; resilience of communities; maritime safety; sustainable agriculture and forestry; climate measures and ecosystems; protection of natural resources; and animal welfare.
5. Strengthening fundamental rights, democracy and the values of the rule of law ...	4 sub-objectives: Inclusive society; civil society and youth participation; rule of law and democracy; media freedom and media literacy; capacity of public administration (e.g. local municipalities); EU values, cultural diversity

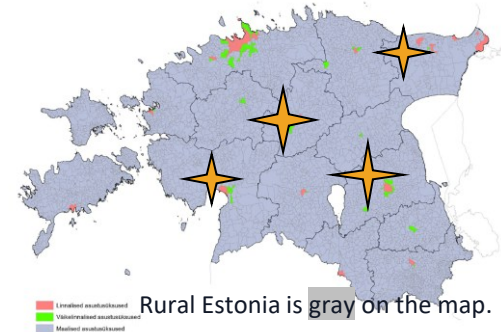
Great, regional policy seems to be integrated, but... what data do we need to assess whether at least 10% of policy costs, results and impacts support rural areas?

NPP process provides an opportunity to manage ‘wicked’ challenges of policy ‘silos’, including the rise of regional inequality (see **context**: slides 15-16)



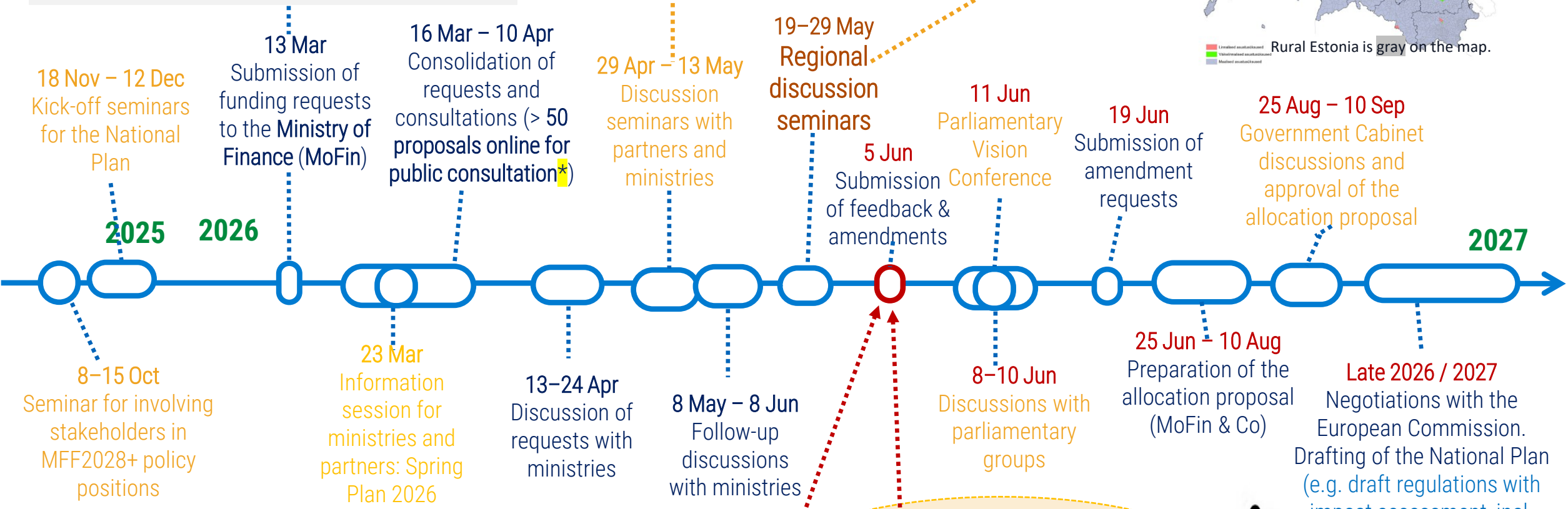
Process for Preparing the National Plan and Stakeholder Engagement Activities in 2025–2026

50 applications (214 activities, ca 700 pages) had been submitted by the ministries requesting a total EU contribution of EUR 13.3 billion. The volume of applications submitted is 3.5 times higher than the amount allocated under the initial EU support plan.



- 29 Apr Economy and competitiveness
- 7 May Security and governance
- 12 May Health, education and social protection
- 13 May Rural life and nature >

- 19 May in Paide
- 20 May in Tartu
- 26 May in Pärnu
- 28 May in Jõhvi



Ministry of Regional Affairs and Agriculture

Hey! Today is 3 June! We have made 3 reform proposals – polycentric Estonia, food security, and public transport. What we can do in addition? We will praise reform proposals from other ministries that contribute to balanced regional & rural policy goals

Hey! The LEADER Union network can support and contribute to most reform proposals related to rural communities, rural-urban relations etc

LEADER Union



Example: National PP seminar „Rural life and nature“ (13 May 2026)

What kind of Estonia would you like to live in in 2034?



SPEAKSMART

Proposal No. 1
Implementing the Spatial Development Vision for a Polycentric Estonia



Sigrid Soomlais
Deputy Secretary General for Regional Development

Marine pollution response capacity



Gert Kaja
Kõrvaldamis- ja keskkonnakaitse osakonna juhataja

Ensuring Estonia's Food Security



Rida Pirel
Kõrvaldamise osakond

Transition to Clean Energy



Rein Vaks
Siseministeeriumi energiaosakonna juhataja

Improve Environmental & Climate Awareness



Forests as a Strategic Resource: A Competitive & Climate-Resilient ...

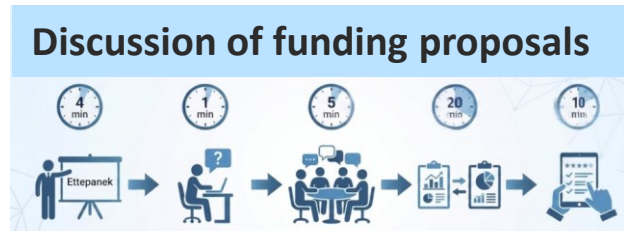


Data-Driven Environmental Management Reform & ITC



Marilyn Oro
Analüüsi ja digiteerimise osakonna juhataja

Water Services Reform

Each responsible ministry's deputy secretary general was given **4 minutes** to present the proposal, followed by an opportunity for **quick questions via Slido**. Then:


- 5-minute** discussions at the tables after each proposal
- 20 minutes** for comparing the proposals at the tables
- 10 minutes** for assessing the proposals against three criteria:
 - future-readiness;
 - impact and systemic relevance,
 - competitiveness.




All reform proposals are competing for additional EU funding 2028-2034, so the presentations took place in a highly competitive atmosphere



The LEADER Union, as a strategic partner in the NRPP2028+ process, has a 'seat at the table' – what did they do? See the next slide 😊



At the “Rural life and nature” seminar, **10 proposals** were presented: the Ministry of Regional Affairs and Agriculture 2, the Ministry of Defence 1, and the Ministry of Climate 7. The example of **Proposal No. 1** slides is in the appendices (slide 13)



Some concerns, conclusions and workstreams ...

There has not been such a complex reform of EU policy instruments since Estonia joined the EU in 2004. **My biggest concern today**, after reviewing the extensive analytical input from all ministries and strategic partners such as LEADER, is this: **how can we prevent this major NRPP2028+ reform from failing?***

Some key workstreams for 2026–2027

1) Alignment of strategic objectives of Estonia's NPP 2028+ with regional partnership plans and specific action plans.

Example: two pilot initiatives — the Regional Development Agreement Councils in South Estonia and Central Estonia (EU/Estonia CAP Strategic Plan 2023–2027 and OECD pilot project 2023–2024).

2) Elaborating the measures under the draft NPP 2028+ and updating an *ex ante* and *ex post* impact assessment framework for national policy, legal, project & service design.

Examples: **a)** Design of **new regional investment measures** with the Regional Development Agreement Councils; **b) Regional and rural impact assessment practices** (e.g. standard costs & simplification); **c) Effective implementation:** The Estonian Agricultural Registers and Information Board (ARIB) has implemented a **results-based financing scheme** since February 2024. In 2025, ARIB used the **AI assistant “Kratt”** to assess applications for conventional investment support schemes, and in 2026, will use in the evaluation process for some **LEADER Local Action Groups (LAGs)**.*

3) A structural shift in EU/EE regulatory governance and strategic change management ☺

Examples: **structural changes** in national strategies; inter-ministerial cooperation; better regulation rules (e.g. impact assessment); ICT architecture, [The Agentic State](#) & AI; the system of government advisory bodies; and in the institutional & **organisational management processes & working routines** for policy, legal, project and service design beyond 2030.

*Sources: on better regulation and policy failures see slides 41-44; on workstreams slides 13-14 + 18-19 and Ms **Piret Ilves** (2026) Results-based financing scheme for project support – ARIB (Contact: Piret.Ilves@pria.ee)

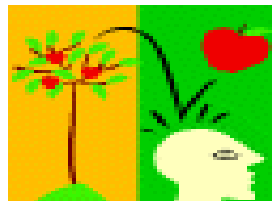


Sources and context-related appendices

on Proposal No 1, institutional tools for stakeholder engagement, Estonian rural networks, rural proofing, key definitions, and how to avoid (rural) policy failure?

Content:

1. **Sources** of ideas and practices in context (Slide 12)
2. **Example of the Estonian NPP seminar “Rural Life and Nature”, Proposal No. 1, and follow-up activities** (Slides 13–14)
3. **Context:** regional inequality, “urban” legislation, and institutional tools for stakeholder engagement (Slides 15–19)
4. **Estonian rural networks:** the National Rural Network Unit (CAP), the Leader Union, the Village Movement Kodukant, the Association of Estonian Cities and Municipalities, the Network of County Development Centres, and Estonian networks of agricultural, forestry, fisheries, rural tourism, and other business organisations (Slides 20–28)
5. **Rural proofing: let’s dream and act** — Double Diamond, legal design, guidelines, Coop4RuralGov, etc. (Slides 29–38)
6. **Key definitions:** consultation, engagement, co-creation, partnership, rural proofing, rural network, ecosystem, and better regulation (e.g. regulatory impact assessment, consultation, simplification, etc.) (Slides 39–41)
7. **Better regulation as a “fire alarm”:** how can policy failure be avoided? (Slides 42–44)



Sources of ideas & practices in context



European Rural Pact Community Platform https://ruralpact.rural-vision.europa.eu/discover-platform_en

ELARD (2026). [NRPP consultations: why EU member states must involve LAGs now?](https://elard.eu) (3 examples of inclusive stakeholder consultation: Estonia, Poland, and Lower Saxony) - <https://elard.eu>

European Rural Pact Policy Labs (12.06.2025) '[Rural proofing: looking at policies through the rural lens](#)' / (05.11.2025) [Rural areas and communities in the post-2027 EU budget and policies](#)

EU Commission (2024) [The long-term vision for the EU's rural areas: key achievements and ways forward](#) (see, ch 3.1)

EU CAP Network (2022) A Framework of Rural Proofing Actions: https://eu-cap-network.ec.europa.eu/publications/framework-rural-proofing-actions_en

OECD (2024) [Rural Proofing](#) | Lessons from OECD countries and potential application to health: https://www.oecd.org/en/publications/rural-proofing_4011899a-en.html

OECD (2024) Place-Based Policies for the Future. <https://www.oecd.org/en/about/projects/place-based-policies-for-the-future.html>

Estonian National Partnership Plan 2028-2034 (e.g. EU/EE baselines, engagement activities, 50 funding [applications](#), feedback, etc.). Estonian Ministry of Finance, [public website, in Estonian](#)

Demis Voss et al (2026). Preparation of National Partnership Plan 2028-2034 - National Partnership Plan 2028-2034 seminar 'Rural life and nature', 13 May 2026, Estonian Ministry of Finance, available in Estonian at https://www.fin.ee/sites/default/files/documents/2026-05/Riigiplaani%20seminarid_maaelu_loodus_kodukale.pdf

Katre Luht & Olavi Petron (2026). Current status of preparing the National Plan – Estonian Ministry of Regional Affairs and Agriculture - Rural Network Partners' Round Table, 25 May 2026 at House of Europe, Tallinn – slides available in Estonian via Rural Research and Knowledge Centre, Estonian Rural Network <https://www.maainfo.ee/index.php?id=8699&page=3394>

Triin Kallas (2026). Open governance in practice. The LEADER Union as the Ministry's partner in shaping rural policy - FAO StudyTour, Tallinn, 2 June. Estonian LEADER Union, www.leaderliit.eu

Triin Kallas et al (2026). LEADER-võrgustiku roll riiklikus partnerluskavas 2028–2034. Kogukonna juhitud kohaliku arengu võimalused. Analüüs. "Tööversioon 26.05.2028 (draft, in Estonian).

Aare Kasemets (2026). Rural proofing ecosystem and stakeholder engagement in Estonia: some examples. In: OECD, The Rural Principles Series webinar: *Rural Proofing – Involving the Right Stakeholders at the Right Time* (1 April, 2026; Interreg project Coop4RuralGov activity - [download of slides via www.ETIS.ee](#))

Aare Kasemets & Taavi Kurvits (2022). How to make the regional impact assessment and rural proofing a routine part of the decision-making process of officials across the government, in all ministries? Some ideas and examples from Estonia. [Slides via web of EU Network of Rural Development \(ENRD\)](#)

Aare Kasemets, Taavi Kurvits, Kristi Jõesaar, Anne Põder, Taavi Kiisk (2025) [ESTONIA: newcomer in the field of rural proofing. Vol 4](#) (6 p, available via www.ETIS.ee)

Aare Kasemets (2025) [Data-driven regulatory policy oversight to enable rural proofing. Compliance analysis of explanatory memoranda for draft acts: RIA, incl. impacts on urban, rural, and coastal areas \[pilot study\]](#) *Interregional workshop of the Interreg project Coop4RuralGov "How to implement knowledge-based rural proofing", Tallinn 28-29 May 2025 (via www.ETIS.ee)*

Aare Kasemets (2025) [Institutionalization of rural proofing in policy, legal and service design: the case of Estonia - Coop4RuralGov \(Interreg\) and G30 Rural Proofing CLM \(Spain\) 14 April, '25.](#)

Aare Kasemets et al (2025). Digitalization, RIA and Simplification of the EU/EE Agricultural, Fisheries & Rural Policies [14 Examples from the Estonian Ministry of Regional Affairs and Agriculture and Its Executive Agencies with General Context to Support a Proactive Better Regulation Approach]. Working paper to DG AGRI CAP Simplification TG5, 02.07.2025 (by request)

Aare Kasemets, Jacob Van Ingen Bro, Oskar Ernst, Ligija Ozolina, Vygantas Katkevičius, Marjeta Bizjak, Tii Tammik-Võsu, Maarja Malm, Paula Talijärv and Merle Vesiloo (2022) A comparative pilot study on advisory bodies and stakeholder involvement in the ministries responsible for agriculture, fisheries and rural development: Estonia, Denmark, Latvia, Lithuania, Slovenia. – Estonian Ministry of Regional Affairs and Agriculture: <https://www.agri.ee/sites/default/files/documents/2023-02/uuring-2022-advisory-bodies.pdf>

Example: Proposal No 1 from the Estonian National Plan involvement seminar „Rural life and nature“ (13 May 2026: 4 minutes & 4 slides)

Proposal No. 1

Implementing the spatial development vision of a polycentric Estonia

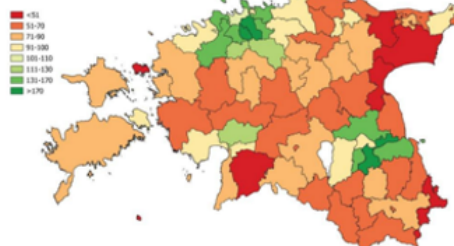
Sigrid Soomlais
Deputy Secretary General for Regional Development



Is it a question of regional policy or Estonia's operating model?

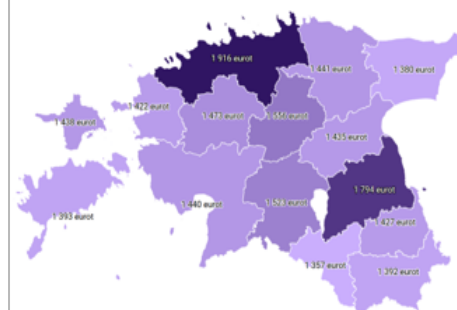
Excessive concentration in the capital brings up to 6 billion euros in additional societal costs, increases pressure on services and infrastructure, and worsens the living environment in both growing and shrinking regions.

Projected population change 2024–2050 (2024 = 100%)



The regional divide as a strategic risk

Median salary, 2025



ECONOMY: Regional productivity remains underutilised, SMEs face a shortage of capital

QUALITY OF LIFE: Services deteriorate, and the sense of having a **right to stay** in one's home region is lost

SECURITY: Depopulation of the EE/EU/NATO eastern border area, lower crisis resilience



Polycentric Estonia:
a guarantee of economic, social, and security resilience



REFORM

Polycentric Estonia = a change in the state's investment logic

- the decision to curb overconcentration in the capital through the national plan budget is made at a strategic level;
- supporting balanced spatial development is binding for all sectoral policies;
- a larger share of resources will be deliberately directed outside Harju County (Capital Tallinn region).

€603 million supports the implementation of the reform

Future-proof services, growth in the innovation and development capacity of regions

- Sustainable development of services
- Sustainability of local governments
- A digital development leap of local governments
- Smart city solutions measure

Initial EU support plan: €128 million

Development of the regional business environment, incl. improving access to capital

- Development of regional cooperation
- Development of the regional business environment
- Development of regional entrepreneurship

Initial EU support plan: €280 million

A unified framework for directing interventions under the national plan
Initial EU support plan: €6.5 billion

Initial EU support plan: €150 million

Empowering local communities

- Preparation of more comprehensive development strategies for rural and coastal areas.
- Implementation of development strategies – supporting the capacity of local action groups.

Initial EU support plan: €45 million

Decline of the eastern border peripheral areas amid geopolitical challenges

- Attractiveness of the urban space in Ida-Viru city regions
- Community engagement and civic activity in the eastern border area.

Estonian Ministry of Regional Affairs and Agriculture, Regional Policy Department:

Some key activities related to the new period 2027+

Strengthening the regional dimension of sectoral policies

- Develop and implement a model for assessing the regional impact of sectoral policies, e.g. city, rural and islands proofing tools
- Define key regional policy priorities and introduce a system for integrating them into other sectoral policies, e.g. legislation
- Ensure that the regional development dimension is reflected in the design of support measures under the EU 2028+ national plan.

Reviewing the roles of partner organisations and networks in regional policy implementation

- Review the service model of County Development Centres and prepare a new model based on the business life cycle
- Create a unified network of local action groups based on coastal and LEADER groups, and review their governance, areas of operation, and links with county development strategies.

Increasing the scale and impact of regional development support

- Participate in negotiations with the EU Commission on the EU 2028+ legal framework and planned regional development measures
- Prepare amendment proposals for state-funded regional development programmes for 2028–2031
- Define Estonia's priorities for European Territorial Cooperation programmes and launch planning of the next generation of programmes with partner countries.

Central national strategy „Estonia 2035“

Why?!



Goal 1: Estonia is a cooperative society...



Goal 3: Estonia is an innovative, trustworthy and people-centred country [...] where policymaking is co-creative and people are able to participate in making important decisions [...]



Goal 2: An active person can...

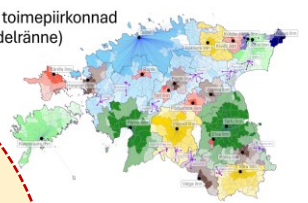
Public services are high-quality and accessible regardless of place of residence and contribute to the well-being and safety of people.



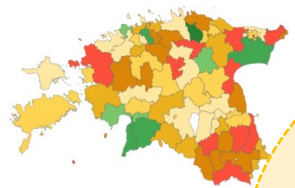
Uuh! Political strategic goals (promises) and realities (data) differ – regional inequality is still rising (2020–2025). We have a problem!



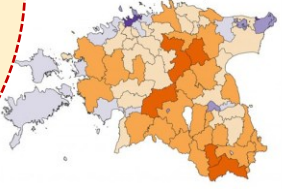
Eesti toimepiirkonnad (pendetränne)



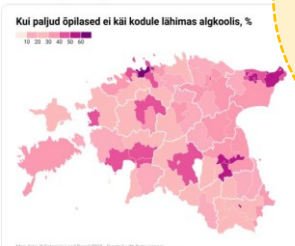
Laste heaolu teenustase 2023. aastal



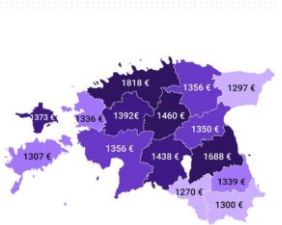
Eluolukindluskorraldajad 2024. aastal



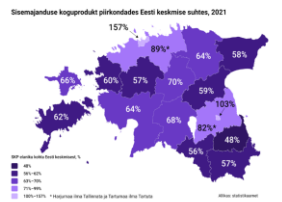
Laste koolitööd maapiirkondades ja linnades



Mediaanpalk maakonniti, 2024



SKP elaniku kohta Eesti keskmisest, %



5-19-aastaste noorte arvu muutus 2022-2035

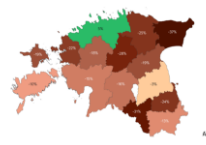
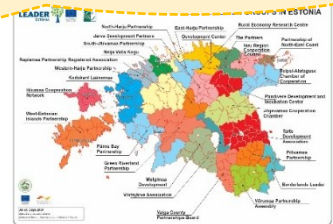


Table with multiple columns and rows, likely containing demographic or economic data. The columns include 'Sisemajanduslik tootmine', 'Kaubandus', 'Tööstus', 'Ehitus', 'Transport', 'Informatsioonitehnoloogia', 'Kultuur', 'Tervishoid', 'Sotsiaalteenused', 'Haridus', 'Majanduslik areng', 'Keskkond', 'Eluolukindlus', 'Sotsiaalvõrke', 'Kohalike omavalitsuste võimekus', 'Kohalike omavalitsuste vastupidavus', 'Kohalike omavalitsuste tõhusus', 'Kohalike omavalitsuste läbipaarsus', 'Kohalike omavalitsuste vastutavus', 'Kohalike omavalitsuste osalus', 'Kohalike omavalitsuste koostöö', 'Kohalike omavalitsuste võimekus', 'Kohalike omavalitsuste vastupidavus', 'Kohalike omavalitsuste tõhusus', 'Kohalike omavalitsuste läbipaarsus', 'Kohalike omavalitsuste vastutavus', 'Kohalike omavalitsuste osalus', 'Kohalike omavalitsuste koostöö'.

Hey! *Why mobilise our knowledge? 'Whatever form the EU's next financial framework takes, Estonia needs a stronger plan to reduce regional inequalities. The LEADER Local Action Groups network is the state's strongest ally in understanding rural needs and unlocking local potential!' 😊
*** Rural proofing is the right tool for human-centric, place-based policy design!** 😊



Why?!

... Regional inequality reflects social, educational, economic, security and, ultimately, legal inequality linked to our constitutional rights and freedoms, our democracy, and the values of the rule of law...

Looking for solutions together:

Interreg project „Rural Proofing. Cooperation for better sparsely populated rural, coastal and mountain focused governance“ (Coop4RURALGov).

Common problems and shared objectives

Legislation is usually made with urban centres in mind and can sometimes discriminate against rural areas and communities by failing to take into account their needs, resources and capacities.

There's therefore a need to:

- * **Improve comparative territorial impact assessment knowledge** to help ruralise regulations and ensure that all relevant policies beyond rural development are adjusted to rural needs and realities.
- * **Improve governance processes**, for example by using spatial data and taking into account the rights of all citizens, regardless of where they live.
- * **Improve political culture**, because the knowledge-based (=responsible) policy-legal-service design is a prerequisite for sustainable development 😊



Coop4RURALGov (2023-2027) will improve the capacities of 4 regions of **Spain, Bulgaria, Estonia** and **Ireland** in their governance processes to design and implement public policies, programs, laws and other initiatives that take into account the particular circumstances, resources and needs of people / communities living in rural areas.

§§§ The Rules for Stakeholder Engagement



Estonian „Rules for Good Legislative Practice and Legislative Drafting“**

§ 1. Legislative intent, concept and impact assessment of Act

(1) The person preparing a draft Act draws up a legislative intent for the approval of the need to prepare a draft Act. A legislative intent must contain the following information and reasoning:

1) the field or **the problem** to be addressed and **the target group**; 2) **the purpose**; [...]

(5) **Interest groups and the public are involved** in the preparation of a legislative intent, concept and **draft Act** and coordination is carried out in compliance with the provisions of the **Rules of the Government of the Republic** and the **Good Practice of Involvement** established on the basis of subsection 2 of § 4 of the Rules of the Government. Interest groups are engaged in the **ex-post impact assessment** of an Act in accordance with the Good Practice of Involvement.“

§ 50. Involvement of interest groups, public consultation, and approval of draft

(1) The part of an explanatory memorandum sets out:

1) **the state or local authority** to whom the draft was submitted for approval or for the receipt of an opinion and the public institution, interest group or expert concerned to whom the draft was submitted [...]

2) the opinions that were delivered and proposals that were made in the course of involvement [...].

3) to which extent the opinions and proposals were taken into account.

(2) The relevant explanations and reasons for taking or not taking comments or proposals into account are presented in a table that is prepared as an annex to the explanatory memorandum.

(3) The table (subsection 2) sets out the contents of the comments or proposals submitted upon approval, the persons who submitted the comments or proposals, the provisions of the draft whereby a comment or proposal has been taken into account and the reasons for the rejection of the comments or proposals [...].“

If... there is a **problem** with stakeholder engagement, it is **not in the laws §§§** and other regulations 😊

** Estonian Rules for Good Legislative Practice (2011, updated 2025 – ENG) - <https://www.riigiteataja.ee/en/eli/508092025003/consolide>

Ginter, Jaan; Kasemets, Aare; Narits, Raul (2020). Legislation in Estonia. In: Karpen, Ulrich and Xanthaki, Helen (Eds.). Legislation in Europe. A Country to Country Study. (151–166). Oxford: Hart Publishing. DOI:10.5040/9781509924684.ch-009



Estonian Ministry of Regional Affairs and Agriculture

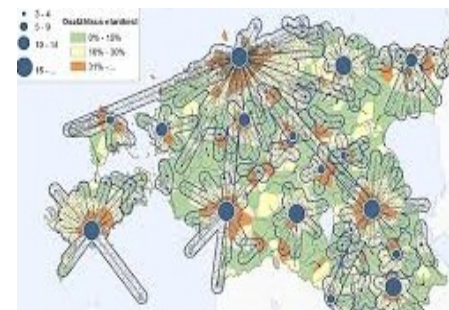


<https://www.agri.ee/en>



Policy areas:

- [Agriculture and food market](#)
- [Animal health, welfare and breeding](#)
- [Bioeconomy](#)
- [Fishing industry and commercial fishing](#)
- [Food safety and food labelling](#)
- [Organic farming](#)
- [Plant production and plant health](#)
- [Reference laboratories](#)
- [Research, development and advice](#)
- [Rural entrepreneurship and rural life](#)
- [Regional development and policy](#)
- [Public transport](#)
- [Local governments](#)



The area of government (executive agencies):

- The Centre of Estonian Rural Research and Knowledge [web](#)
- The Agricultural Registers and Information Board [web](#)
- The Agriculture and Food Board [web](#)
- Centre for Laboratory Research and Risk Assessment
- Rural Development Foundation
- Estonian Rural Museums Foundation



Institutional tools for stakeholder engagement

Several stakeholder engagement tools are based on the strategies „[Estonia 2035](#)“ and „[The Basic Principles for Legislative Policy until 2030](#)“ (‘3. Legislative policy is made on an inclusive and foreseeable basis and is knowledge-based. Citizens enjoy an equal right to be heard in legislative matters.’) and the first objective of the “[Estonian Open Government Roadmap](#)“ (2023, Cabinet Office): ‘The policy-making process is visible to the public, participation opportunities are published and open to all interested parties.’



Ministry of Regional Affairs and Agriculture

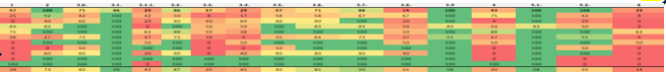


JAN Ministry’s Annual Stakeholders Informing and Involvement Plan
2026: 160 activities, e.g.100 draft acts > web

JAN Ongoing review/analysis of draft acts > quality check of impact assessments & stakeholder engagement’ information
DEC 2025: 9 departments > 121 draft acts>*

DECEMBER 2025 > 2026 >...
Award in cooperation with stakeholders:
„Best Rural Communities Friendly Policy-Legal-Service Design Team 2025!
Rural Proofing is well done!“

FEB Annual Day of Strategic Partners
11.02.2026: ca 200 stakeholders, Teams



Good Practice Guide for Stakeholder Engagement
(2022: 1 pager, linked to **RIA & Rural proofing guidelines** >)

JAN Guide p. 2: If the social, economic etc. impact of a policy initiative is significant for the target groups, the ministry prepares a short **Engagement Plan** (its timeline is coordinated with the stakeholder groups).
DEC

We are (aim to be) trusted partners and client-oriented policymakers.
(Organisational Strategy)

Organisational Strategy until 2029 (2025)

JAN 2026: co-creation projects (public transport, regional policy); legal design & engagement workshops; **sociological stakeholder survey** (e.g. satisfaction with engagement); design of **support services**, etc
DEC

*Sources: Aare Kasemets (2026 OECD); and (2025) [Data-driven regulatory policy oversight to enable rural proofing. Compliance analysis of explanatory memoranda for draft acts: RIA, incl. impacts on urban, rural, and coastal areas \[pilot\]](#) Interregional workshop of the Interreg project Coop4RuralGov "How to implement knowledge-based rural proofing", Tallinn 28-29 May 2025



Estonian National Rural Network Unit – CAP Network

- **National Rural Networks as in all EU MS – since 2007.**
- Before 2007 – LEADER Infopoint (2005-2027) - Rural Development Institute (outsource)
- **Estonian NRN – 3 periods and subordination: 2007-2013, 2014-2020, 2021 - 2027**
- 2007-2018 department of **Rural Economy Research Centre** in Jänedä (partly FisheryNW)
- 2018-2023 **Agricultural Research Centre**
- From 2023 **Centre of Estonian Rural Research and Knowledge (METK) -**
- **Department of Knowledge and Innovation Services has three services:**
 - **Unit of CAP Network (ENRN)** – 6 employees (incl. Reve Lambur and Ave Bremse)**
 - Unit of Innovation Support Service's
 - Unit of Training and Advisory Service (Knowledge Transfer Program, AKIS)

Rural Network's Cooperation Chamber – advisory board, representatives of different rural organisations.

Collecting and disseminating RDP best practices – database, booklets, travelling exhibitions, fairs (Local, ARIA, ...),

Collecting and disseminating information about different rural sectors, events, other FUNDS,

Information exchange and infodays for LEADER LAG – MA, PA, ESF with Ministry of Social Affairs, Partnership Search for LEADER *

*LEADER Union est. 2012

Seminars, events, infoevents, study tours (less than before)
Organising, participating, looking for representatives,
...

Webinars, lectures A Researcher's view of the Rural Development, podcasts Rural Talks („Maaelu jutud“)



Mee DNA testimise meeskond. Foto: Mulda Mees OU
DNA-põhise meetodi arendus mee koostise ja päritolu tuvastamiseks (Authentic Honey Meets DNA Technology) – kategoorias „Arukas & konkurentsivõimeline põllumajandus“ -



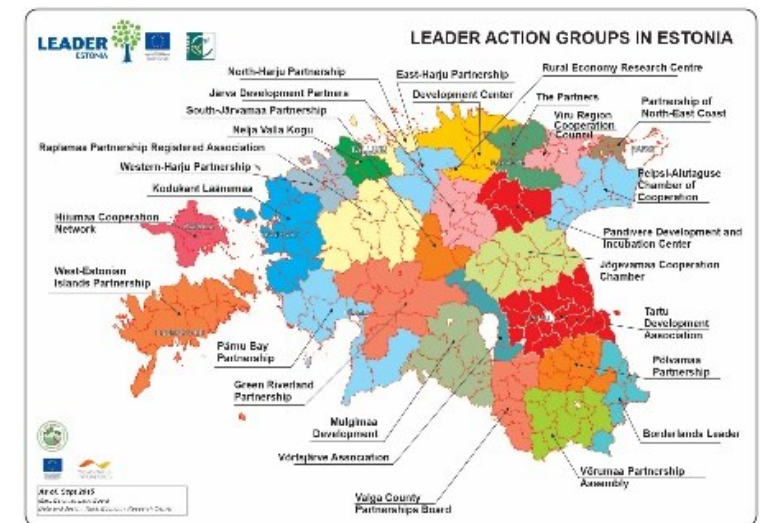
LEADER in Estonia



- LEADER is a local development method which has been used In EU for 20 years to engage local actors in the design and delivery of strategies, decision-making and resource allocation for the development of their rural areas.
- Preparations already in the framework of Estonian National Development Plan 2004–2006 (pilot)
- Wider implementation of LEADER approach began in 2006
- Estonian Rural Development Plan 2014–2020: budget 90 mln EUR, of which
 - Preparation of local development strategies – 1,7 mln EUR;
 - Implementation of local development strategies – 68,1 mln EUR;
 - Cooperation projects – 2,5 mln EUR;
 - Administrative and operation costs of LAGs– 17,6 mln EUR.
- There are 26 LEADER local action groups in Estonia, which cover almost 99% of rural territory. The number of members of Estonian LAGs is more than 1.5 thousand (public sector 13%, entrepreneurs 37% and NGOs 37%). Every LAG has 60 members on the average.



The Board of Estonian Leader Union



LEADER in action

„Open governance is not a policy. It is a habit“

The LEADER Union as the Ministry's partner in shaping rural policy

 Triin Kallas, CEO, Estonian LEADER Union



How it works – four stories

Mechanisms matter more than principles.

<p>1</p>  <p>ESF+ and the multifund breakthrough</p>	<p>2</p>  <p>Simplified Cost Options – a 10-year negotiation</p>	<p>3</p>  <p>Amending regulations from the LAG floor</p>	<p>4</p>  <p>Crisis response – COVID and the war next door</p>
---	---	---	---

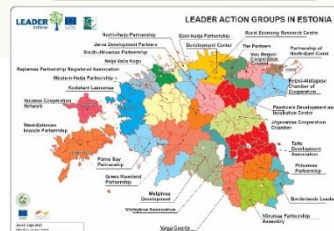
The partnership architecture

Multiple players, one table.








The principle: civil society is a co-designer, not a consultee.

 **FAO Study Tour | Tallinn | 2 June 2026**



From Tallinn to Brussels — the ELARD link

Estonian LEADER Union is a member of ELARD (European LEADER Association for Rural Development).

-  Pan-European voice of LAGs in ~28 countries
-  Joint EU-level advocacy on the post-2027 EU budget and CAP
-  Ring-fenced LEADER-CLLD funding across cohesion and social funds
-  Position papers, MEP letters, 35,000+ signature petition
-  European Rural Parliament — biennial gathering of rural voices

 **Estonia's voice reaches Brussels; the EU debate comes back to our LAGs.**

LEADER-CLLD as the engine for the Right to Stay

ELARD's four asks for the next EU funding period

- Scale LEADER-CLLD across all cohesion policy areas**
Make LEADER-CLLD mandatory in every chapter of the 2028–2034 MFF; pilot a CLLD label
- Ring-fence resources and strategic ambition**
30% of NRPPs to the Rural Target; 30% of that to community-led initiatives — no box-ticking
- Empower Local Action Groups**
Restore LAGs' full competences post-2027; create a LAG Academy for multi-fund capacity
- Mainstream the Right to Stay via CLLD**
Add Right to Stay criteria to every call; pilot 'Stay Grants' — lump sums for micro-solutions

90% of rural residents already live in areas covered by LAGs.



NRPP consultation: Estonia
An inclusive stakeholder consultation example

<p>All ministries involved</p> <p>50 reform proposals submitted</p> <p>750 pages of documentation; 3rd times the planned scope of the NRPP</p>	<p>Consultation timeline</p> <p>4 thematic meetings in May</p>
<p>1 seat by partner organisation</p> <p>60 partners</p> <p>LAGs represented by Estonian LEADER Union</p>	<p>Consultation committees will have recommendations ready by 24 August</p>

Article 21(2) & Article 6 of the Proposed Regulation Entrenching the Fund's required partnership with regional and local authorities in NRPP preparation, implementation, and evaluation. Multi-level governance & bottom-up approach are mandatory in this partnership.



Estonian Villages Movement *Kodukant* (est. 1993–96)

„All Estonia must live!“



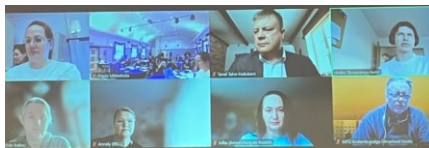
„The villages had to put their heads to work and start working together to keep their spirits up. The village fools became the leaders in a good sense, and today we call them *the spark people* – the ones who encouraged us to stick together, tidy up the village, organise events. We bring together more than 600 legal and natural persons through the members of the regional umbrella organisations. There are over 300 active village centres. With the “**Village of the Year**” competition, we value active villages. We recognise villages for their performance, share good community practices and contribute to a positive image of rural life.“



The main idea of the **Rural Day (Maapäev)** is to give clear directions to the village movement, to set tasks, to find solutions and make proposals to the parliament, ministries & local authorities.

Since **1996**, Maapäev has been held every two years in different counties across Estonia.

- <https://kodukant.ee/en/home/>



- https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/List_of_villages_in_Estonia

Kodukant participated recently (24 January 2026) in the People's Assembly to discuss the topic of economic inequality and poverty.

„Regional inequality is a threat to the security and survival of the Estonian state. Decisions that need urgent implementation:

☀ Improving the availability of state services in rural areas as well. There are still many active and willing people who stand up for their homes in our villages... They do not expect any handouts - it is enough if the availability of public services is guaranteed - a reliable electricity grid, internet, roads and transport.

☀ Simplify legislation, reduce bureaucracy, and focus on micro and small businesses to promote the business environment in rural areas (better access to loans and other financial instruments!).

☀ Network effect: poverty is not just a lack of money, but a lack of social contacts. When the community works together“ [...]

The Association of Estonian Cities and Municipalities (AECM)

AECM is representing common interests and arranging co-operation of cities & rural municipalities. The main goal is to ensure development of local governments through joint activities.

At present, all the 78 municipalities (e.g. 15 cities) of Estonia are members of the association.

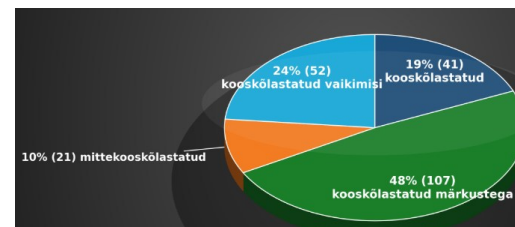
Responsibilities of the AECM are:

- to represent the interests and protect the rights of its members in governmental institutions.
- to work out positions of the AECM in the issues of **local government policy**;
- to arrange **co-operation** between local governments, their associations and unions;
- to disseminate **information** to local governments and to advise local government officials;
- to provide **training** for politicians and officials of local governments.

The AECM Bureau (20 employees)

It has also the task **to collect, analyse and distribute the opinions of local authorities on draft legal acts of the central government.**

In 2025 were „**238 drafts** submitted to the **AECM** for approval, including 13 development intentions, 91 draft laws/acts, 26 draft regulations of the Government of the Republic, 9 draft orders of the Government of the Republic, 82 draft ministerial regulations, 7 draft ministerial directives, 2 draft development plans and 10 other drafts. We approved 41, 107 with comments, 21 did not approve and 52 drafts were approved by default.“



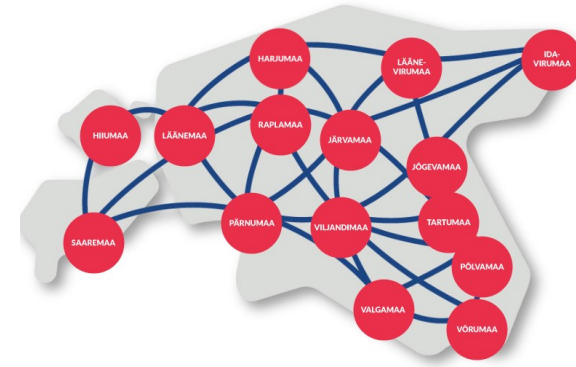
Network of County Development Centers

The **Network of County Development Centers (MAK)** is a nationwide organization that supports entrepreneurs, NGOs, and local governments on their path to growth.

15 development Centers operate in every county, offering free consultations, training, and practical solutions to foster sustainable economic and community development.

MAK provide support for:

- ✓ **Entrepreneurs** – business plan development, funding opportunities, export support
- ✓ **Small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs)** – consultation and training, growth strategies, innovation support, access to financing
- ✓ **NGOs** – project writing, funding options, strategic development
- ✓ **Local Governments** – regional development, networking, investment attraction



15 county centers have been founded by **Local Governments**, ensuring strong regional representation and commitment to local development. In addition, MAK implements various projects commissioned by the **Ministry of Regional and Agricultural Affairs**, the **Ministry of Economic Affairs and Communications**, **The National Foundation of Civil Society**, and the **National Institute for Health Development**.

The key partners include also the **Estonian Business and Innovation Agency**, **Association of Estonian Cities and Municipalities**, and **Estonian Association of Small and Medium-Sized Enterprises**, among others. Through strong collaboration, we work to promote entrepreneurship and community development across Estonia.“

Estonian networks of agricultural, forestry, fisheries, rural tourism etc business organisations

- **The Estonian Chamber of Agriculture and Commerce** – representing, supporting and protecting the interests of rural business operators. Its activities are aimed at ensuring balanced development within the agricultural production sector, the processing industry and the sector providing services to **rural life** (member of EU COPA-COGECA): www.epkk.ee
- **Estonian Farmers' Federation** - the main goal is to represent farms and rural businesses and to protect their interests. Federation offers replacement service for farmers in all counties and has 2 projects - *Ehtne Talutoit* (Genuine Farm Food) and Agroturism: www.taluliit.ee
- **Estonian Association of Small and Mediumsized Enterprises**: <https://evea.ee/>
- **Estonian Rural Tourism Association** – the goal is to give its members and the rural tourism business a stronger voice in shaping tourism and rural policy and to introduce rural accommodation, catering and experience services: <https://www.maaturism.ee/index.php?lang=en>

•



Reaching a shared understanding on the prerequisites for evidence-based and inclusive regional and local governance policies in Estonia is not „rocket science“ – but it does require smart collaboration...

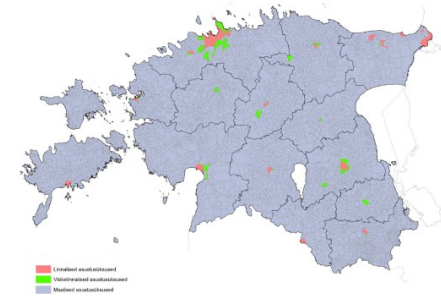


Tools>> The Open Government Roadmap, including 6 shared objectives and 25 actions for ministries, as well as 5 for local governments – to be monitored by reusing existing national tools such as good legislative practice guidelines, impact assessment checklists, public engagement good practices, and more. **One idea of the Coop4RURALGov project** was-is that **provinces/counties, local governments, and communities join forces & and data – when it's time to influence ministerial policies and policymakers. It's our time** 😊 😊 😊 😊 (e.g. The Agentic State AI support)

Rural proofing > Let's dream and imagine, if ...

... every policy and law is designed using a human-centric & place-based approach

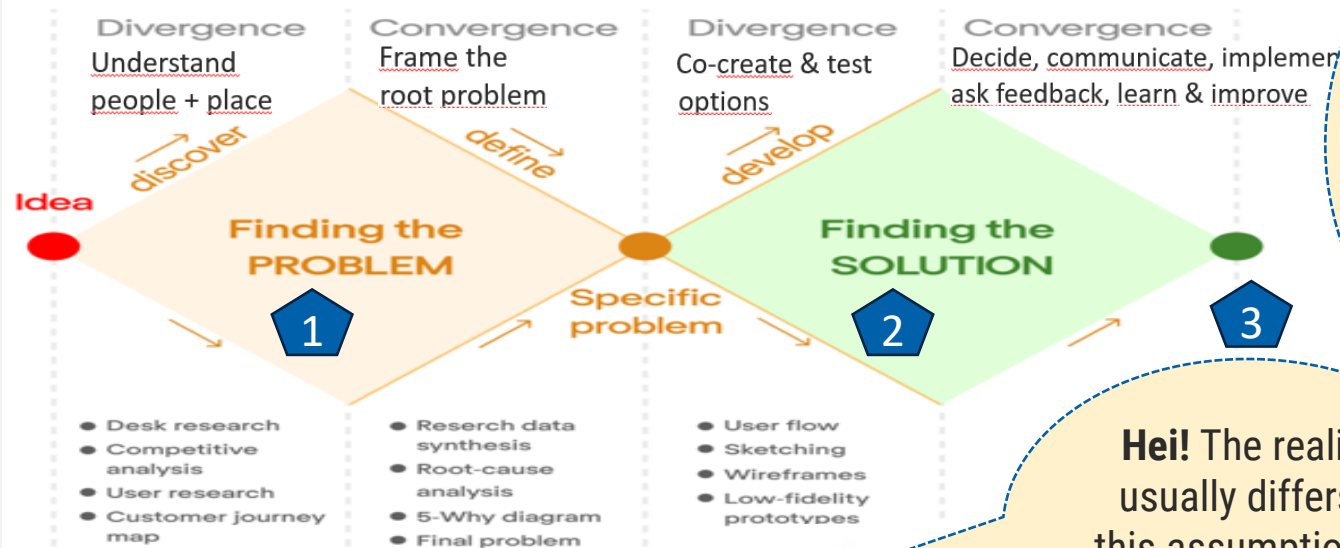
... then stakeholders from rural communities living in the grey areas on this map of Estonia (ca 33% of the population) would be involved and heard from the earliest stages of policy design, starting with identifying the right problem.



3 engagement points to connect existing data with stakeholder input (a rural/islands 'lens'):

- 1 Early rural discovery (root problems, lived experience);
- 2 Review of the draft: analysis of problems, impacts and solutions;
- 3 Feedback on engagement outcomes and lessons learned.

Double Diamond for Legal & Service Design



Finding the right problem and the right solution... not for officials in ministries, ...but for people, businesses or local authorities = the primary clients of political decisions, laws & services.

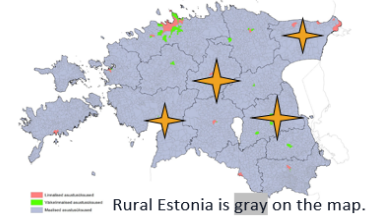
Hei! The reality usually differs - this assumption is a bit idealistic > see next slide 😊



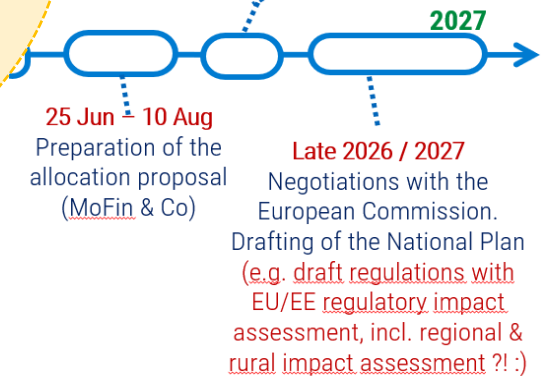
The NPP 2028+ consultation process is not the end.
A key follow-up question is how the impact and risk assessment of NRPP-related draft regulations can help prevent regional and rural policy failures at both EU and national level.

The European Commission has its Better Regulation Guidelines and Toolbox.

In Estonia, every draft act's explanatory memorandum must contain a section entitled "Impact on regional development, including urban, rural and coastal areas".



25 Aug – 10 Sep
Government Cabinet discussions and approval of the allocation proposal



The final NRPP 2028–2034 policy options could be rural-proofed in 2027





KEY ELEMENTS OF ESTONIAN TIA & RURAL PROOFING MODEL ...*

1. **Political strategic support** for TIA* & rural proofing at EU, national, regional/county, and local municipalities levels (strategies, resources).

2. **Legal basis** for establishing regional/territorial & rural impact assessment requirements in policy cycle

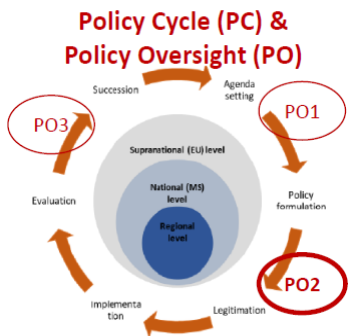
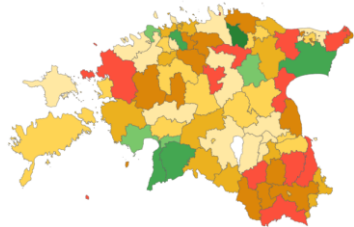
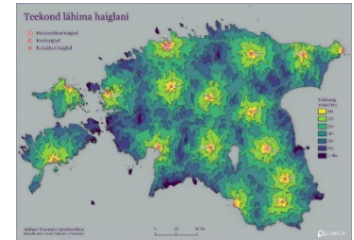
3. **Clear roles of ministries and coordination at national and regional / county levels** with relevant rural policy advisory bodies

4. **Analytical capacity**, availability of support services & spatial data

5. **Guidelines, checklists and procedures** are integrated to all processes and levels of policy, legal & service design and linked to databases

6. **Open governance**, partnership & stakeholders engagement (guidelines, methods)

7. **Policy oversight**: monitoring, compliance/quality surveys, feedback & policy learning. A behavioral approach.



* TIA = territorial impact assessment – see also European Commission impact assessment guideline and toolbox (2021).

*Aare Kasemets et al (2025). Estonia - a newcomer in the field of rural proofing – project *G30 Rural Proofing CLM* (draft, 03.05.2025).

Figure (PC): Daniele Bertolozzi Careddio (2023). Tools4CAP Conceptual framework and understanding of the CAP New Delivery Model – European Commission, JRC. + Aare Kasemets (2025) PO1: agenda setting, PO2: quality check of ex ante impact assessment [IA] (pilot study), PO3: ex post IA > new policy cycle

A. Mandatory impact assessment and stakeholder engagement

The „Rules for Good Legislative Practice and Legislative Drafting’ (2011) §§ 1, 46 and 50.
Supervision: The Ministry of Justice and Digital Affairs

§ 46. Impact assessment

1. Socio-demographic impact
2. Economic impact
3. Environmental impact
4. Impact on ICT & information society
5. Impact on security & foreign policy
6. Impact on equal treatment
7. Impact on regional development, including urban, rural and coastal/island areas*

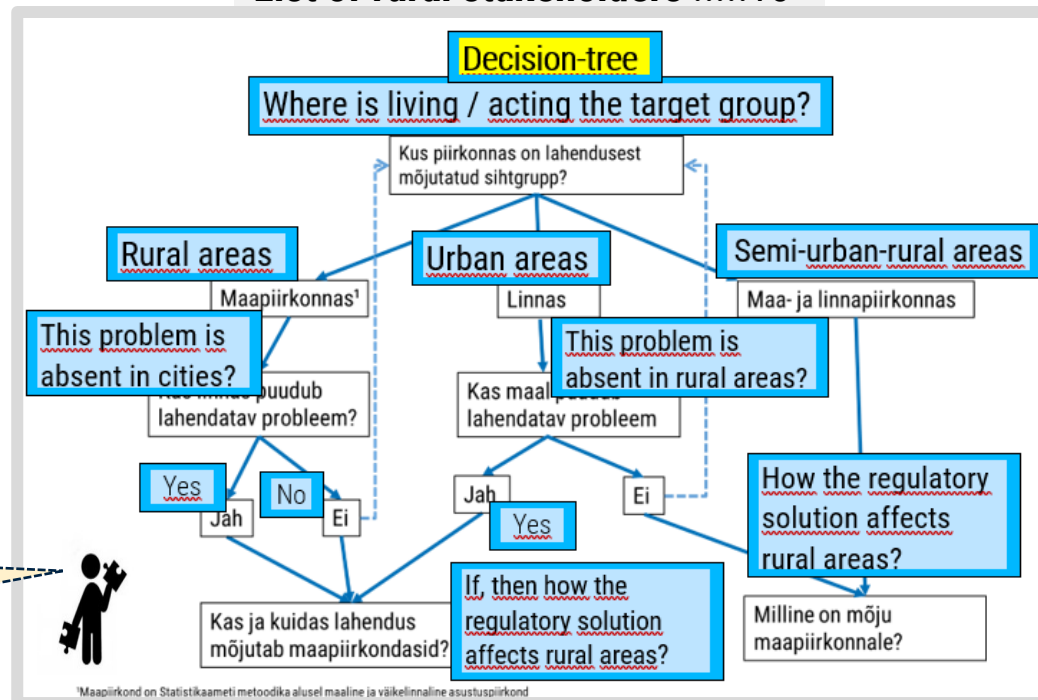
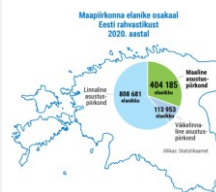
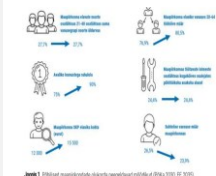
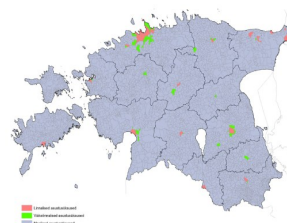
§ 50 Involvement of interest groups and public consultations

Rural communities and “other minorities” are often not visible in general statistics. Explanatory memoranda for draft acts list the stakeholder organisations, but we do not know much about their internal democracy, capacity, etc.

*If.. the impacts 1-6 in urban and rural areas and islands (7) differ, the official has to analyse difference: see B

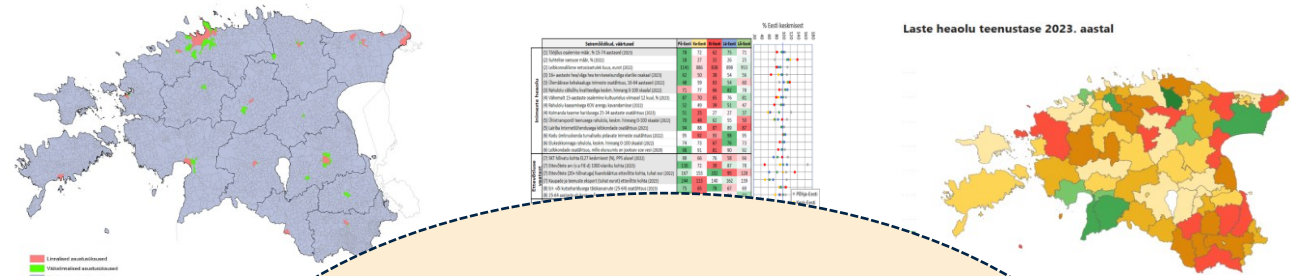
B. Non-mandatory ‘Rural proofing guideline’ (2022, Ministry of Regional Affairs &)

Objectives and indicators.....	3
Process	5
Rural Impact Assessment	7
Employment	8
Competitiveness	10
Population	12
Access to Services	14
Connectivity	16
List of rural stakeholders	18



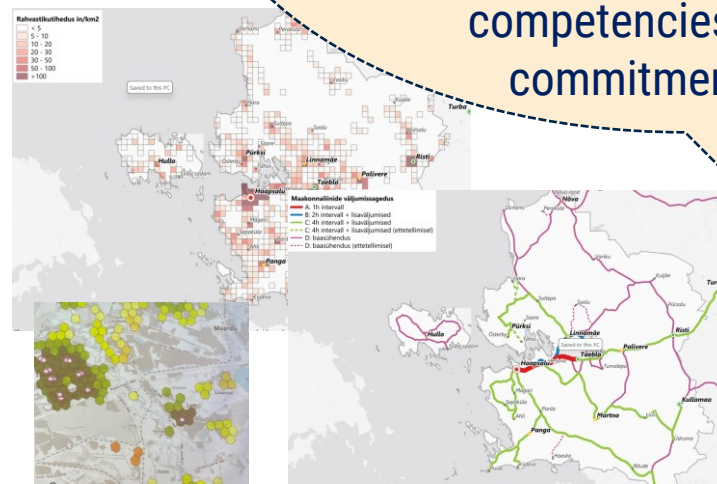
Rural Proofing Guideline. Process: 8 steps & engagement

- 1. Identifying and informing the target groups.** Map out all social groups, enterprises, and regions potentially affected. Identify main problems (using 'rural & islands lens').
- 2. Assessing the need for rural-specific analysis...**
- 3. Analyzing the current situation...**
- 4. Evaluating specific impact domains...** of rural policy key areas, with a focus on rural and islands specifics.
- 5. Mitigating negative impacts...**
- 6. Stakeholder engagement.** Involve rural residents, entrepreneurs, community organizations, and local municipalities in the assessment to gather direct input and validate findings (see 1-pager „*Good Practice Guide for Stakeholder Engagement*“ & in-house seminars).
- 7. Documenting and reporting.** Prepare a clear and structured impact assessment and stakeholders engagement report.
- 8. Monitoring and ex post impact assessment.** Set up mechanisms for monitoring actual outcomes/impacts on rural and coastal communities after implementation and plan for adjustments and policy learning based on real-world outcomes.



How can we integrate quantitative spatial data and in-house analysis with qualitative, people-centred & place-based local stakeholder engagement (in a context of our limited resources - time, funding, competencies, political commitment... :)??

Hei! It seems to be more an art of managing expectations, relationships & knowledge than a science:)



Example 1. Developing proposals for the route network as part of the public transport reform (co-creation accelerator project)

Problem, objective, challenge



Target groups, stakeholders



Process 1 methods, tools



Process 2, 3 results, lessons

In **2025** the co-creation with local stakeholders focused on 8 counties, in **2026** it will cover other 7 counties. The main objective was-is to explore **in a situation where the budget is limited, whether people prefer that public transport reaches... every village**, but very infrequently, or that it focuses on connections between **regional centres** with higher frequency, or **something in between (...)**

- 1. Representatives of the local communities** (families with children, teachers, farmers, owners of local shops, pensioners, etc);
- 2. Local municipalities:** officials & politicians.
- 3. Public Transport Centres,**
- 4. Regional Development Centres,** etc.

- 1. Methodological seminar;**
- 2. Introductory seminar** for the formulation of initial proposals.
- 3. Facilitated regional workshops** > (15–30 participants).
- 4. Sociological online survey.**

Ongoing draft legislation to clarify the responsibilities between state and local authorities...



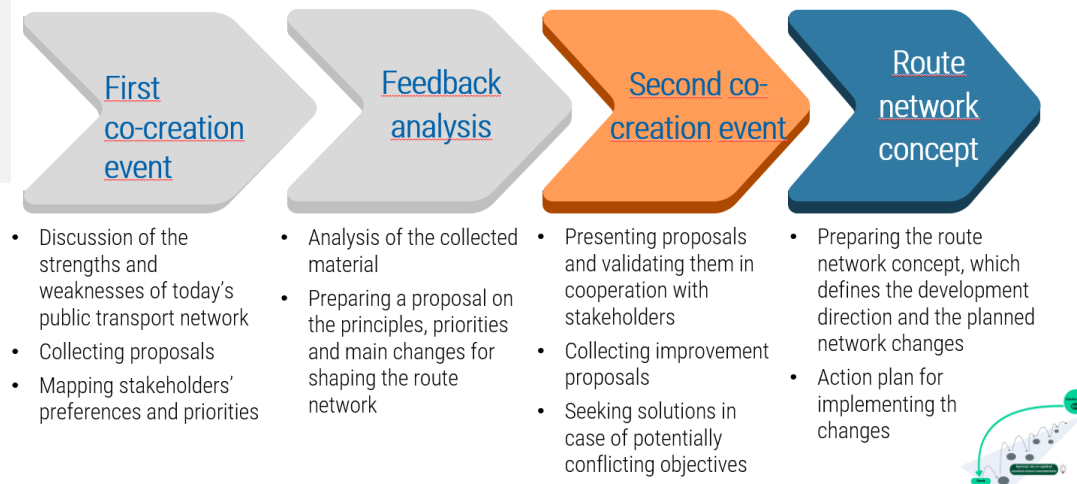
Public Transport Reform

- Mobility analysis**
 - Network analysis by region (current route network vs. mobility needs)
 - Analysis of new route service potentials (aligned with the needs of the new network and its commercial potential)
- Route network reform**
 - Target based approach – routes are connected into an integrated network
 - Fast direct connections
 - Demand based Public Transport 2.0 – better PT availability in rural areas
 - Travel planning conference
- Unified ticketing system**
 - Regionally unified fare structure – transfers are not penalized with a higher ticket price
 - Ticket sales platform to integrate different service providers
 - Funding and revenue sharing model
 - Environmentally friendly buses
- Supporting investments**
 - New stops
 - Large traffic hubs (waiting/transfer paths)
 - Safe parks
 - Change infrastructure
 - Increasing rail speeds
 - Environmentally friendly buses
- Administrative changes**
 - Redesign of the public transport governance model
 - More flexible procurement/tenders
 - Legislative changes
 - An operational level structure for day-to-day traffic coordination between operators

Current proposal for service level standards (working version / proposals) – departure interval

- A+ (i.e. suburban lines): 20–30 min / during peak hours 10–15 min**
- A: 1 hour / additional departures during peak hours**
- B: 2 hours / additional departures during peak hours**
- C: 4 hours / additional departures during peak hours**
- D: Basic connection**

Action plan for steering the development of the route network



Andres Ruubas (2026). Public transport organisation in Estonia: from a strategic perspective to implementing solutions – Ministry of Regional Affairs & Agriculture (MRAA, EST [YouTube](#)); Hannes Luts (2025) Developing proposals for the route network as part of the public transport reform in Lääne County (MRAA); Kaidi Tamm & Lilian Yallop (2025) Final report on the co-creation process for developing the route network as part of the public transport reform. Summary of the results of the regional co-creation processes in East and West Viru County, East and West Harju County, Rapla County, Lääne County and Saare County. SEI Tallinn (in EST [via MRAA](#)).

Example 2. Koidula border crossing closure

„Every person and village counts..“

Problem, challenge

Ministry of Interior: „various restrictions have been imposed on the cross-border movement of people and goods in connection with the Russian Federation’s war in Ukraine, and border crossings have decreased significantly (people: down 66%; passenger cars: down 62%; heavy goods vehicles: down 2%)“.

Setomaa Municipality: a sudden loss of planned investment and jobs; families are leaving; older people cannot cross the border to visit their ancestors’ graves; outmigration from rural areas is a security issue for border municipalities (...)*



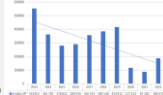
Target groups, stakeholders

1. Setomaa Municipality with its rural communities & businesses;
2. Võrumaa County Development Center;
3. Ministry of Regional Affairs & Agriculture

Process 1 methods, tools

1. Impact assessment in cooperation with the Ministry of the Interior and the The Ministry of Regional Affairs and Agriculture (Regional Policy Department).

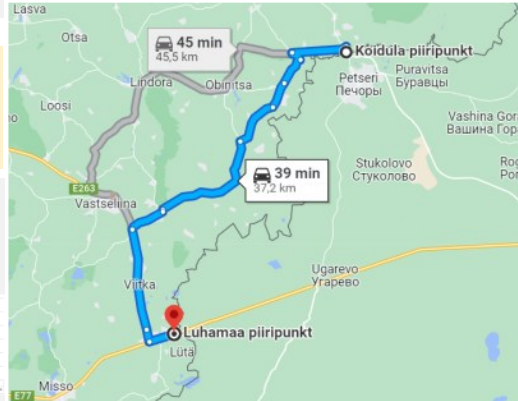
2. Roundtables in Setomaa Municipality, e.g. Borderland LEADER LAG questionnaires and consultations, for which local data (incl. interviews, were collected by the Võrumaa Development Centre.



3. Public discussion in the media to support Setomaa Municipality / people: „The small Setomaa Municipality would be put under pressure, one local business hub would disappear, people’s faith and hope would be taken away“.

Process 2, 3 results, lessons

*PROPOSALS TO THE STATE: Võru County is a border region of Estonia, the European Union and NATO. A depopulating border area, however, poses a serious threat to the state’s security and defence capability. Therefore, the state must support the development of the living environment and the business environment so that the region remains sustainable in the future as well. It is important to implement regional support schemes and measures (...)



Traditional area of Setomaa



Coop4RURALGov Olite workshop 2024: Common Manifesto, Mission, Opportunities and Challenges

Coop4RURALGov - Rural Proofing Collective Sensemaking

dot.

Key learnings and outcomes

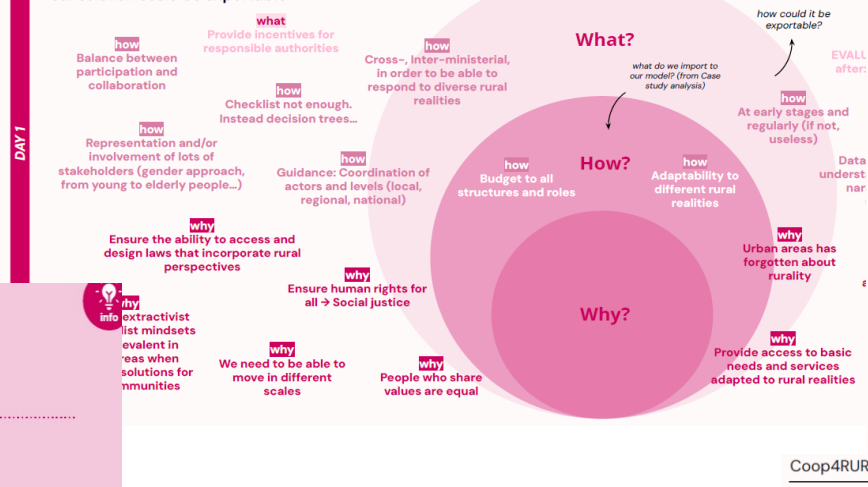
55



Coop4RURALGov

Activity 4 → Collective manifesto: setting a goal for the team

After analyzing two case studies, in which we identified key points and main learnings that we can **import** to our Rural Proofing solution, we created a **collective manifesto** aimed at developing a shared vision of **WHAT** we are going to do, **HOW** we are going to do it a **Coop4RURALGov - Rural Proofing Collective Sensemaking** our solution could be **exportable**.



Key learnings and outcomes

57

Activity 4 → Collective manifesto: setting a goal for the team

We believe in a democratic society in which everyone can have equity of rights and opportunities for a fulfilling life (also) in rural areas for present and future generations.



Coop4RURALGov - Rural Proofing Collective Sensemaking

dot.

Key learnings and outcomes

58

Activity 5 → Step by step process definition: Rural Proofing Methodology inspired by the Design process

Finally, after drafting a **manifesto of shared vision and values**, we designed the **Rural Proofing Methodology**, first in groups and then collectively, based on the Design process, which consists of four phases: Research & Empathize, Define & Ideate, Prototype & Test, and Implement & Evaluation. Specifically, we defined the **key activities for each phase**, as well as the **critical points** to consider at each stage. Additionally, we collectively established a set of **principles** that anyone conducting a Rural Proofing process should follow.

KEY PRINCIPLES

- Ensure visibility and open communication to foster a clear understanding of the importance of Rural Proofing.
- Develop a shared vision, mission, and narrative to align stakeholders and by extension, the whole society.
- Raise awareness of the problem and secure political will to address it.
- Adopt a holistic, intersectoral approach for comprehensive problem-solving.
- Provide clear guidance and methodologies, such as checklists, to ensure consistency.
- Gather rural-specific statistics and data, including case (field) studies from micro to macro levels.
- Establish a well-resourced leadership organization with cross-departmental connections, ensuring a link between top-level and local entities.
- Design local, regional, and national strategies within a structured Action Plan framework.
- Ensure flexibility and adaptability over time to accommodate changing needs.
- Prioritize evaluation and rapid experimentation to assess impacts and drive continuous improvement.

DAY 2

Rural Proofing (inspiration):

/def./ European Union
Rural proofing means reviewing policies through a rural lens, to make these policies fit for purpose for those who live and work in rural areas. In practice, it considers, for policies in the making, the actual and potential, positive or negative, direct and indirect impacts and implications on rural jobs, development prospects, social well-being, equal opportunities for all and the environmental quality of rural areas and communities.

/def./ European Committee of the Regions
Rural proofing is ensuring that "thinking rural" becomes part of the policy design at all governance levels, potential negative impacts are addressed and positive aspects of a policy are fostered. From a methodological point of view it is close to territorial impact assessment (TIA) as recognised by the Better Regulation Toolbox, tool #34 in its approach of focusing on assessing impacts based on specific regional traits and characteristics. Rural proofing however is not only an impact assessment process, but rather part of the overall policy design. "Thinking rural" needs to be relevant at all stages, from drafting the initial policy strategy all the way to impact assessment after implementation.

/def./ The European Network for Rural Development (ENRD)
Rural proofing is a mechanism that can help drive rural revitalization by ensuring that all relevant policies beyond rural development are aligned with rural needs and realities. Rural proofing is a systematic process to review the likely impacts of policies, programmes and initiatives on rural areas because of their particular circumstances or needs (e.g. dispersed populations and poorer infrastructure networks). In short, it requires policy-makers to "think rural" when designing policy interventions in order to prevent negative outcomes for rural areas and communities.

/def./ Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD)
Rural Proofing is a process, not a policy. It is a guidance mechanism that involves a number of interconnected variables that aim to enhance the quality of government decision-making in relation to rural regions. It's a tool to ensure policies are fit for purpose in rural areas. It involves making policy decisions, based on evidence on rural dynamics, available in a timely fashion, to enable changes and adjustments early in the policy design and strategy development phase.

Rural Proofing (inspiration):

Opportunities & Strengths

- Increases the number of **ex-ante assessments**
- Fosters **collaboration** across government (horizontal and vertical)
- Encourages **stakeholder engagement**
- Builds **capacity and knowledge** on rural issues
- Improves rural **data collection** and coordination
- Encourages **clear objectives and outcomes** on rural issues
- Increases focus on **rural opportunity**
- Builds **synergies** and streamlines **administrative actions**
- Improves **policy coherence**

Challenges & weaknesses

- Time constraints**
- Overly **cumbersome process**
- Ineffective oversight**
- Vague or overly **ambitious objectives** - trying to do too much
- Perpetuates a **negative view** of rural
- Overly **dependent on political support** which limits long-term sustainability
- Resources and commitment** are not in sync with needs of the coordinating body
- Risk of **bureaucratic paralysis**
- Limited agreement** or collective understanding on what constitutes 'rural' and limited availability/easy access to hard data that corresponds to rural or rural areas

Comparative Study on Rural Proofing in Spain, Bulgaria, Ireland, and Estonia

Anne Põder, Taavi Kiisk, Estonian University of Life Sciences

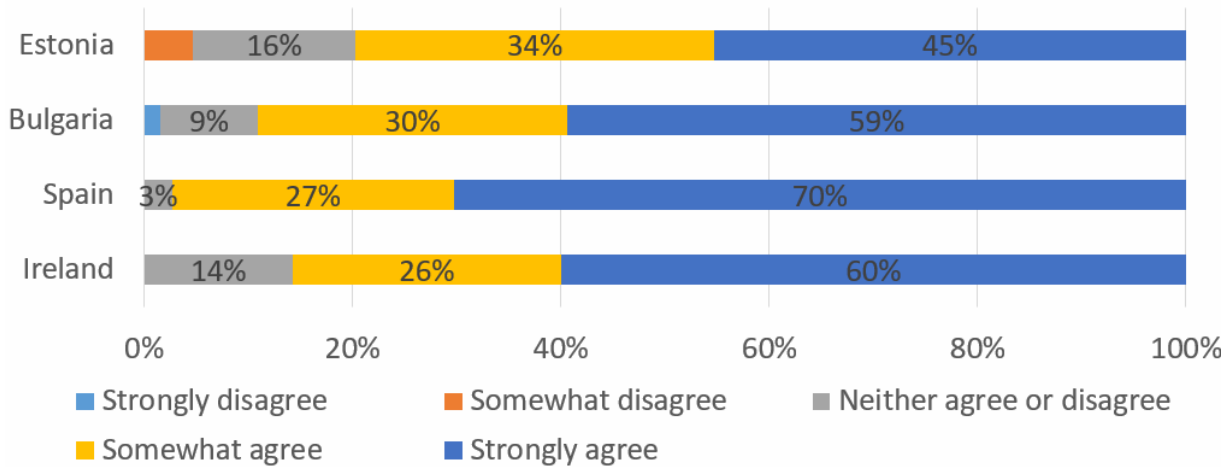
Project: Rural Proofing. Cooperation for better sparsely populated rural, coastal and mountain focused governance (Coop4RURALGov)



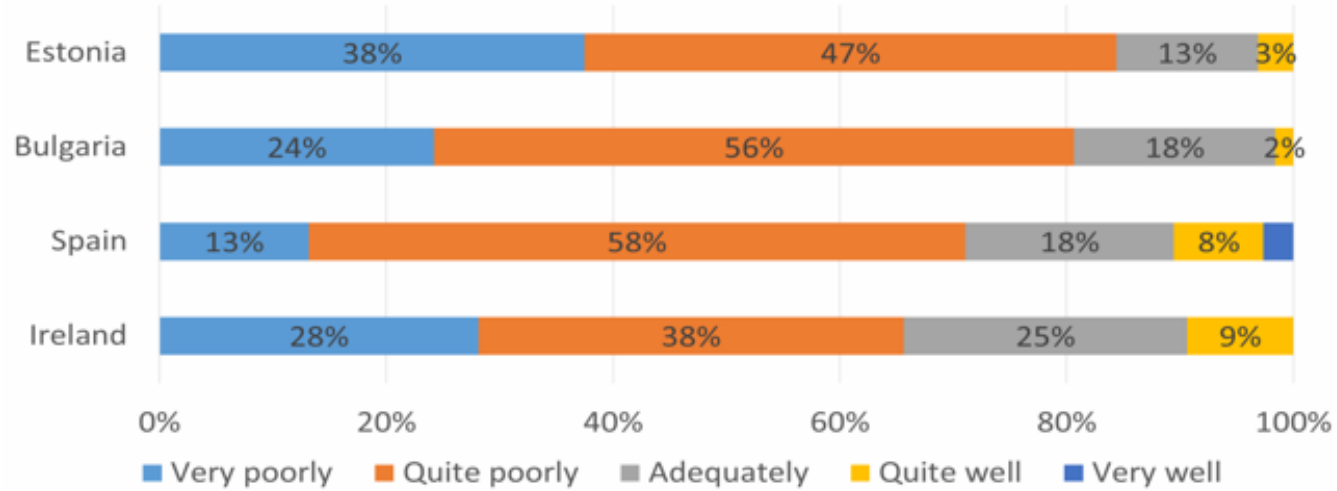
Coop4RURALGov



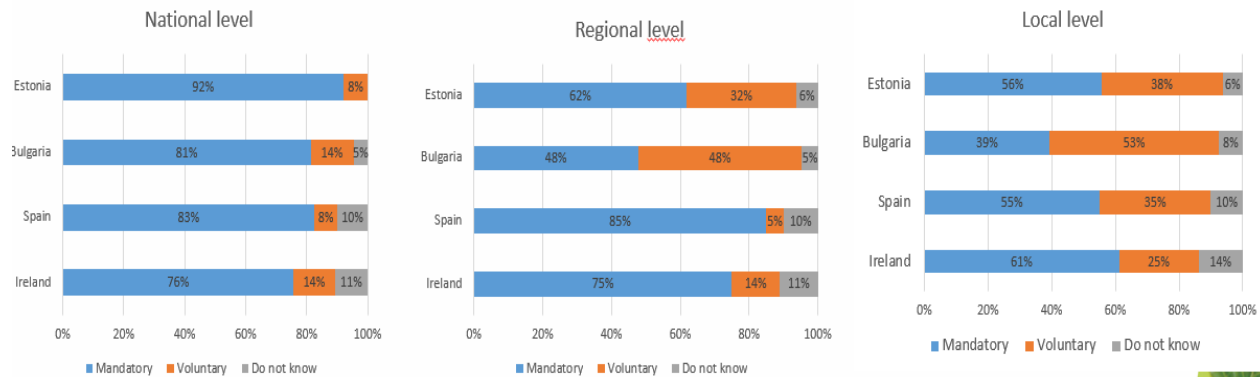
Do you agree that rural proofing of policies, bills and programs in your country or region should be mandatory? (%)



How well does the present policymaking and planning process address the needs of rural areas (%)



At what level should the policy-making process implement rural proofing



Behavioural (rural) policy research: 'Nudge' vs. 'Sludge'*

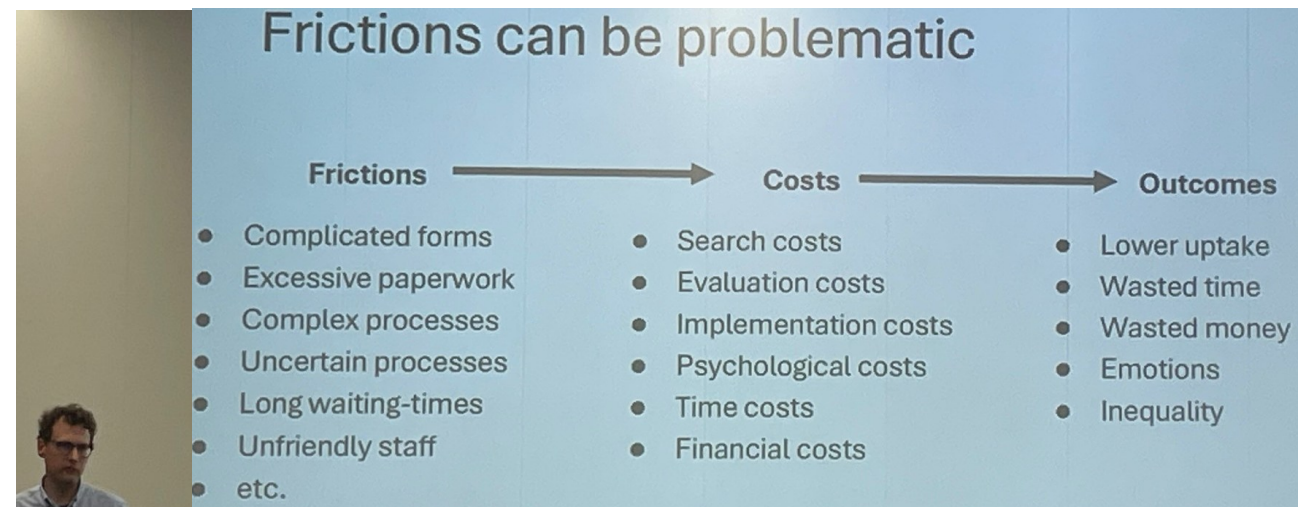
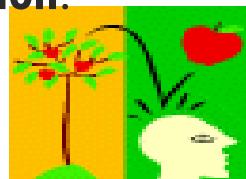


Estonia faces evolving structural challenges as a small EU/OECD/NATO member state with limited human, economic, budgetary and scientific capacities.* This makes the adoption of IT/AI solutions that reduce working time, limit civil service size, cut regulatory standard costs, and simplify laws/services existential policy choices for long-term sustainability. At the same time, **Estonia's small scale and fewer hierarchical layers enable faster experimentation with innovative methods, regulations, and technologies – serving as a governance 'testbed' / 'sandbox'.**

Looking at Estonian examples of CAP, CFP & **rural policy** digitalisation, impact assessment, and simplification*, Estonia's **digital innovations are largely driven by IT solutions and EU/EE legal frameworks, with limited incorporation of data-driven behavioural science perspectives – such as the 'nudge vs sludge' discourse.** These **innovations often lack deeper analysis of social, economic, and regional/rural impacts, spatial inequality, and cognitive or psychological costs.** **As a result, the costs and risks for several policy target groups may be underestimated, hidden, and only emerge over time.**

In brief, **there is a need for stronger behavioural science input, and science-policy interaction. Universities – as holders of 'academic capital' – could play a greater role in supporting evidence-based human-centric and space-based policy design and interdisciplinary collaboration.**

*A.Kasemets *et al* (2025). Digitalization, RIA and Simplification of the EU/EE Agricultural, Fisheries & Rural Policies... - DG AGRI CAP Simplification TG5 working papers, 02.07 (Proposal No 5)

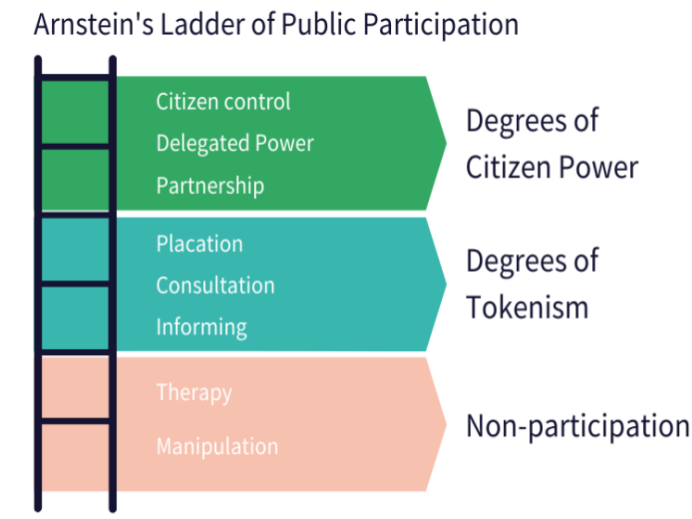


A recent inspiration: Prof Leonhard Lades „Administrative Burden & „Sludge““ > [IAREP 2025: Behavioural Insights in Research and Policymaking](#) in Tallinn (for officials, 16.06.2025), and in Tartu (for academics, 17-19.06.2025).

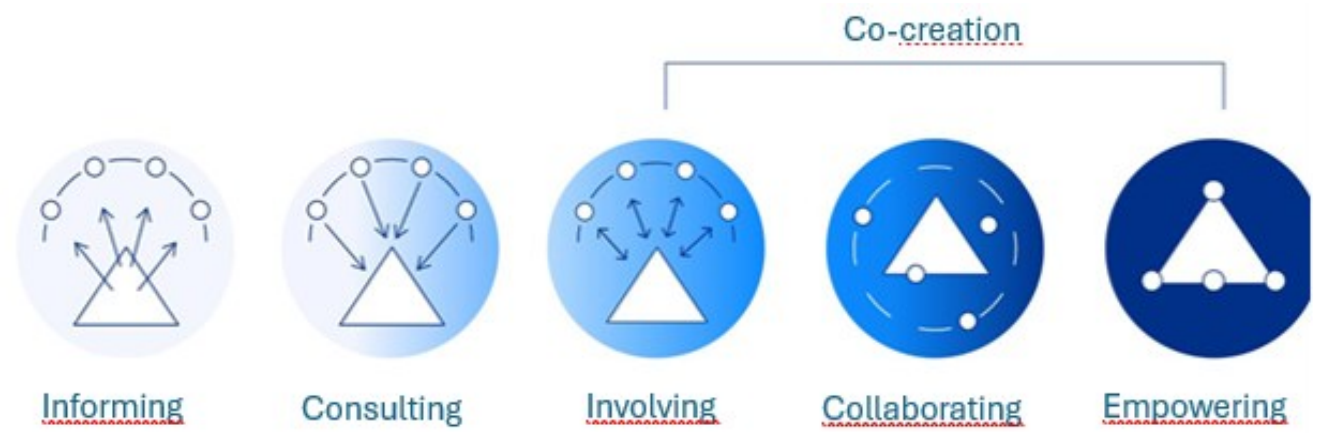
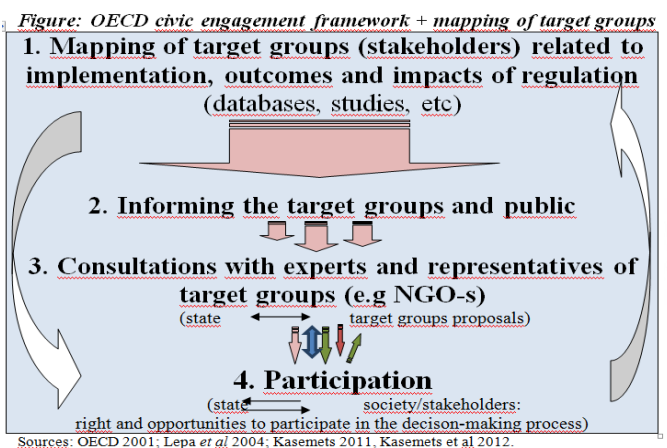
Definitions: from informing to co-creation & partnership

Engagement / inclusion covers the activities of public and private sector organisations aimed at giving citizens and the organisations that represent them the opportunity to participate in shaping decisions that affect them. Engagement is preceded by informing stakeholders and consulting them. **NB!** If a stakeholder group has no real opportunity to shape policy, we try to avoid using the **words** “engagement” and „participation“.

Co-creation is the next level, characterised by the opportunity to participate in defining both problems and goals.



(“A Ladder of Citizen Participation,” Sherry Arnstein, *Journal of the American Planning Association*)



Sources: OECD 2001, Praxis 2004, Kasemets 2011, EU Commission 2021, Estonian Open Governance Roadmap 2023 and classics: Sherry Arnstein's Ladder of Public Participation (1969)

Definitions: rural proofing, rural networks & rural policy ecosystem

Rural proofing, also rural impact assessment

means the analysis of EU, national and regional policies (e.g. draft strategies, draft acts, funding programmes) and related public services from the perspective of the people living in rural areas, in order to understand the possible economic, social, cultural, environmental, IT, security, etc impacts of public policies on the people, families, communities and businesses of rural areas (e.g. islands).

Rural development networks and rural policy ecosystem

In this presentation, I will look at rural networks broadly in the framework of rural policy social innovation and learning. **Rural networks are horizontal networks connecting different public, business and NGO sector branches and geographical regions across the country.** Collaboration is also close between the public administration, universities and villages leaders / communities at the grass-roots level.

The rural policy ecosystem in Estonia is relatively fragmented and requires better cooperation.

An innovation ecosystem is a network where parties jointly create-offer-generate **value**. While **an ecosystem in nature** is a network of relationships involving organisms and the environment in an area, **in a social ecosystem** cooperation, mutual **trust** between participants and **common goals** and **activities** are central, where **each participant knows** their roles, **impact** and that ...

... we depend on each other's results and survival...

BETTER REGULATION (we need a new deal, see slides 40-43)



Due to multidisciplinary 'academic competition' around the policy- and law-making, there are a **myriad of definitions**. Let's try to use the terms agreed on by OECD and EU organisations...

Better Regulation is an example of complex terms including 7 subterms (+ actions):*

- 1) **political commitment** on policy options
- 2) **regulatory impact assessment (RIA)**
- 3) **consultations**
- 4) **simplification**
- 5) **access** (to regulations & **RIA data**)
- 6) supporting **responsible structures**
- 7) **effective implementation** of regulation.

RIA is a systematic process of identification & quantification of economic, social, environmental, **rural**, etc impacts likely to flow from adoption of a proposed regulation or a non-regulatory option. May be based on cost-benefit analysis, risk analysis, standard cost analysis, etc. (OECD 2004 +)
Impact assessments look at the **problems** to be tackled, the objectives to be achieved, the trade-offs to consider, **options** for action and their potential **impacts** (EC 2021)

Consultations: input (data) from **stakeholders** supports this work throughout the policy cycle, to provide policymakers with the **best possible evidence base** (EC 2021)

Simplification: 'EU aims to keep regulatory burdens to a minimum.. Simplifying legislation means rigorously applying the principles of necessity and proportionality...' (EUR-Lex).

*European Commission: *Mandelkern Group report, 2001.*
[Better regulation: guidelines and toolbox \(2021\)](#)



ORGANISATION FOR ECONOMIC CO-OPERATION AND DEVELOPMENT



Better regulation as 'fire alarm': how to avoid policy failure?

In line with OECD regulatory reform reports posing the question “How to avoid policy failure?”, and Claudio Radaelli’s interpretation of Regulatory Impact Analysis (RIA) as a ‘fire alarm’ within the political economy context, the ‘better regulation firewalls’ at both EU and national levels are designed as proactive safeguards. These **institutional rules of the game** aim not only to alert decision-makers to regulatory risks but also to help prevent overregulation, administrative burden, and the cumulative rise of information, implementation, evaluation, oversight, and psychological costs, which can erode trust and reduce policy effectiveness.*

Estonia was relatively successful in applying ex ante RIA even amid a cascade of crises (COVID-19, economic shocks, war), thanks to four core elements of its better regulation system functioning as ‘firewalls’:

1. **Integrated regulatory governance** covering the entire policy cycle, beginning with legislative intent.
2. **Interministerial coordination and shared capacities.**
3. **Open governance**, including consultation, transparency, and accessibility.
4. **A regulatory policy oversight model: a behavioural approach** (see next slides).**

+ A fifth ‘firewall’ is needed at the EU level to help prevent future large-scale farmers' protests and such regulatory simplification campaigns that entail substantial economic and administrative costs.



*OECD (2000). Reducing the Risk of Policy Failure: Challenges for Regulatory Compliance; Claudio Radaelli (2010). Regulating Rule-Making via Impact Assessment', Governance, Vol. 23/1;

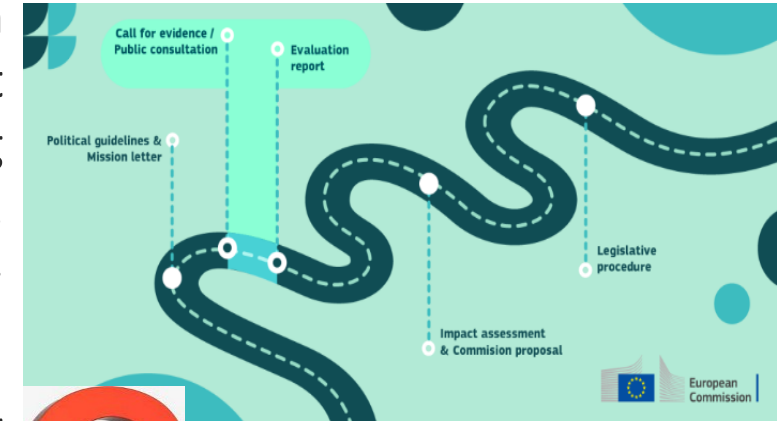
**Jaan Ginter, Aare Kasemets & Raul Narits (2020). Legislation in Estonia. In: Karpen, U. & Xanthaki, H. (Ed.). Legislation in Europe. A Country to Country Study, 151-165. Oxford: Hart Publishing;

Aare Kasemets (2024) Regulatory Impact Assessment in public policy design and draft legislation: the case of Estonia – EU - Moldovan Mentor Group, [via LinkedIn](#)

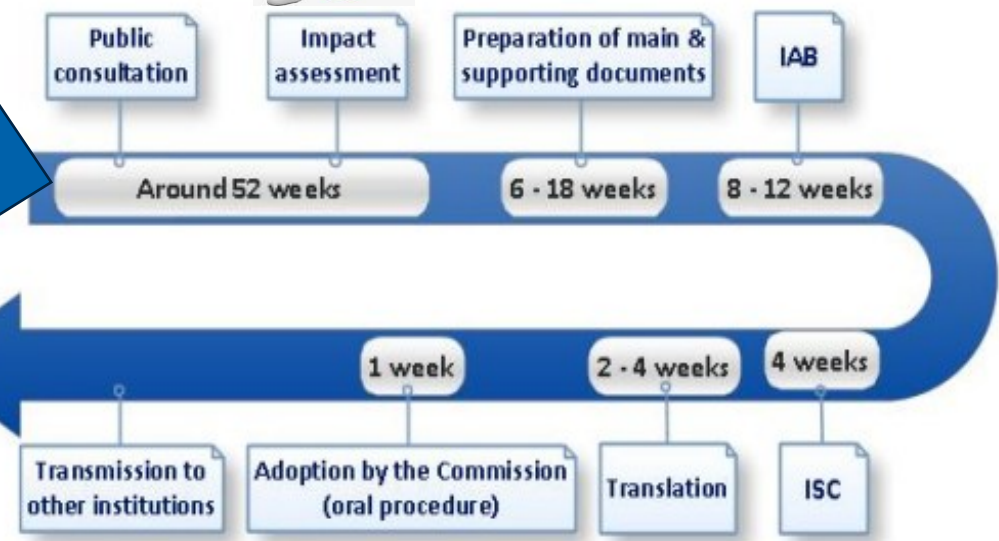
The cost of imitation vs. implementation of RIA (e.g. TIA & rural proofing)?

Problems and lessons learned. The emergence of massive simplification initiatives is evidence that the existing ‘fire alarms’ & ‘firewalls’ are not functioning. In other words, the current rule-making rules — including semi-mandatory regulatory impact assessment (RIA) requirements, such as in the European Commission’s *Better Regulation Guidelines** — are insufficient to prevent regulatory policy failures. **Why?**

How can we move from merely imitating RIA to truly implementing human-centric RIA?



Why are the economic impacts (e.g. standard costs) on businesses, NGOs & consumers not analysed and negotiated *ex ante*? The same ‘why?’ with rural impacts...



*European Commission (2021). [Better Regulation Guidelines & Toolbox](#); (2009). [Annexes To Impact Assessment Guidelines](#); (2016). Impact Assessments in the EU policy making - MOVE A3, Stockholm, 6-7 October 2016; see also European Parliament (2025) Quality analysis of European Commission impact assessments. [Developments during the 2019-2024 term \(64 pages\)](#).
 Source: Aare Kasemets *et al* (2025) „Digitalization, RIA and Simplification in EU/EE common Agricultural, Fisheries & Rural policies ..“ CAP Network CAP Simplification TG 5, slide 35

Figure 2-5: The 9 CAP objectives for 2021-2027

The European Commission is the first 'better regulation firewall' in EU common policies (proposal 2)*



National efforts in regulatory impact assessment (RIA) are not sufficient within the context of EU multilevel governance. Although Estonia has demonstrated good practices in *ex ante* RIA of draft laws and regulations, existing economic impact assessment tools (e.g. SCM) function selectively in EU/EE CAP and CFP related draft regulation => **a renewed EU-level agreement on better regulation** and *ex ante* impact assessment minimum requirements ('firewalls') is needed.

Given the diversity of CAP & CFP administrative systems and regulatory policy needs across Member States, **the EU regulatory framework should become more flexible.** This may involve delegating primary responsibility for *ex ante* RIA and simplification to Member States, along with appropriate resources, data collection strategies, reporting obligations, and comparable 'nudging' indicators.

In the **Estonian Ministry of Regional Affairs and Agriculture**, the general in-house agreement is now: if **policy departments**, participating in **DG AGRI, DG MARE, DG SANTE** or **DG REGIO** working groups, identify the need for additional data collection and economic impact assessment (e.g. standard cost analysis), the **Analysis Unit of the Strategy and Finance Department** will provide some support based on a specific information/service request. + If there is a need for a territorial/regional and/or rural impact assessment, then since 2026 the **Analysis Unit of the Regional Policy Department** will provide some support.





Aare Kasemets - BIO in brief

The House of the Five Ministries in Tallinn, e.g. Estonian Ministry of Regional Affairs and Agriculture.



WORKING & LEARNING:

2016- Estonian Ministry of Regional Affairs and Agriculture, adviser in regulatory impact assessment & stakeholders' engagement, member of many networks, 2023-2027 ca 1/4 of my work is related to the EU Interreg rural proofing project Coop4RuralGov.*

2011-2016 Estonian Academy of Security Sciences (Tallinn) and **The Hertie School of Governance** (Berlin), researcher in EU/EE governance, better regulation, anti-corruption, internal security, and public sector reform projects (e.g. ANTICORRP 2012-15; PADOS in Moldova 2014-15).*

2008-2010 University of Tartu, EU College, vice director, and manager of better regulation and civil society programme.*

2004-2007 Estonian Ministry of Environment, adviser in better regulation, and head of strategy bureau (e.g. EU/EE green procurement).*

1993-2003 The Chancellery of Riigikogu, Estonian Parliament, adviser of Economic Committee 1993-1995, head of socio-economic information department, and the correspondent of European Parliamentary Research and Documentation Centre (ECPRD) 1995-2003.*

1989-1993 Estonian Academy of Agriculture [now Estonian University of Life Sciences], member of **rural sociology** research group.*

EDUCATION: PhD in sociology (2018). Study: „Institutionalisation of Knowledge-Based Policy Design and Better Regulation Principles in Estonian Draft Legislation.“ University of Tartu (e.g. 2004-05 a visiting PhD student at Uni of Oxford); **MA in sociology (2001)** and **BA in journalism (1995)**, Uni of Tartu.; **Studies of agronomy and rural sociology (1983, 1985-1988)**, Estonian Academy of Agriculture.

NETWORKING: Estonian Association of Sociologists, Estonian Villages Movement „Kodukant“, Estonian Club of Rome, Estonian Academic Association of Journalism, Association of Owners of Native Rural Threshing-Barn Dwellings, also G30 Rural Proofing CLM, Rural Move, etc rural proofer's networks.

My country home.
Kriimani village.
Tartu County.
Estonia.



***CV & publications:** https://www.etis.ee/CV/Aare_Kasemets/eng/ **E-mail:** aare.kasemets@agri.ee