

Quality Education for All: Adapting School Networks for Equitable Access
12-16 May 2025 – Peer learning event in Latvia and Estonia
Supporting education reforms and skills in the Eastern Partnership region

Day 1: Monday 12 May 2025 – Riga, Latvia

The peer learning events opened in Riga with a strong institutional welcome by Latvian representatives, who framed school network optimisation as a strategic response to demographic shifts, resource inefficiencies, and equity gaps in education systems.

Kristīne Niedre-Lathere (Latvian MoES) highlighted ten systemic factors influencing school quality—from leadership capacity to teacher support systems—arguing that optimisation must serve inclusion, safety, and sustainability.

Christophe Masson (EC, DG ENEST) and *ETF's Timo Kuusela* stressed that although reforms cannot be copied wholesale, the event should spark contextualised action grounded in robust diagnostic assessments.

Country presentations from Armenia, Georgia, Moldova and Ukraine outlined the shared pressures of depopulation and urbanisation, with nuanced differences in strategy:

- **Armenia** (*Tamara Sargsyan, Head of the General Education Department at the Ministry of Education, Science, Culture and Sports*) emphasized short-term mitigation (e.g. transport reimbursements) and longer-term clustering plans.
- **Georgia** (*Ana Baramia, Head of the Division of EU Integration and Relations with International Organizations at the Ministry of Education, Science and Youth*) is piloting school networks to align funding with accessibility.
- **Moldova** (*Olga Tretyacov, Head of the External Assistance Coordination Service and National Coordinator for the Education Reforms and Skills Programme at the Ministry of Education and Research*) focuses on model schools and mentorship for teacher development.
- **Ukraine** (*Andrii Lytvynchuk, Acting Director of the Institute of Educational Analytics under the Ministry of Education and Science*), facing war-related disruptions, is integrating school network optimisation into its broader New Ukrainian School reform.

The ETF expert *Luc Gacougnolle (PPMI)* provided a data-driven comparison across the countries based on diagnostics conducted by the ETF team. Declining school-age populations and underutilised facilities compound inefficiencies, especially in rural areas. Strategic consolidation, incentivised cooperation among municipalities, and data-informed planning emerged as potential levers for action.

Latvian experts showcased two decades of reform, framing optimisation as a human-centred process requiring transparency and co-ownership. *Ramona Urtāne (MoES)* underscored empathy, leadership, and local partnerships as success factors. Riga municipal authorities reflected on balancing hard data with local realities, while VET reformers, including ex-Minister of Education *Jānis Gaigals*, detailed Latvia's transformation of VET through consolidation, infrastructure renewal (also through EU structural funds), and curriculum overhaul.

Afternoon school visits illustrated Latvian implementation in practice. At **Riga Classical Gymnasium** and **Riga State Technical School**, participants examined how optimisation reshaped institutional ecosystems—through modernisation, programme diversification, and governance restructuring. The day concluded with bilateral meetings and a networking dinner, setting a collaborative tone for the week.

Day 2: Tuesday 13 May – Ogre, Latvia

The second day focused on the practical implications of school network optimisation through site visits and municipal engagement. Participants were split between the **Ogre State Gymnasium** and **Ogre Technical School**, where they observed how infrastructure, governance, and curricular innovation coalesce within Latvia's broader education reform. These institutions, products of consolidation and strategic investment, showcased high-quality learning environments—boasting advanced STEM programmes, career guidance integration, and strong international cooperation through Erasmus+ programmes for both teachers and students.

Ogre State Gymnasium, inaugurated in 2023, was presented as a flagship model of the reform. With 640 students and a clear pedagogical vision, the school embodies the shift to a 10–12 grade structure and promotes inclusivity, refusing to limit access through competitive admissions. Leadership emphasised that genuine reform required a mindset shift: not only new buildings, but also new values around equity and excellence.

Municipal officials, including *Deputy Council Head Gatis Sīviņš* and *Igors Grigorjevs, Head of the Education Board of the Ogre Municipal council*, elaborated on the political and operational dynamics behind the reform. They discussed the four-year consultation process leading to the Gymnasium's creation, balancing technical planning with deep community involvement. The new public library, located near schools and designed as an educational hub, symbolises the shift towards multifunctional infrastructure in education.

During the afternoon wrap-up session moderated by *ETF's Marie Dorleans*, Eastern Partnership (EaP) representatives reflected on transferable practices: the flexible use of community buses, shared infrastructure, and the importance of involving parents and students in decision-making. Discussions highlighted contrasts between decentralised Latvian governance and more centralised structures (e.g. in Armenia and Moldova), raising questions about replicability and scalability in different contexts. The day underscored how political vision, municipal commitment, and educational ambition can converge to deliver impactful change.

Day 3: Wednesday 14 May – Tartu, Estonia

The third day marked the transition from Latvia to Estonia, beginning in **Tartu** with institutional presentations that connected higher education reform, skills development, and school network

optimisation within a broader innovation ecosystem. At the **University of Tartu**, *Vice-Rector Aune Valk* outlined Estonia's approach to higher education: autonomy, flexibility, research and alignment with labour market needs. With over 14,000 students (1,600 internationals) and a robust continuing education offer, the university plays a central role in national upskilling efforts.

Presenters from the **Ministry of Education and Research** (*Indrek Riisaar – Head of State Property Management and Liisa Ojaveer, Adviser for EU and International Cooperation*) detailed Estonia's education development plan, emphasising a dual-track structure: municipalities manage primary education, while the State assumes responsibility for upper secondary schooling. This transition is part of a broader vision for inclusive, high-quality education accessible across regions.

Officials stressed that school network optimisation is not synonymous with school closures; rather, it seeks rational allocation of resources, modern learning environments, and pedagogical quality. Policy is increasingly grounded in data—through instruments like OSKA, which forecasts labour market needs—and implemented through municipal-state cooperation.

In the afternoon, participants visited the Estonian National Museum and later transferred to Tallinn. The overarching message from Estonia was clear: reforms require clarity of responsibility, forward-looking planning with the use of evidence, and digital solutions. The use of lump-sum financing with performance indicators, and the emphasis on teacher professionalisation (all must have master's degrees), underscored Estonia's holistic and coherent policy model.

EaP participants noted how Estonia's long-term investment in education (viewed as a strategic national asset) has yielded high PISA scores, trust in schools, and a deeply rooted learning culture. For EaP countries, Estonia offered a compelling vision of system-wide reform anchored in digital governance, community trust, and cross-sectoral coordination.

Day 4: Thursday 15 May – Haapsalu and Saue, Estonia

Day four was also structured around two parallel tracks showcasing local implementation of education reforms.

In **Saue Municipality**, participants visited a rural **Ruila Comprehensive School**, the **Saue State Gymnasium** and the **Tallinn Industrial Education Centre**. Saue's mayor outlined the municipality's strategic planning, stressing the interplay between political leadership and pedagogical innovation. The Gymnasium's manager highlighted inclusive curriculum design, state-of-the-art facilities, effective stakeholder dialogue and active engagement of students in school life. Meanwhile, the vocational centre demonstrated Estonia's commitment to aligning VET with economic demand through industry partnerships, work-based learning, and modular qualifications. Optimisation of VET institutions is an ongoing process, and the vocational centre is subject to a merger of other 5 VET providers in Tallinn where the government has decided to unite 6 existing VET providers into two larger institutions in the capital of Estonia. The aim of the reform is to consolidate teaching and learning resources and boost the attractiveness of VET by increasing the enrolments from the current 28% up to 40% at upper secondary level by 2035.

In the seaside town of **Haapsalu**, municipal leaders described how structural reforms were carried out with minimal resistance thanks to clear communication and long-term planning. Education is a political

priority for the city, with more than 50% of the municipal budget dedicated to the sector, reflecting its strategic importance at municipal level in the country. Despite some emotional regrets over losing traditional school trajectories (e.g. attending grades 1–12 in one unique place), the reforms succeeded in optimising resources and improving access, as exemplified by the **Haapsalu Elementary School**.

The **Haapsalu Vocational Education Centre** presented its own strategies for inclusivity and upskilling. The city also highlighted the role of libraries and cultural centres as integral to education ecosystems.

Across both tracks, local governments showed high commitment to co-financing, aligning with national priorities, and ensuring a broad understanding of education as a public good. Teacher salaries, infrastructure investment, and community dialogue emerged as key variables.

While the scale of Estonian municipalities may differ from those in EaP countries, participants took note of their operational autonomy and political coherence. The day concluded with a networking dinner in Tallinn, where participants deepened bilateral contacts and reflected on how municipal leadership can be leveraged in their home contexts (particularly Georgia and Ukraine).

Day 5: Friday 16 May – Tallinn, Estonia

The final day focused on early education, STEM promotion, and wrap-up discussions. The morning began with a visit to **Pääsusilma Kindergarten**, which exemplifies Estonia’s integration of digital competence and robotics into early childhood education. Teachers engage young learners in structured play-based learning environments, supported by inclusive policies and state-subsidised infrastructure. The staff-student ratio and pedagogical approach reflect Estonia’s belief in early investment as foundational to lifelong learning.

Participants then toured the famous **Rakett69 Science Studio**, spin-off of a popular Estonian TV science competition show and designed to enhance STEM education across age groups. More than just a learning centre, Rakett69 functions as a national hub for integrating STEM into formal and non-formal education, offering hands-on workshops, teacher training, and extracurricular activities. By combining interactive learning with cutting-edge technology, the centre fosters scientific curiosity and practical problem-solving. During the visit, participants took part in a team-based challenge designed to simulate the Studio’s signature hands-on learning approach, sparking active engagement and playful competition.

The final sessions at the **Radisson Blu Olumpia hotel** synthesised lessons from the week. Country delegates reflected on actionable ideas—ranging from inter-municipal cooperation and shared infrastructure of education facilities to financing models and teacher incentives. Several stressed the importance of communication strategies to mitigate resistance, and the need to shift from top-down mandates to community-supported change.

- **Armenia:** Priorities include shared infrastructure, local decision-making, and flexible transport.
- **Georgia:** Focus on school networks, shared resources, and piloting inclusive administrative reforms.
- **Moldova:** Multifunctional schools and evidence-based resource allocation seen as key takeaways.

- **Ukraine:** Interest in decentralised transport models and Estonia's use of digitalisation in education.

The event concluded with a preview of the next steps in the SER programme. Among the thematic priorities for future peer learning identified by participants were resource mobilisation strategies, education funding formulas and incentives, and school autonomy frameworks, to be further explored in follow-up activities scheduled until July. In addition, the ETF intends to summarise the current status of school network optimisation policies and processes across the Eastern Partnership countries, along with the insights gained from the peer learning visits to Latvia and Estonia, in a publication aimed at practitioners and policy makers in the partner countries.

Delegates confirmed the importance of sustained regional exchange, while the *Iwona Ganko* and *Timo Kuusela* reaffirmed ETF's commitment to supporting country-specific reform trajectories through targeted technical assistance.

- **Armenia** will benefit from the dissemination of the [Rapid Education Diagnosis \(RED\)](#) and a comprehensive capacity needs assessment and a functional review of the education sector governance. A joint sector review of the education system is foreseen, alongside capacity development activities specifically targeting local and regional education authorities.
- **Georgia** is expected to engage in capacity development support activities designed to reinforce the operational and strategic capabilities of education actors involved in network reform and resource planning which is a joint activity with Armenia and Moldova.
- **Moldova** will receive support through the RED dissemination and a capacity needs assessment leading to adapted support to education authorities. Follow-up will also include tailored capacity-building initiatives aimed at strengthening the governance of school optimisation at decentralised levels.
- **Ukraine** will undergo further consultations and analytical work on launching the RED assessment in third quarter of 2025. The SER programme supports Ukraine in aligning education statistics with the EU standards. Additional capacity development support is under consideration, depending on evolving needs and institutional readiness.

The event closed with a shared commitment to continue the dialogue—not only as a series of technical exchanges, but as a long-term community of practice. Participants agreed that peer learning, grounded in real experiences and common challenges, can serve as a powerful driver for evidence-based and context-sensitive education reform across the Eastern Partnership region.