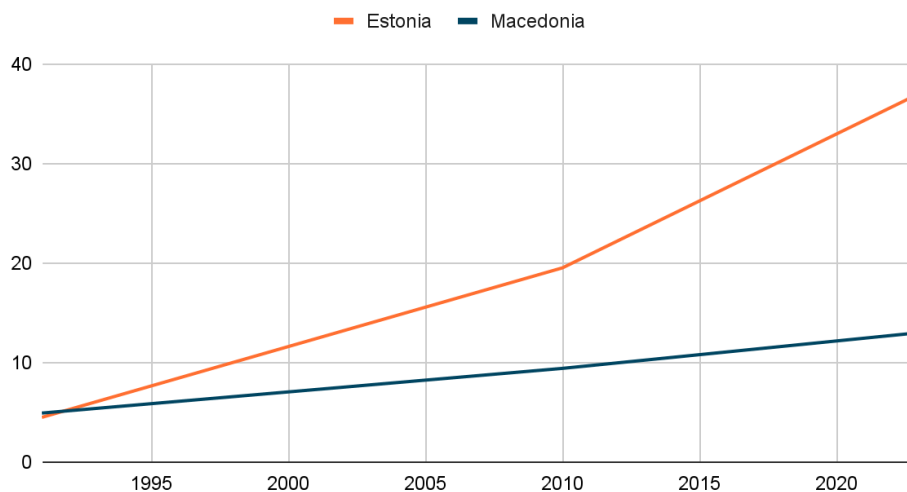# Conclusions from FECHs Work Visit in Tallinn, Estonia
Lets run data, not bureaucracy.

- ## Introduction | Why Estonia?

Forum for Educational Change is constantly seeking to grow and learn from best practices from other countries. In the core, we believe that through exchange of informations and practices, every organization and institution could get better. This is the first work-visit for the FECH in Europe, with the purpose of establishing meaningful partnerships. **Why Estonia? Because Estonians are pathfinders**, who have built an efficient, secure, and transparent ecosystem that saves time and money and there's so many good practices to learn. The other reason is the similarity between Estonia and North Macedonia. Both got *independent in 1991*, they had *similar economic circumstances*: In 1991, *Estonia's economy was 4,50 billion USD of the GDP*, while *Macedonia had 4.93 billion USD of the GDP*. *In 2023, Estonia's GDP is estimated at 37.19 billion USD of the GDP*, while *North Macedonians at 13,83 billion USD of the GDP*. So what went wrong in the past thirty years? How can one country have an economic and digital transformation becoming the most advanced digital society in the world, while the other one has been the same for the past thirty years. The answer is that after the independence, Estonia embarked on a series of fast track reforms to modernize the economy and put the investments in technology as a key way to boost economic growth.

The GDP of the Economy | 1991-2023

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[1] https://tradingeconomics.com/macedonia/gdp-growth-annual

This document outlines the conclusions from the best practices that we learned during our visit with NGOs and institutions in Tallinn, Estonia.

- **Detailed briefing on the meetings:**

In the period from 27-29 September 2023, the Executive Director of Forum for Educational Change, Blendi Hodai went on an official work-visit in Tallinn, Estonia to strengthen the partnership with the Estonian civil society and learn from the best practices of the institutions in Estonia.

The *Kick-Off meeting* for Forum for Educational Change started with a reception to the Macedonian Ambassador to Tallinn, *Mr. Dragan Jordanovski*, where we emphasized the importance of such visits from the civic sector. We mutually agreed to establish communication channels and invite more NGOs to Tallinn with the purpose of increasing the partnership between two countries.

The second meeting was with the *Network of Estonian Nonprofit Organizations[2]* that is an umbrella organization for the CSO to gather them on all matters that should and must be advocated. We were informed in details about the Estonian legislation for the civil society and also for the Estonian Civil Society Development Concept that was approved by the Estonian Parliament in 2002. Moreover, the Open Government concept that is well-implemented in Estonia was an important part of the discussion.

The third meeting took place at the *Estonian Riigikogu* with *MP Yoko Alender* and *Margit Sutrop* where we discussed the Parliamentary role in the society and reforms that Estonia undertook to become the digital state today it is. They concluded that the key-factor on Estonian development are the people, who were willing to contribute to make it happen. Impressive was the political culture that exists in Estonia, where politicians are not considered these "untouchable figures" in the society compared to the political culture in the Balkans, specifically in North Macedonia. Citizens could easily go to the parliament and ask to be a visitor during any plenary session, because transparency is the only way to regain the public trust.

The fourth meeting took place at the **University of Tallinn**, where we had a tour within the campus of the University to see their facilities. During the meeting with Anete Elken and Pauliina Perkklo, we were informed that the University from the establishment in 2005, has adopted a paper-less policy where everything is done within matter of minutes. Students are not required all the time to be present in–person at campus. We were informed about their university structure that is constructed of the council (7 members appointed by the Ministry of Education and Research); Senate and Rector. Interesting to add is that all Universities in Estonia,

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[2] https://heakodanik.ee/en/

livestream their senate meetings due to their commitment to transparency as a pillar for quality higher education. Additionally, the University of Tallinn has a #09tole

The fifth meeting took place at the offices of the **National Youth Council of Estonia**, where we presented them our latest monitoring research of the local youth councils in North Macedonia. They informed us about their advocacy efforts to lower the voting age in national and european level to 16y old as a way to increase the youth participation in political level. As an umbrella organization they have **58 youth NGO** and **76 local youth councils**.
We mutually agreed that both organizations should collaborate in the European-level to promote and increase youth participation in decision-making levels.

We continued the meetings with the civil-society sector in Talllinn in the offices of Shokkin Group to learn more about their work on empowering young people to live a pro-active lifestyle by providing them with opportunities for personal and social growth. They shared with us their organizational structure. Their membership has two levels, one for passive members and the second level is for active members that they are required to implement at least two activities during a year. They of course hav benefits of being the first one to know about project opportunities and also get engaged in some projects; They informed us about their resource hub for game-based learning #playversity that aims to change the way we teach.

We had the honor to conclude our work-visit with *Erika Piirmets, Digital Transformation Adviser at e-Estonia Briefing Center[3]*. She gave us a thorough presentation on the digital transformation of Estonia since its independence. e-Estonia is an incredible success story that grew out of a partnership between a forward-thinking government, a pro-active IT sector, and a switched-on, tech-savvy population. Here are some indicators that show how IT-solutions have improved everyday life in Estonia[4].

Saving and efficiency:
- at least 2% of state GDP is saved due to collective use of digital signatures.
- 2000+ years of working time saved annually thanks to data exchange.
- Time to establish a business reduced from 5 days to 3 hours.
- 99% of public services are online 24/7

Financial indicators:
- 98% of companies are established online
- 99% of banking transactions are online
- 98% of tax declarations are filed online - it takes only 3 minutes!

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[3] https://digiexpo.e-estonia.com/story-of-e-estonia/
[4] https://e-estonia.com/briefing-centre/about-us/

- Over 98,000 e-residents[5]

Education & healthcare:
- First in Europe in the OECD PISA tests
- Two times more students in ICT-related courses on the average than in other developed countries
- 100% of Estonian schools use e-solutions.
- 99% of patients have countrywide accessible digital records and digital prescriptions.

Worth to mention that when Estonia started building what is today, there was no digital data being collected about their citizens. The general population did not have the internet or even the devices with which to use it. It took great courage and poilitical will to invest in IT solutions and take the information technology route. These were some of the principles that North Macedonia MUST take under consideration:

- **Decentralisation:** there's no central database and every stakeholder, whether a government department, ministry, or business gets to choose its own system and than through the X-Road data exchange platform they exchange information between institutions. This helps to combat the silo-effect between institutions.
- **Interoperability:** All system elements exchange data securely and work smoothly together.
- **Integrity:** Data exchanges happens thanks to the KSI blockchain technology.
- **Open platform**: any institution may use the infrastructure and it works as an open source
- **No legacy:** continuous legal change and organic improvement of the technology and legislation
- **Once-only**: data is collected only once by an institution, eliminating duplicated data.
- **#transparency:** citizens have the right to see their personal information and check how it is used by the government via log files.

How can North Macedonia turn the table?

Based on our work-visit the following are recommendations from what is applicable from Estonia to be implemented in North Macedonia:

- **Shared responsibility. Decentralized system:** North Macedonia doesn't need to have an agency of digitalization because it deepens the bureaucracy procedures.

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[5] Estonia is the first country to offer e-Residency - a government-issued digital identity available to anyone in the world interested in running a global EU company fully online,

Digitalization as a process is nobody's and everybody's responsibility: every minister needs to be in charge of digitizing their own ministry.

- **Standardization and Interoperability:** Establish clear standards and interoperability guidelines to ensure that digital systems across ministries can seamlessly interact and share data, enhancing efficiency and effectiveness.

- **Public-private partnership:** The Government doesn't code. And for that reason the public-private partnership is important to help design platforms that can help the digitalization process. By sharing the responsibility of digitalization with private partners, governments can reduce the burden on public funds. This approach allows for the efficient allocation of resources, ensuring that taxpayer money is used judiciously. **In conclusion, embracing public-private partnerships is not merely a choice but a necessity in today's digital age**

- **Digital-minded leadership**: The country needs leaders that believe in the digitalization as a tool to improve the life of its citizens. They need to thinking like an entrepreneur and not like a bureaucrat.

- **North Macedonia Civil Society Development Concept**: A document which will describe the different roles of the public sector and the NGO which supplement each other, and the cooperation principles in developing and implementing public policies and building up the civic society. This document will be adopted by the Parliament.

- **Keeping it short and simple:** The parliament needs to adopt laws that are simple and not complicated. Because no foreign investor wants to come and work in places with complicated legislations and tons of bureaucracy.

- **Transparency in Higher education:** the Senate in the Public Universities must start livestreaming their meetings in order to increase their public trust, following the Estonian example.

By adopting these recommendations, North Macedonia can take significant strides toward a **more efficient, citizen-centric, and digitally-enabled government**, mirroring Estonia's notable achievements in this domain.