

# Reflections

**Global Economic Education Alliance – Baltic Study Tour**  
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As I reflect on our time in the Baltic States, I am reminded of the role that the United States plays in modeling democratic principles. The individuals we interacted with (educators, politicians, tour guides, colleagues, friends) were citizens of their countries during the Soviet Occupation, their respective independence movements, the birth of their new nations, and shapers of the communities they now live in. Overwhelmingly, they were pro-Ukraine and anti-Putin. Many of them offered the plea “please don’t forget us” and reminded us to pay attention to the rhetoric Putin used prior to invading Crimea/Donbas in 2014 and Ukraine in 2022 to “protect” ethnic Russians in the former Soviet Republics. I became acutely aware of the geopolitical implications of their proximity to Russia/Belarus and the threat that exists along the Suwałki corridor leading to the Kaliningrad. The looming presence of Russia is a daily reminder to Baltic citizens of the fragility of democracy. ALL public buildings (banks, libraries, political offices) flew their country flag, the EU flag, and the Ukrainian flag. Unlike Ukraine, NATO offers the Baltic States some assurance that they are protected, but these three countries have taken it upon themselves to brace for any eventuality. Estonia has increased its defense spending to 3.4% of GDP, the second largest behind Poland.



Anti-Putin propaganda. Paula Stradiņa Medicine History Museum. Riga, Latvia.

Lithuania and Latvia are not far behind with 3% and 2.4%, respectively. Efforts by all three countries to physically disconnect from the Russian power grid have been finalized and they will be fully committed to the EU system this year. These efforts are one more example of the Baltic States embracing “western” pro-democratic, free-market principles, despite the far-right movements in other parts of the EU. It is more important than ever for the international community to support democratic principles world-wide. George Washington cautioned us about the “disorders and miseries, which...gradually incline the minds of men to seek security and repose in the absolute power of an individual; and sooner or later the chief of some prevailing faction, more able or more fortunate than his competitors, turns this disposition to the purposes of his own elevation, on the ruins of Public Liberty.”

In the U.S. revolutionary movements are part of history textbooks. In the former Soviet Republics, it is recent, lived history. I often remind my students that when the United States won the American Revolution, we had NOTHING – no government, no method in place to form said government, no currency, no credibility, no formal rule of law (i.e., institutions.) In the Baltic States, they rapidly established democratic foundations supported by western democracies, but are actively working to

reinforce those foundations and improve the standard of living for their citizens. Lithuania is pursuing advancements in fintech while Estonia focuses on environmentally friendly economic development. On average, across the three nations, the standard of living has increased 1,000% since the early 1990's (that's ten-times more than the U.S.)

The educators who hosted us at their schools (both public and private) were deeply passionate about the young people they work with and are committed to fostering respect for the role that democracy plays in the free market. Across all three countries, economic educators were not just talking-the-talk, but walking-the-walk. The students we encountered were inspired by the power that economic freedom gave them to pursue their entrepreneurial endeavors. We attended a teacher workshop hosted by Elba Metsatalu and Kersti Loor in Estonia focusing on economics and the environment. We were able to participate in an activity with Estonian economics, science, and business educators (who overwhelmingly spoke English.) The debrief was especially insightful. According to Yale and Columbia's Environmental Performance Index, Estonia ranks as the *most* environmentally friendly country. It is obvious that there is a conscious effort on the part of educators to coordinate cross-curricular efforts to embed environmentalism in their country's economic development plan.

The Junior Achievement program has achieved tremendous success in all three countries and is fostering an enthusiastic entrepreneurial spirit. The students we met were intelligent, articulate, and hungry for challenges. Students displayed tremendous professionalism and charm. We were able to interact with students in workshops, classrooms, individual presentations with Q&A, and at their Student Company Trade Fair. I practically emptied my wallet buying student products to bring back to my classroom.

The opportunity to dine in our hosts' homes was an incredible experience. These opportunities gave us personal insight into the everyday lives of people. As in almost everywhere I have traveled, community and fellowship are centered around food – the Baltics did NOT disappoint. In Lithuania, we joined the JA staff at the home of Andželika Rusteikienė and were able to share in the making of šaltibarščiai (translated “cold borscht”) or Pink Soup, a regional dish that celebrates the beginning of summer. We also attended the Pink Soup Festival in Old Town Vilnius that featured booths selling food and craft items, several musical stages with both traditional and modern music, and fun, family-centered events. We also dined at the home of Danutė & Gintas Bareikienė. Danute is a retired economics teacher, and her husband Gintas is a math professor at the University. Our lively dinner conversation included stories of growing up under Soviet Occupation, particularly how Danutė & Gintas partnered with five other families from the University to “purchase” and build a block of six homes. Obtaining permits and materials and hiring craftspeople for the construction was time-consuming and complicated because of the inefficiencies of the “market” under Soviet rule. Gintas spoke of the existence of the “underground” economy that was necessary to complete the building. They also spoke of their experiences during the independence movement and how everyone had to reorient their day-to-day activities to participate in the new democratic, free-market system. The transition from a “collective” mindset to a “private ownership” mindset does not just require a mental shift (whether you agreed with or believed in it or

NOT), but also it takes time to adjust the mechanisms that support that new system. Trying to identify what is owned by whom – who benefits and who feels threatened, took time.

In Latvia, I had the privilege of dining with a small group at the country home of Elbe Metsatalu. We took a long, leisurely car ride along the coast and through some rural communities. To my surprise, we were able to drive through Laulasmaa and stop at the Arvo Pärt Center and Concert Hall. I knew of Arvo Pärt prior to arriving and often play his music in my classroom, so it was a special treat for me personally. Little did I know that days later I would also be treated to an organ concert at St. Nicholas' Church in Old Town Tallin, where Arvo Pärt loves to perform because of the outstanding acoustics. When we arrived at Elbe's home, we were welcomed by an American flag raised high in the sky on her property, a gift from her son who had spent time in Kansas. Her son had spent the day preparing home-made pizza dough, fresh tomato sauce and herbs from Elbe's garden, and cheese from the farm down the road – all cooked to perfection in their home-made, outdoor pizza oven. Again, stories were shared by all about day-to-day life. Others might consider it mundane, but I believe these are the moments that help us develop empathy for the lived experience of others. This is something we could all do with a little more of.

### ***Lithuania***

In general, other than some light pre-trip reading and “googling” my knowledge of the region was limited. I was surprised by Lithuania's Polish roots and by the strong Catholic tradition, compared to many in Latvia & Estonia that identify as “unaffiliated” (mainly as a result of their history of conquest and occupation.) The architecture is a mixture of old European and modern development. Public transportation (both local & regional) seems to be the norm across the Baltics. There is a coordinated effort to establish rail connection between the Baltic countries and tie them to the European rail system. This will obviously promote economic development across the region. We had the opportunity to meet with Lukas Jakubonis, the Chief Business Development Officer at Lietuvos Bankas to discuss the role that Lithuania is playing in the fintech industry. Lithuania has emerged as a leader and is attracting investment across the EU, while positioning themselves as safe and reliable. The government has prioritized the fintech sector as part of their development plan. We also had the opportunity to visit the Money Museum where we learned more about the history of Lithuania through the evolution of their currency. The museum included a lot of interactive technology. Most interestingly, a collection of currencies from around the world with an interactive, wall-size digital display of each country's currency and coin and their current economic conditions. Interestingly, on the screen for Russia, both their Head of State (President) and Head of Government (Prime Minister) were identified as “Terrorist(s).”

While in Lithuania, we had the opportunity to visit the private Queen Marta School. We spent the day with the Director touring classrooms, programs, and facilities while discussing education philosophy. In the spirit of educators worldwide, they are committed to educating the physical, mental, and emotional health of their students. Similar to schools in the U.S. their Mission and Values, as well as their stated Student Learning Outcomes focused on young people becoming intellectually curious, committed to

justice of all kinds, appreciative of the arts, and responsible global citizens. It was nice to know that teachers there are also struggling with how to keep students off their devices and engaged in rigorous study! We were able to enjoy lunch at Pirmas Blynas, a pancake house in Vilnius, staffed by people with disabilities. Not only did we get to enjoy delicious food, but also witness the efforts of staff to bring purpose and dignity to an often-marginalized population.

### **Latvia**

In Latvia, we were all humbled by the experiences documented at the Museum of Occupation of Latvia. Here again, the personal voices/stories were the most powerful ones. The 20<sup>th</sup> century was a time of incredible chaos for the whole region. Occupation by the Russians, then the Nazis, then the Soviets left a complex web of mistrust and grief. Changing alliances, threat of deportation, and fear of the unknown splintered family ties and changed the economic and social landscape for communities. The lasting effects are still present. Latvia has a large Russian-speaking population and the presence of Russian State Media broadcasting in the Baltics makes it challenging for the government to address concerns about Russian “influence” and the extent to which citizenship and/or services are available to ethnic Russians. This seems to be an ongoing challenge.

We visited Riga State Technical School, constructed on the site of an old Soviet factory. The school has extensive economic and entrepreneurship programs as well as many technical programs, including auto mechanics, machining, woodworking, and the region’s only railway program. Given the massive rail system currently be constructed, the school offers programs in electrification, telemechanic, communications, traffic safety, technicians, and railroad maintenance. My school has eliminated 75+% of technical programs because of the inability to fund the rapidly changing technological equipment on an on-going basis. Training young students to take on the responsibility for the economic and social lifeline in the region is an important investment. Students seemed proud to be participating in shaping their future.



### **Estonia**

Our first stop in Estonia was Tallinn Reaalkool established in 1881. We were hosted by their director Ene Saar. There is a tremendous history associated with this school and the students and staff are proud to be a part of its legacy. Despite being a public school, there is incredible competition to be admitted and very few leave once they start (many of them in the primary grades.) Three recent graduates gave us an extensive tour. They repeatedly referred to their school as “home.” The full history of the school is documented in photographs throughout the school. Photos represented the entire arc of 20<sup>th</sup> century history, including the variety of academic/physical/spiritual programs offered, the first female class, and

the tumultuous political history. Photos of the school's main reception hall used for formal school events tells a story. Currently, the Ukrainian flag is displayed in support of their neighbors valiant fight against Russia, but unfortunately, the room has seen both the Nazi and Soviet regalia displayed as well.



Meelis Kitsing, Chairman of the Estonian Business School discussed student programs for high school and college students offered by the private school. The construction of a new facility and their relationship with the Junior Achievement program is proof of how popular business, economics, and finance programs are with young people. As mentioned before, all three Baltic countries have experienced rapid growth since independence and students want to position themselves to take advantage of those gains.

Arrangements were made through Dr. Brock's contacts for us to meet with Marko Michelson, Chair of Foreign Affairs Committee for the Estonian Parliament. Mr. Michelson was kind enough to give us a tour of the legislative floor and speak to us for over an hour on the current state of affairs with Russia and the European Union's Parliamentary elections. His background includes being a student of history, Director of the Baltic Centre for Russian Studies, a journalist assigned to Moscow, Editor-in-Chief of the biggest national newspaper, and a writer of two books on Russia. His insights regarding the current crisis in Ukraine, the position of the Baltic States, their relationship with NATO, and the necessity of the Baltics fully moving toward the European Union was masterful.



Marko Michelson's presentation was really the culmination of everything I learned on this study visit – the “whole” picture. His presentation really gave me the opportunity to talk to people about what I learned. It has been challenging to try to encapsulate how much the individual actions of people to pursue their passions and contribute to better communities, all while under the looming presence of Russia. It reminds me that democracy is precious and fragile. I find myself having to give geography lesson to people who don't have any awareness of the region and, even then, they don't necessarily see the Baltic States as significant player on the world stage. Despite this, I am inspired by the vision of the small & mighty and how much they have to teach us about what it takes to protect our democratic institutions and the risks if we don't.