Cooperation Agreement between the Republic of Estonia and the Government of Flanders, signed in Tallinn on 7 March 1996

The Permanent Joint Commission Estonia-Flanders

met in Brussels to discuss cooperation priorities for the years 2024-2026

report of the consultations

On 29 November 2023, the foreign services of the Republic of Estonia and the Government of Flanders met in Brussels to discuss the dispositions of the Cooperation Agreement between the Government of Flanders and the Republic of Estonia, signed in Tallinn in 1996.

This document constitutes the record of the consultations and contains information about concrete project and proposals for further cooperation during the years 2024-2026, focusing on the support to Ukraine, the digital and green transitions, as well as education and culture.

Support to Ukraine

Estonia, Flanders, and our partners worldwide are united in support of Ukraine in response to Russia's premeditated, unprovoked, and unjustified war against Ukraine. The ongoing Russian full-scale aggression confronts us with terrible humanitarian consequences and far-reaching geopolitical and economic consequences. It is of ever-greater importance to continue supporting Ukraine and to invest in Ukraine's future to strengthen its socioeconomic resilience. More than ever, Europe needs close and intense cooperation on all levels.

Both Parties are hosting refugees and attempt to alleviate human suffering in Ukraine. Flanders is assisting local authorities in offering housing to refugees and is providing emergency aid through the Red Cross. Estonia is providing temporary protection to Ukrainian war refugees for three years (giving access to emergency health, education, and other public services) and continues to provide humanitarian assistance to those in need in Ukraine, including in view of the upcoming winter. Support for demining remains a priority.

Estonia is among the first countries to have begun reconstruction in Ukraine, focusing on the Zhytomyr Oblast and urgent needs of the recipient country. Successfully implemented Estonian-Ukrainian projects, including components of training and digital solutions, have proven that reconstruction is possible during the war Estonia is ready to share its expertise with Flanders and welcomes its support.

In the context of the European integration process, Estonia's cooperation with Ukraine and Moldova focuses on projects promoting good governance, public administration, the rule of law, the fight against corruption and disinformation, and increasing SME export capacity and access to the EU market.

Continuing the cooperation with the Estonian Centre for International Development (ESTDEV), Flanders supports the reconstruction of educational infrastructure in Ukraine. Flanders has awarded a grant to VOKA Chamber of Commerce Antwerp-Waasland to provide training and guidance to small businesses Depending on the mandate that the next government coalition will provide, Flanders could focus on specific sectors, such as the reconstruction of harbours and inland waterways.

Digital transition

While Estonia is a long-term frontrunner in digitisation, Flanders aims to spur its digital transition.

The Parties intend to cooperate in the following areas.

A citizen-centred digital approach in cooperation with knowledge institutions and private enterprises

Flanders has defined a digital services strategy to ensure that the citizen is central in the (digital) services offered by the government, with a special focus on digital inclusion As part of this, a tool was developed that check to what extent a service meets the principles of this strategy.

Estonia takes inclusion into account in its digital services and has developed relevant digital government building blocks such as Digital Identity solutions and X-Road In addition, Estonia is making efforts to enable a citizen-centred and personal digital state. As part of that initiative, tools to enable citizens' control over their data and to achieve transparency of the use of personal data have been made available to the public, augmented by widely available awareness raising and digital literacy programmes

Implementing standards and enhancing interoperability to improve the digital ecosystem

For over a decade, Flanders has successfully operated an interoperability program known as Open Standards for Linked Organisations (OSLO). This programme facilitates more effective agreements with both public and private partners for seamless data exchange, aligned with international standards, eliminating the need for costly data adapters. Digital Flanders possesses internationally proven tools to support a region in establishing such a framework and is prepared to conduct an initial pilot project in partnership with local stakeholders, including government, academia, and industry.

Flanders realises the expansion of smart data spaces in Flanders with public and private actors. The used standards, building blocks and supported ecosystem operation have the potential to be adopted by other regions and companies in Europe.

The development of a thriving data economy and implementation of data spaces in Estonia and in other EU member states happens at a time when the EU is actively developing new legislation (Data Governance Act, Data Act, AI Act, Interoperable Europe Act and implementation acts of the above), as well as implementing the concept of Common European Data Spaces. Active collaboration to exchange ideas and opinions about these pan-European developments between member states would be highly beneficial in this context.

Flanders has emerged as a best practice in Digital Twin implementation with initiatives like Duet, Compair, and the upcoming Urbreath. Simultaneously, we remain highly cognisant of the requirements for building a high-performing, multi-purpose digital twin. Consequently, Flanders is currently working on a proposal for a digital twin programme that will bring together all stakeholders to initiate a sustainable business model. Furthermore, Flanders actively contributes to the Citiverse through initiatives like Living-in.eu, the Local Digital Twin Toolbox, and our involvement in leading Belgium's European Digital Infrastructure Consortium (EDIC) Local Digital Twin.

Estonia has successfully implemented and is open to discuss cooperation on X-Road, a widely used technological and organisational environment that enables secure, internet-based data

exchanges between information systems, used by public and private sector to support smooth and seamless data exchange between relevant stakeholders.

Building a thriving data economy

Flanders stands as a front-runner in vault technology, which enables data-sharing among public-private and private-private partners, all under the control of the individual citizen. This approach allows citizens to securely share their qualifications with prospective employers. The Flemish data trust, athumi, has developed a sandbox environment that could serve as a starting point for gaining hands-on experience.

Estonia's e-government applications are highly relevant to these endeavours. One of Estonia's priorities in 2024-2025 is to explore novel business and operating models to boost data economy, facilitate data exchange and sharing.

Developing ethical and effective AI applications

Efforts are being made to raise AI awareness within government. Every employee should know the possibilities and limitations of AI and should be coached to deal with it. A competence model should eventually be able to map the needs in this area. Whereas Flanders plans to set up a transparency register (algorithm register), Estonia's experience in this area is of high relevance. Estonia is actively exploring potential methods and assessment models to evaluate the transparency and trust into AI components and solutions. Both Parties agree to join forces to realise these common ambitions.

Multi-stakeholder approach for digital transformation

Both Parties understand that the effective implementation and cooperation for reaching Digital Transition objectives may include, inter alia, evaluation, pre-qualification and nomination of suitable private companies or other institutions or experts to implement, partner or cooperate in development projects, in the field of digital government and digital transformation.

More specifically, EdTech Station Flanders and EdTech Estonia will collaborate to draw lessons from the introduction of education technology in secondary education.

Green transition

In the context of the green transition, the Parties are promoting onshore and offshore wind power generation. Estonia is working on multiple wind park projects, including an offshore wind project with Latvia. The auction of sea areas for development of wind parks is scheduled for 2026.

Flanders' academia and business sector have gained experience with offshore wind energy generation on the North Sea and other maritime regions worldwide. Flanders offers to facilitate contacts with potential partners and to organise study visits in Flanders.

The Parties will also look into possible cooperation in the field of clean hydrogen.

Education

Exchange of good policy practices

PISA 2018 shows that Estonian students ranked first among European countries in all three domains of assessment Among the OECD countries, Estonia ranked first in Reading and Science and third in Mathematics.

Flanders refers to the new system of centralised learning assessments of students for the subjects of mathematics and instruction language. These tests will be organised at key stages in school careers from 2024 onwards.

The Parties will exchange good practices in improving students' learning achievements, in quality teacher training and in the prevention of teacher attrition.

Digitisation of education

The Parties agree to promote efficient use of technology in education and blended learning, with particular attention for teacher training and inclusion of the most vulnerable learners. Flanders has established the Knowledge Centre for Quality Digital Education, 'Digisprong', which oversees the introduction of digital education tools in the Flemish education system.

The Parties will share their best practices on the use of AI and other new disruptive solutions in education.

Higher education

The Parties will promote the automatic recognition of higher education qualifications as initiated by the Baltic States and the BENELUX countries in the Treaty of 2021. The Parties will reach out to other European countries to join the initiative.

The Parties will encourage their respective higher education institutions to participate in mobility schemes within the EU framework, particularly the Erasmus+ Programme. Estonia offers higher education scholarships for persons with Belgian citizenship. Flanders offers scholarships for master studies through the Master Mind Programme (www.studyinflanders.be).

Culture

The Parties see the digital transition of the cultural world as an important evolution. Estonia has been a pioneer in the digitalisation of cultural heritage. Estonia is looking for a solution for the long-term preservation of digital cultural heritage outside its national borders and wants to exchange best practices with Flanders in this field. Flanders is exploring the role of digital audience data to interact with the diverse audiences of today and to stimulate audience participation. The Parties aim to bring together their strategic knowledge at policy level.
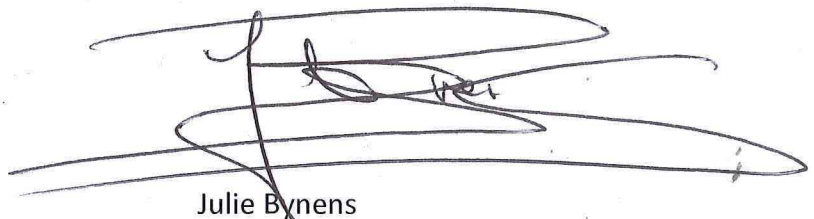
The cultural sector has embraced the need to innovate in a sustainable way. The Parties aim to stimulate networking and knowledge exchange of cultural actors and experts in this field to foster the development of sustainable cultural and creative sectors.

In 2024, the Estonian city of Tartu will be Cultural Capital of Europe. Several Flemish cities are candidate for Cultural Capital of Europe in 2030, which is to be decided in the Fall of 2025.

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