



Environmentalism and Social Change

SCANDINAVIA & THE BALTICS

A written report by E. Gerhards | July 2018

Introduction

This report was made during my trip that took place from July 9 till July 31st, 2018 and included three countries and four cities – Vilnius in Lithuania, Riga in Latvia, Copenhagen and Roskilde in Denmark. During the trip I made sure to have a look at the life in the cities in general and see how people lead their daily lives in terms of being eco-friendly. Also, I had a look at the situation of the countries governmental policies and laws to see if the countries' political and economic directions were also leading the countries to be more nature-friendly. This also includes the relevancy of eco-activism and the general public's interest and demand in environmentalism in each country.

Part I – Vilnius, Lithuania

My trip started from my home town of Salaspils in Latvia on July 9th. In four hours' time, I was already in the center of the Lithuania's capital city – Vilnius because the not-so-far distance from Latvia. The car drive into Vilnius is very beautiful because a beautiful panorama of the hilly Lithuanian capital appears right after going past the city name sign.

The very hot European summer had just started its peak in the beginning of July, therefore all three days in the city were sunny and the temperature was quite high



(+28...+32C). Hence the warm weather, there were way more bicycles visible in the city center than on a usual workday in the Baltics, as expected. Although, the amount of bicycles overall was not that impressive and the huge amount of cars was still there. All three Baltic countries, especially Latvia and Lithuania, are known for their citizens' high usage of

cars as their main transportation tool. This, of course, does not leave a good impact for the countries' ecological "scores" and ruins the quality of air, especially in the city center. There, however, are a couple reasons why this is so relevant, one of them definitely being the lack of good cities' public transportation systems. For example, there are no underground metro systems implemented in either of the Baltic capitals, despite numerous projects being planned in the past. As all of the transportation is happening above ground, it causes the traffic to become way busier during the so-called rush hours. And while the public transport costs remain very low for European standards, the pricing still counts as high for the Baltic citizens. That is why people usually choose to invest and purchase their own vehicle. However, ecologically thinking, it is hard to recognize whether the higher car count is worse for the environment than the implementation of metro systems in the busy but relatively small capitals (Vilnius being the least populated one in the Baltics). Therefore, seeing more bicycle users in the streets of Vilnius is satisfying because that is actually the eco-friendliest way of transportation (which, of course, should be encouraged way more).

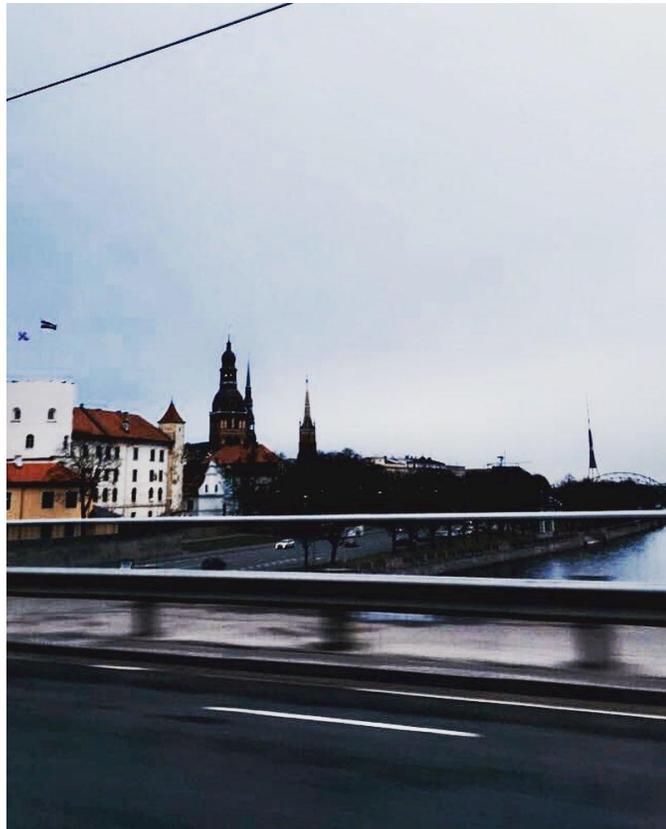
Being and living “green” is definitely is a growing trend in Vilnius, however. One of the highlights – the first Lithuanian urban farm, which has been operating in Vilnius since 2013. While being just an abandoned greenhouse in the start, local, green-thinking residents have transformed the greenhouse in something extraordinary. The farm has now developed in a testing site, where many new eco-friendly plant growing ideas are tested out – even *aquaponics* being one of them. It is also planned that more farms like this are going to be implemented in the city.

Part II – Riga, Latvia

Riga – the capital city of my home country – Latvia – was not necessarily a part of the trip in the same way that the other three cities were. However, by being the city in the middle of my trip, I decided to include Riga in my report as well and pay closer attention to the matters of sustainability and an eco-friendly lifestyle among the society in general. In the already mentioned 2016 Environmental Performance Index, Latvia took the 22nd place in the world. Although it is a pretty high number for a country like Latvia, I wanted to recognize and research the actual methods of the popularization and general relevance of an eco-friendly lifestyle.

Growing up and living in Latvia, I had always heard of my country being called one of the greenest countries in Europe and in the world as well. Though, it was mostly connected to the fact that Latvia has a huge forest area covering the lands of the country. Indeed, Latvia takes the very high 4th place in Europe with only Finland, Sweden and Estonia – all close neighbors – ahead of it in terms of the size of forest area in the country. The forest area takes up to around 60% of the overall are of the country which truly is quite an impressive number. However, can this number truly represent the actual state of eco-friendly activities and sustainable lifestyle in the country’s society?

Looking at the sphere of politics, the attitude towards implementing more “eco-friendly” laws and policies is not very popular. As the huge forest area is getting smaller and smaller because of extensive tree felling, there also is little to no conversation regarding the life in the big city and its sustainability. However, thanks to social media and similar information outlets, there are more and more people starting to pay attention to a greener lifestyle. Choices like recycling or even no-waste lifestyle, as well as plant-based diets are becoming more and more popular and talked about publicly. Another positive change is that more people are becoming politically active by taking part in NGO’s and similar institutions. One of the most prominent NGO’s “Dzīvnieku brīvība” (“Animal Freedom” translated to English) is very active in its public work. Public protests, active social media organization, event planning and many other activities are parts of the NGO’s daily work. As being part of the organization personally, I have experienced many of the protests and events over the years, and it is clearly noticeable that the public interest in the organizations work and a more sustainable lifestyle in general has increased a lot. However, it is true that this particular organization, while being the biggest environmental one in Latvia, has its focus on animal rights and policies connected mainly with protecting the different freedoms of animals (hence the organizations name). So, while animal rights are a huge factor in overall development of eco-friendly and sustainable policies and, of course, social change in the country, it does not cover many different subjects that are very relevant to the sustainability field but are not directly connected to the animal sphere.



Probably the most popular non-governmental organization that is responsible for different “green” and sustainability-related questions is the organization “Zaļā brīvība” (“Green Liberty” translated to English). This organization, while not being

as popular as the “Animal Freedom” group, has its say in many other aspects of eco-activism like efficient agriculture and fair trade, mainly, however focusing on an issue that is very prominent in the whole world – waste and recycling. Thanks to this particular organization there has been a rise of the zero-waste lifestyle and industry overall in Latvia. While still being a relatively new movement with not so many people on board yet, on August 1st, 2018, a whole new concept store was opened with the name “Burka” (“Bucket” in English) where it is possible to shop only with customer’s own re-useable packaging, therefore obviously stopping the anti-ecological waste of plastic packaging. The success of the shop is unknown yet, because of the very recent opening of it, however due to its central location and growing online community it might be only the beginning.

Part III – Copenhagen, Denmark

Upon arriving in Copenhagen, I had read that it is one of the eco-friendliest cities in the whole world (in some charts even no. 1), so the expectations were high. The first thing that is noticeable when coming out of the central train station is the differences in the transport system. More precisely, the bicycles. In Copenhagen, about 50% of its residents choose to use their bikes as the primary type of transport. And the bikes are indeed everywhere. The possibilities to rent a bike are endless as well as the greatly implemented high-quality biking lanes on the streets are very noticeable and safe-looking. As Denmark and Copenhagen are also one of the safest places in the world both for residents and tourists, many choose to leave their bikes with no safety locks. Bicycle parking stations, like the one shown in the picture, are visible all over the city.



Hundreds of bicycles are being left at each these stations with no high level of security. Thanks to the higher social status and well-being as well as the relatively high income of the citizens assure the trust-worthiness and overall safety in the city.

Apart from the high popularity in bicycle usage, the public transportation system in Copenhagen and the surrounding area, while being one of the most expensive in Europe, is also one of the most organized and used public transportation systems in Europe. The both under- and above-ground metro and train systems are greatly implemented in the city, so it is fairly easy to navigate through the city by using the systems in a short amount of time. That also makes the systems very used by not only city-visiting tourists but also a massive part of daily commuters going to work etc.

The city and its citizens is also very green-thinking in terms of food and the selection of environment-friendly dining options, despite the traditional Danish cuisine being mostly based on meat etc. Finding a vegan-friendly café or restaurant in

Copenhagen is not a problem at all. Almost all restaurants offer vegetarian- and vegan-friendly options in their menus. Besides that, there was not a single grocery store (no matter the size) that did not have a special vegan food section. This only shows that eco-friendly eating habits are very common and the demand is quite impressive. It is also worth mentioning that Copenhagen is home to a four-time awarded “World’s Best” restaurant called *Noma*. Being one of the tourist attractions with waiting queues as long as six months and more, *Noma* is also known for its nature-friendly identity and large offering of plant-based dishes.

Copenhagen is probably the eco-friendliest capital city I had ever been in. The tough task of staying very green while also being the most visited Scandinavian country by tourists is what Copenhagen does really well. The cleanliness and green spirit of the city makes it even more captivating for its citizens and tourists from all over the world to visit it.

Part IV – Roskilde, Denmark

Finally, my trip took me to the last destination – Roskilde, a town that’s within a 20-minute train ride from the country’s capital. When compared to the other cities on my trip, Roskilde is probably the closest to my hometown in Latvia, although it is much bigger in terms of size and population. By first impression, Roskilde is probably one of the cleanest, well-organized and just prettiest towns I had ever been in. The super-clean streets and sidewalks, large amount of trees and different plants, the beautiful surroundings around the Roskilde Fjord... the list could go on and on.

What was very impressive though, was that as many people might know, Roskilde is a place where one of the biggest music festivals in Europe takes place every summer, where more than 130’000 people are in attendance, and when walking through the streets of Roskilde, I couldn’t see any signs that just a few days ago there was a mass of people (approx. 130’000 people), three times larger than the population of the city all partying hard for a whole week. The atmosphere in the town is very relaxed and laid back and



The town of Roskilde is also home to a large number of students from different institutions both from Copenhagen and Roskilde itself. Roskilde University is a 9’000-student university with a large campus in one of the quieter neighborhoods of Roskilde called Trekroner. While visiting the campus, it was something totally never before seen as the university blends in so naturally with the green areas of its surroundings with a farm of animals and large green fields being right next to the campus. The daily commute of students is also based on bicycles and the Danish train system, which makes it really eco-friendly and leaves the nature unharmed. The amount of cars seen in the town and especially the university neighborhood is very, very low. Also

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most of the housing around the town are equipped with solar panels to use sustainable, green energy as much as possible.

While being so close to the capital city of Copenhagen and holding a massive yearly festival, Roskilde is doing a very impressive job at keeping the town clean and eco-friendly.

Final conclusions

Not to a big surprise, Denmark is many steps ahead of the Baltic countries in terms of being green and eco-friendly. The Baltics should definitely follow the example of Denmark to acquire eco-friendlier status, because the differences between the countries in terms of nature and population are very little. However, it is very noticeable that the society in the Baltics is developing and supporting more and more eco-friendly ideas when it comes to areas such as recycling, food and an overall sustainable lifestyle. So, while the demand is there, the local authorities are a part of making green and nature-friendly decisions. Therefore, it is up to them to implement more ecologically-conscious policies and devote more funding for the development of more sustainability in the cities. The most important thing that needs to be sorted out, in my opinion, is the transportation. The public transportation systems should be reorganized and people should be encouraged, whether through certain benefits or not, to use the public transport more and use cars less in the cities. As green businesses – eco-friendly cafés and restaurants, grocery stores and others are developing and growing, the government should be paying more attention to issues that are not that solvable by the public. And Denmark is definitely a great goal to set.