**Valga (12.500 inh.), Estonian-Latvian border town**

**Possible topics for URBACT APN networks in 2019**

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**KEY TOPICS:**

* **planning in context of urban shrinkage;**
* **twin towns and integrated approaches for cross-border urban policies;**
* **innovative ways for citizen participation in planning – broking apathy and motivating people;**
* **finding balance between heritage protection and improving urban space through demolitions of derelict houses in shrinking cities;**
* **activation of abandoned and underused buildings; finding interim functions and alternative ways for building activation;**
* **supporting entrepreneurship and tackling aging process in shrinking cities.**

**Read below: background of the city, state of the art in urban planning; current activities and innovative policies; ongoing related projects**

**Valga context**

Valga is located on Estonian-Latvian border and form with Latvian Valka the twin town. Valga and Valka descend from the town of Walk, which was divided between Estonia and Latvia when both countries got independence from the Russian empire in 1917. Valga is situated 267 km from Estonian capital city Tallinn and 161 km from Latvian capital city Riga. With its 12,452 residents the town places 12th out of a total of 47 Estonian cites. Latvian Valka has 4,718 inhabitants.

The town of Valga is a typical example of a shrinking city. After becoming an important railway junction at the end of 19th century extensive urban development followed and the population of Walk peaked at 16,000 inhabitants. After WWII Valga became an important industrial and military centre with 18,500 citizens. However, after the fall of the Soviet Union and withdrawal of military at the beginning of the 1990s there became a surplus of all sorts of buildings (apartments, industrial buildings, administrative buildings). As a result only 72% of town territory, which is presupposed by actual Comprehensive plan to be developed / used, is currently in use. Most of the unused or underused area can be qualified as a Brownfield area, but not necessary as (only) post-industrial Brownfields. Also, many people moved from the historical, mainly wooden apartment houses with poor facilities to relatively new ones made of concrete panels. Therefore, the town’s historical centre under heritage protection suffer by significantly faster depopulation and higher vacancy rate. Of eight historical buildings around the church, only two are occupied: the town hall and the music school. Vacant, unused buildings contribute to a loss in property value. They also have a negative effect on citizens’ sense of attachment to the place and a trust in the town’s future. This results in civil apathy and low citizen involvement in town affairs.

Valga has a valuable town centre which is under State Heritage protection however the percentage of underused and abandoned buildings is much higher in the city centre than in the rest of the town. This has negative influence on the future of the whole town because it has a negative impact on local citizens’ connection with their hometown. They can’t be proud of it. Our main barrier in redevelopment of abandoned buildings is not economical or ecological, but we struggle with ownership constraints and invention of new functions for those buildings.

**Description of the current planning processes in the town**

*New Valga town comprehensive plan:*

Valga Town Council have decided (by decision nr 111 of 29.04.2016) to develop the new Valga Comprehensive plan 2030+. The current comprehensive plans dates from 2007. There have been some significant changes over the time resulting in a need for a new comprehensive plan.

New Valga town comprehensive plan set up spatial development principles for the whole town territory. The comprehensive plan has analysed different scenarios of the future population development. Main objective of the Valga comprehensive plan is to adapt urban space on the phenomenon of population shrinkage. New comprehensive plan should guarantee high-quality and efficient environment with an emphasis on the revitalization of Valga town centre, housing regeneration and brownfield revitalization. Comprehensive plan need to support entrepreneurship and take into account the needs of an aging population.

Stage of the development of Valga Comprehensive plan 2030+ at the end of January 2019:

* Main objectives of new Comprehensive plan were elaborated and approved by Town Council;
* Intentions of the strategic environmental assessment of Comprehensive plan were elaborated;
* To clarify opinions and expectations of inhabitants Valga town centre the poll was executed among them;
* To clarify opinions and expectations of entrepreneurs operating in Valga town the poll was executed among them;
* Special conditions for heritage conservation of city centre were elaborated;
* The mobility analysis of the town and it’s soundings have been composed

*Housing policy of Valga municipality*

The housing policy of local government includes housing demolitions and housing revitalization. Seven residential buildings have been demolished in Valga during the last three years. The sites of the demolished buildings have been converted to low-cost temporary public green areas. Residents would even welcome more rapid demolition works, however, the delay is a result of complicated ownership issues when dealing with the abandoned buildings. However, not all vacant residential buildings can be demolished. Valga town centre is declared, on the national level, as Heritage Conservation Area and the possibility to remove structures within it is strictly limited. To save some of the valuable vacant residential buildings, Valga’s administration is trying to transform them to municipal rental apartment houses. An apartment building with 16 units is currently being transformed to a municipal rental residential building. This structure lies within the town centre and has significant architectural and historical value and has been declared as a heritage monument. These rental units will be primarily offered to the employees of educational institutions in Valga. The municipality has just started another application to finance the second residential building into a social housing.

*Investment in urban space in the city centre*

Despite the important role of local administration in housing revitalization, the majority of the residential buildings need to stay in private hands and the public sector cannot directly invest in their renovation. However, the town government owns the public space between these buildings. Two large projects are recently underway in central Valga. The construction of a new town square on the brownfield area in the city centre between the three oldest streets of Valga was accomplished in August 2018. The second project is in design face and will be built up during this year. This project is linking Valga and Valka city centres with a pedestrian street between Jaani Church in Valga and Lugaži Church in Valka and creates a new central square of Valka town. The length of the new pedestrian street will be 650m. The town government hopes that despite requiring a lot of resources, investment in urban space in the city centre is an effective way to improve the residential attractiveness of the area and raise the property value of buildings in the area.

**Description of our main challenges:**

*Citizens’ participation:*

We are not in strong in getting town inhabitants participated on the town development. But citizens’ activity is a key issue for dealing with shrinkage. World experience shows that impulse for urban development of shrinking city can’t come from the outside. Activity and thoughts must be initiated among the inhabitants of the city. We need to broke apathy and motivate people to take part on development of Valga vision for future.

*Urban space:*

The most important capital of any town is its residents. The psychological link between human and place of his residence has a significant impact on his activity in the community. Unattractive environment undermine such link. Downtown full of underutilized and abandoned buildings impairs the attitude of citizens towards their town, degrades their pride and it reduces the desire to contribute to the development of the city. Thus revitalization of town centre and its urban space is a key issue for us. On one hand our citizens are expecting that abandoned buildings will be demolished, on the other hand buildings in town centre have architectural and historical value, they are under the heritage protection and thus important for us. We need to find right balance between heritage protection of buildings and possibility to improve urban space thru demolitions of derelict houses.

*Activation of abandoned / underused buildings:*

We aim to inspire change in terms of revitalizing the historic town centre through altered use of buildings. We see that the buildings in the historic town centre could be used for small scale local production (food, design, woodworking etc). We need to elaborate strategy how to inspire this altered use on a local scale, how to find a function for the house and how to support use of them.

*Ownership constraints:*

83% of abandoned or underused properties in Valga are in private possession. We have elaborated different strategies how to behave with owners. We propose them different solutions:

* to make us a gift (building has close to zero or negative value, the property tax, local government controls in case of dangerous technical condition of building);
* to sign with us the site use authorization agreement for 15 years (demolition of buildings, site maintenance);
* to exchange the property for our property of similar value, which is located in a sustainable building (apartments);
* to rent an apartment in the reconstructed municipal apartment house (as a vision, we do not have municipal apartment house yet);
* exceptionally to sell us property at market price (low).

All elaborated strategies to deal with ownership constrains use lot of human resources of our town government. We are obliged to negotiate separately with every owner, and in the case of apartment houses number of owners is often higher than ten and more. We need to change our strategies to be more effective and simplify them.

**Possible topics of knowhow we are looking for to get from URBACT network**

*Citizens’ participation:*

We need to broke apathy and motivate people to take part on development of Valga vision for future. For this purpose we are looking for a new innovative ways of public participation in planning process in a context of shrinking.

*Urban space:*

We need to find right balance between heritage protection of buildings and possibility to improve urban space thru demolitions of derelict houses. We need knowhow to be able to set rules of use and reconstruction of buildings as flexible as possible same time not to impair their architectural and historical values.

*Activation of abandoned / underused buildings:*

We need knowhow to be able to elaborate strategy how to find a (interim) function for abandoned valuable houses and how to support use of them. We would like to test alternative ways of buildings activation, using alternative cultural activities, development of local community's Sustainability Hub or similar activities.

*Ownership constraints:*

We need to change our strategies to be more effective and simplify them.

Urban shrinking is a complex process with impact on different aspects (economic, social, psychological) of urban development. Valga municipality is looking forward to be partner in any network dealing with planning in a context of urban shrinkage.

**Description of Valga municipality experiences in participating in different international networks and projects**

Valga Municipality (former Valga City Government) has over 15 years of experience in participating in different international networks and projects – Estonia-Latvia-Russia Cross Border Cooperation, Estonia-Latvia Cross Border Cooperation, Baltic Sea Region program, Nordic-Baltic Mobility program, Erasmus program, Innovative Circle Network etc. and has also been the lead partner.

Valga Municipality has signed the framework agreement with European Commission Representation in Estonia for coordinating the activities of Europe Direct Information Centre -Valgamaa project. EDIC network is created for the purpose to forward information on EU issues in the member states of the European Union.

At the moment Valga Municipality is a partner in several projects funded by European Territorial Cooperation programs, better known as Interreg. Within this program Valga Municipality successfully cooperates with Valka Municipality, Vidzeme Tourism Association in Latvia, Region Blekinge, Bialystok University of Technology and The State Employment Agency of Latvia as project lead partners.

*Ongoing international projects:*

TENTacle (tentacle.eu) – 23 partners from 9 countries, supported by 65 associated partners

Over the period of three years partners from nine countries surrounding the Baltic Sea will be working together to boost the development opportunities generated by the implementation of the TEN-T core network corridors.

GoSmart (gosmartbsr.eu) – 8 partners from 8 countries

The project aims to boost transnational cooperation among industry, the research & development sector and authorities in employing smart specialisation strategies in regions in the eastern parts of the Baltic Sea region. It promotes mutual learning, sharing best practices and translating smart specialisation strategies into practical joint actions of small and medium sized enterprises.

Green Railways – 24 partners from Estonia and Latvia

The general aim of the Green Railway project is to create a new non-motorized tourism route for both locals and visitors, using old narrow-gauge railway causeways in South-Estonia and North-Latvia.

Valga-Valka Mobility – 4 partners from Estonia and Latvia

The objective of the project is to foster the confidence of job seekers and employers of the cross-border region in their ability to find a suitable job or employee, respectively.

Valga-Valka Twin Town Centre – 2 partners from Estonia and Latvia

The common interest and benefit of this project is the development of joint territory – Valga-Valka Twin Town Centre – to improve physical connectivity, unite both towns’ citizens, promote tourism and activate entrepreneurship.