

International Erasmus+ seminar in Tallinn highlighted the importance of children’s voices in a democratic society

In the beginning of October, from 8 to 10, a practical seminar titled *“Participation in Democratic Life in Early Childhood Education”* took place in Tallinn. Led by the Estonian Erasmus+ and European Solidarity Corps Agency, more than 60 representatives from the early childhood education sector—teachers, educational leaders, directors, policymakers, and Erasmus+ coordinators from all over Europe—came together.

During the multi-day seminar, discussions focused on the background, theory, methods, and practices of giving children a voice and involving them in decision-making, all illustrated through Estonian early childhood education examples. The event featured presentations, workshops, and group discussions that offered fresh perspectives and heightened awareness of the importance, necessity, and challenges of participation.

Anne-Mai Runno, chief programme officer and participation priority coordinator at the Estonian Erasmus+ and European Solidarity Corps Agency, who was also one of the event organisers, highlighted the positive atmosphere despite the seriousness of the topic. “The mood was very friendly, all participants expressed their views actively and the discussions were deep and productive,” she said.



Why participation?

Dr Charlie Moreno-Romero, an educational researcher from Colombia who has lived in Estonia for over 20 years and founded the democratic school *Suvenäe* at Tallinn Arts Gymnasium, explained that participation is an extremely important topic that every democratic society must address. “Engaging young people—even preschoolers—in democratic processes helps build a strong sense of belonging, voice, and agency. As a result, they grow into confident, empathetic, and responsible citizens,” he said. “The outcome is adults who value inclusivity, evidence-based thinking, and collective problem-solving. This, in turn, helps us combat polarization, prejudice, and misinformation,” he added, underscoring the role of participation in resolving societal challenges.



International cooperation opens new doors

Experts from Estonia, Poland, Lithuania, Greece, Spain, the Czech Republic, Latvia, Germany, Belgium, Portugal, Turkey, Austria, Finland, Italy, Sweden, Denmark, Cyprus, Slovenia, and Bulgaria exchanged their experiences. Runno noted that a Europe-wide network and long-term cooperation initiatives like LTA PEACE+—dedicated to participation—help participants stay informed and share best practices. “An international event offers the opportunity to discover new perspectives, and participation in the LTA Peace+ network gives us access to the latest research,

initiatives, and experts on democracy. In the Erasmus+ context, establishing partnerships is also very important for potential future projects,” she said.



Theory alone is not enough – practice was also explored

Runno added that the practical component brought significant added value to the event. “The content of the seminar was most appreciated, and participants were grateful that we presented concrete examples from kindergartens and addressed topics in depth,” she said. In addition to theoretical insights, specific participation-enhancing practices were discussed using examples from Estonian kindergartens. Guest contributors included Kristina Lee, Head of Education at Sipsik Kindergarten in Kohila; Ingrid Kaldoja-Vahtra, Head of School at Väike Päike Kindergarten in Viimsi; and Maiki Liivas, Deputy Head of Education at Linnupesa Kindergarten in Tallinn. On the final day of the seminar, 10 October, participants visited all three kindergartens. This allowed them to gain a deeper understanding of how environment and purposeful approaches to child participation look in practice.