

## GEEA BALTIC STUDY TOUR 2024-- Ann Tepovich

Why travel to the Baltics with a group of Economics teachers and professors? A few friends asked me that when I mentioned my desire to participate in the GEEA trip to the Baltics. I found this question interesting, as though there was nothing to be gained from this region of Europe. How wrong they were. My participation in the GEEA trip to the Baltics in 2024 engaged me in not only the Economics of the region but also the history and current geo-political issues as well as their focus on practical, entrepreneurial Economics.

Historically this region of Latvia, Lithuania and Estonia had suffered under multiple periods of oppression by foreign powers. From the time of Peter the Great and Catherine the Great until 1991 the peoples of this region lost control of their political and economic systems. However, they did not lose their nationalistic and cultural pride. One of the highlights for me as an Economics and History teacher was learning about life under Soviet occupation and the impact of that on the cultural identity of these people. In addition to many anecdotes of historical events, we were privileged to meet with Vytis Jurkonis, a professor of International Relations and Political Science at Vilnius University and Marko Michelson, Chair of Estonian Parliament Commission on Foreign Affairs who spoke to us about the current geo-political situation with Russia. These talks were highlights of the trip for me. They were both passionate about the need to defeat Putin's territorial ambitions and were optimistic about the strength of their respective countries and the global community to end the war in Ukraine. As an American, it was important to hear their thoughts as our country waivers in its support for Ukraine and how our country has "politicized" something that is so real and urgent to these countries.

Economically, this region is impressive. In the 30(+) years since their independence they have built strong economies with an entrepreneurial spirit that will provide future economic growth. We were fortunate to visit the Central Banks in Lithuania, Latvia and Estonia and all the presentations had the common theme of optimism and growth. Their economies are fortunate to be built off a solid educational foundation as well as

smart policies that find opportunities for growth such as Fintech, banking and filling the holes in the greater European (EU) economies with a less expensive, but well trained labor supply and a spirit of Entrepreneurship that is supported by their Central Bank and government policies. The economic optimism of these countries was impressive especially since many Americans focus on the problems in our economy and that makes them unable to see the bright spots of our economy.

In reflecting back on this experience I wonder if that entrepreneurial mind set that is so prevalent is a product of their history. Thirty years of independence after a long history of occupation has taught them to seize the opportunities in front of them and to not waste time building an economy and political system that reflects their culture, beliefs and optimism. That entrepreneurial spirit was also evident in the high schools. The use of Junior Achievement Student Companies to teach economics and business development was widespread throughout the region. These student companies require students to develop a business plan, create a product, track costs of production and potential profits, design and marketing plan and consider how green their company is. This program allowed for the next generation of entrepreneurs to tap into what they are seeing around them in their growing economies. It was impressive to see what these young entrepreneurs could do with the resources provided by their teachers and the Junior Achievement program. Each student that I spoke to talked about how much they felt they gained from the experience and how the hands-on learning experience helped them build not only their academic skills but also their soft skills which will serve them well in the future. What these students produced as their products was varied and based on their personal interests and that level of engagement made these products authentic. I was impressed with how articulate and confident the students were in speaking about their companies and it reinforced the importance of experiential learning in the classroom. It makes me think about how I can add some of that to my AP Economics curriculum as I believe students would benefit from some practical application of the theoretical concepts we study. I had the benefit of speaking to a few of my Economics classes when I returned and in speaking about the student company aspect in the schools many students expressed “why don’t we do that

here” and “wow, that sounds really cool and relevant”. At the end of my presentation to my econ classes about my experiences students asked which place was my favorite. That was a hard question to answer as although there were similarities between each place their differences were unique and that made it hard to “pick a favorite”.

This study tour was an incredible opportunity for me as a teacher and as a person. This summer I am going to work to take the information and experiences that I gained and integrate it into my lessons for my students. Additionally, being exposed to different methodologies of teaching Economics will force me to re-examine my own practice and methods. Lastly, the personal connections I made with people and their willingness to share their experiences enriches me as a person. I am grateful for the opportunity that GEEA provided.