

Fifty-One Shades of Public Engagement

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This article provides an overview of the public engagement activities during the administrative reform. The activities were carried out by the Ministry of the Interior and later by the Ministry of Finance, beginning in 2013, when the Minister of Regional Affairs, Siim Kiisler, proposed a reform plan based on local commuting centres, and ending in autumn 2017, as the mergers were implemented after the local elections.

This period can be divided into different stages that admittedly overlapped to some extent:

- 1) The main issue until spring 2015 – will there be an administrative reform at all?
- 2) From spring 2015 until summer 2016 – what will be established in the Administrative Reform Act?
- 3) From summer 2016 until autumn 2017 – how, if at all, will the provisions of the Administrative Reform Act be implemented in practice?

The plan based around local commuting centres proposed by minister Kiisler did not find support from his government partners and was put aside. In terms of public engagement, the efforts made toward administrative reform under five different ministers between 2013 and 2017 – Siim Kiisler (Minister of Regional Affairs until 26 March 2014), Hanno Pevkur (Minister of the Interior from 26 March 2014 to 9 April 2015), Arto Aas (Minister of Public Administration from 9 April 2015 to 23 November 2016), Mihhail Korb (Minister of Public Administration from 23 November 2016 to 12 June 2017), and Jaak Aab (Minister of Public Administration from 12 June 2017 to 2 May 2018) – formed a consistent process.

Why write about the public engagement aspect of the administrative reform process in its own right?

Although we cannot be certain, it is likely that without a broad and successful engagement process the necessary decisions for the administrative reform would not have been made.

'A well thought-through and timely engagement process saves money and time (and participants' nerves) in the latter stages of decision-making and implementation.'¹

Engagement does not mean agreeing on the lowest common denominator, but making open and fair decisions. More discussion means participants are more likely to accept the decision even when their opinions are in the minority. It was clear that the administrative reform would not produce all the desired outcomes for those who often had conflicting interests.

Public engagement is not just a recommendation, but it is an obligation in the drafting of legislature. According to the good engagement practices^{1,2} approved by the government (Section 1(2)):

¹ *Kaasamine avalikus sektoris ja vabakonnas*, p. 11, http://www.riigikantselei.ee/arhiiv/sb/osale.ee/kaasamine_avalikus_sektoris_ja_vabakonnas.pdf

² <https://riigikantselei.ee/et/kaasamise-hea-tava>

Public engagement ... means informing and consulting with stakeholders and the public in the decision-making process. [...] Public consultation means asking for feedback from stakeholders and the public at all stages of policy-making, including during the process of raising problems, defining goals, analysing alternative solutions and preparing a draft decision.

This article only discusses part of the engagement work that was conducted through various methods and levels during the administrative reform process. There were definitely numerous other forms of engagement, such as the distribution of information via local channels, organising public meetings or even in the form of word-of-mouth stories shared between a few participants. The parties and politicians informed their networks, every rural municipal leader notified their acquaintances and so on.

As fifty-one new municipalities were formed as a result of the mergers, there can be at least fifty different shades of descriptions and stories about how the process of engagement unfolded in various locations. And not to mention that participants at the same location and even in the same room remember situations differently.

By law, the local authorities that took part in the merger negotiations were required to determine the opinions of all residents over the age of 16. Their opinion was sought on the alteration of the administrative-territorial organisation as well as 'the public disclosure and transparency of the negotiation process.'³ The latter can be accomplished using either more or less formal means.

It is probably not enough to put information up on the public notice boards inside the offices of the rural municipal government. Luckily most merging municipalities took a wider approach to the subject. They produced booklets for residents, created separate pages for the administrative reform on their websites, organised community meetings and so on. Even though some people still felt uninformed, there was a lot of

³ Territory of Estonia Administrative Division Act.



An administrative reform meeting in Viljandimaa county in 2013. In every county, the municipal leaders held numerous often difficult meetings. Source: Elmo Riig / Sakala.

effort put into consulting the public. There is always someone who will say they did not receive the information.

The period before decision-making

In 2013, minister Kiisler did not have the necessary support from the government led by Prime Minister Andrus Ansip so that the administrative reform could be implemented from a strong position. Quite the opposite, Prime Minister Ansip repeatedly confirmed that his government would not introduce a coercive administrative reform. 'The party of the Prime Minister has not indicated the willingness to make a political decision about decisively altering Estonia's administrative division. Like repeating a mantra, they keep reassuring their constituency of voluntariness,' writes journalist Anneli Ammas about the initiative of minister Kiisler in March 2013.⁴

⁴ A. Ammas, 'Väikevenna võimatu missioon' – *Postimees*, 9.3.2013.

In order to make the 'mission impossible' a possibility, or for it to at least remain topical until it could become possible, it was necessary to find more support. In October 2012, minister Kiisler proposed six possible models for public consultation in order to continue the administrative reform and break the impasse⁵ (described further in the article by Ave Viks). The proposal and inclusion of the six approaches to engagement in the early stages of the reform in 2012, could be seen as a response to the failure of the radical administrative reform proposals and the criticism they received in 2009.

Minister Kiisler commented to the newspaper *Postimees* that personally he thinks the best approach is to have a minimum of 25,000 residents and that would mean smaller counties would form a single municipality. On the other hand, he promised to continue with another option if it gained enough support as 'prolonging the current situation in silence would be the worst option.'⁶

There was a significant number of replies to the proposals from local authorities, national and regional associations of local authorities, universities, county governments, political parties and other organisations (69 replies in total). On 12 March 2013, a document⁷ detailing the intention to develop the Act was presented for approval. It concluded that the majority of those consulted were in support of the local commuting centre model and that the draft Act would be based on this.

This initiated the idea that the regional associations of local authorities propose their own candidates for the commuting centres for each county in preparation for the draft act. The hope was that the outcome would be more acceptable to everyone when the proposals came from the counties through the engagement process instead of being suggested by the ministry.

⁵ Minister of Regional Affairs letter No 12-1/134-1 of 10 October 2012.

⁶ S. Valner, 'Riigireformile tuleb otsustav aasta' – *Postimees*, 20.10.2012.

⁷ 'Omavalitsuskorralduse reformi seaduse väljatöötamiskavatsus', <http://eelnouid.valitsus.ee/main#Gr7TCazg>.

The Ministry of the Interior issued a guide on how to assign local commuting centres. Most regional associations of local authorities signed a contract to determine the local commuting centres. This was accompanied by a small grant for operating expenses. Many members of several county associations thought it would be better not to express their opinions about the preferred locations of local commuting centres in their counties, as they feared that their answers would later be used to legitimise the reform. For example, Järvamaa county withdrew from the contract. According to the guide, in order to obtain a reply from each county, the list of local commuting centres would be created by the county governor if the association of local authorities failed to submit a proposal.

From April to May 2013, the local authorities from every county held meetings and discussions with Ministry of Interior officials. Most county governors and municipal leaders attended the meetings. In many cases, the atmosphere at these meetings could be described as prejudicial. Often the meetings started with a rather negative view of the subject instead of having an objective approach, because there was a lack of trust in the government's repeated efforts at implementing the administrative reform and its justification for doing so. There was a lot of general discontent toward the state as the partner of the local authorities.

By the due date, most county-level associations of local authorities had nominated their local commuting centres and Harjumaa county did so by the end of that year. Some associations did not make a decision (Võrumaa, Järvamaa and Pärnumaa counties), saying that the local authorities did not reach an agreement. Consequently, the proposals for those counties were made by the county governor. The final proposals for those counties were made by the county governor. The final proposals from some county governors were entirely different from those submitted by the relevant associations of local authorities (Lääne-Virumaa, Harjumaa, Viljandimaa, Tartumaa counties).

A list of 63 local commuting centres were included in the draft Act. In 2014, the draft Administrative Reform Act was officially circulated for

approval, but the procedure was held up in the government, as some ministers, for mostly political reasons, and some national associations of local authorities did not approve it.

The most significant accomplishment in regional areas in 2013 was the engagement of local decision-makers and organising productive meetings on possible mergers. And even if that did not break the ice, it at least got it melting.

These discussions can be considered an important stage in reaching the future regional agreements, as many counties already nominated local commuting centres in 2013 and came very close (e.g. in the counties of Valgamaa, Jõgevamaa, Raplamaa, Saaremaa) to the result that was implemented with the 2017 administrative reform.

In autumn 2013, a number of municipalities were voluntarily merged during local elections (e.g. Viljandi, Põlva, Lääne-Nigula, Kose and Lüganuse). According to local leaders, the drive behind the mergers was the desire to accomplish something that the administrative reform would sooner or later force upon them anyway.

With the help of financial assistance from Enterprise Estonia, the ministry recommended merger consultants to support the local authorities who had expressed interest in or were considering merging. These consultants accomplished a lot by advising local authorities on ongoing and potential mergers. The work of the consultants in the merging of local municipalities was definitely a vital engagement method. Other methods would not have made it possible to advise the local authorities directly about merging or to communicate issues as they emerged between the state and the local authorities preparing for mergers across so many locations.

In 2013, a handbook on local government mergers ('Kohalike omavalitsuste üksuste ühinemise käsiraamat') was completed and a

revised version was released in 2016.⁸ There is no reason to underestimate its importance, as now there was a centralised guide that could be used independently to answer any questions related to the mergers. Merger consultants Georg Sootla, Kersten Kattai, Mikk Lõhmus and Rivo Noorkõiv also compiled a separate summary of the most important lessons that had been learnt during the local government mergers in 2013 ('Peamised õppetunnid pool aastat pärast ühinemisi') and that has also been available on the administrative reform web page.

The administrative reform web page was initially a WordPress blog, but was later integrated into the Ministry of Finance website. Over the years and with various administrators, the development of this web page has been uncertain for many reasons, but it has definitely played an important part in sharing practical information about the administrative reform.

The Minister of Regional Affairs created an advisory board to consult on matters of local government. The board members included representatives of the national associations of local authorities, universities, the National Audit Office of Estonia, the Praxis Centre for Policy Studies and other relevant organisations. In 2013, this think tank held three meetings to discuss any issues related to the administrative reform. In summer 2013, there were three separate working groups of specialists formed, who were asked to submit proposals for the draft Administrative Reform Act – on local democracy, the responsibilities and financing of local authorities as well as local business development and employment. These working groups had two-three meetings where they determined the main problems in the field and possible solutions. The work of the advisory board and the working groups was not officially concluded, but because there were no more meetings organised their activities faded.

Despite the draft being delayed politically, public engagement

⁸ https://haldusreform.fin.ee/static/sites/3/2016/11/2016_kov-uhinemiste-kasiraamat.pdf

continued in spring 2014 in Türi, Otepää, Lihula and Kunda with a series of meetings called *'Tugev omavalitsus – uued võimalused'*. These meetings were advertised in local papers and a significant number of people attended. In addition to discussing the (unlikely success of the) draft Administrative Reform Act, European funding until 2020 was also covered and representatives of the Ministry of Education and Research and the Ministry of Social Affairs presented to local government officials how the reorganisation of the school network and the health centre project would be in line with the possible changes in administrative territorial division. Representatives of municipalities that had already been merged were also invited to ease any fears related to merging. During the last meeting of this round of talks in Kunda on 12 March, Taavi Rõivas was named Prime Minister of Estonia and it became clear that minister Siim Kiisler with the Pro Patria and Res Publica Union would not continue in the government.

From that point, the politicians did not want to hear about local commuting centres, though the new action programme of the Reform Party and the Social Democrat government also included the implementation of the administrative reform. At the same time, the Estonian Cooperation Assembly was actively involved in the Good Governance Programme and nominated the administrative reform as one of its potential components. Consulting on the voluntary merging of municipalities continued. By summer 2014, the authorities of over fifty municipalities, or almost every fourth municipality in Estonia at the time, had officially participated in merger consultations.

Deliberations peak

A new stage in the administrative reform started after the elections for the *Riigikogu* (Estonian Parliament) in 2015, when the administrative reform objective was included in the coalition agreement between the Reform Party, the Social Democratic Party and the Pro Patria and Res Publica Union. With that, the decision had essentially been made but



Merger consultants Rivo Noorkõiv (above) and Mihkel Laan alongside others led dozens of discussions on administrative reform across Estonia.

Photograph: Arvo Meeks / Valgamaalane.

there was still a lot to determine in regard to what kind of strategy would gain the necessary support from all parties in order to implement the administrative reform.

Arto Aas was appointed the new Minister of Public Administration. To include a wide range of experts in developing the basic principles of the administrative reform, the government created a separate government committee⁹ and the Minister of Public Administration convened an expert committee. However, the government committee led by Prime Minister Taavi Rõivas only held two meetings. In terms of public engagement, the importance of the committee of experts that met regularly in 2015, was in facilitating multilateral deliberations on decisions that would later enable broader legitimacy.¹⁰ By autumn 2015, the committee had proposed their suggestions, most of which set the basis for possible options for the draft¹¹.

There were many ways that experts were included in the engagement process. In addition to the committee meetings, researchers from universities (Tallinn University, Tartu University, Tallinn University of Technology) or consultants with extensive experience in the relevant field were commissioned to submit their expert opinions. These opinions were mostly used as input for the draft Act and on preparing deliberations. For example, the commissioned work by Mikk Lõhmus (Tallinn University of Technology) on the role of rural municipal districts and city districts in the model of local government organisation (*'Osavalla ja linnaosa koht kohaliku omavalitsuse valitsemiskorralduse mudelis'*) and Vallo Olle's (University of Tartu) opinion on the constitutionality of the intended draft Local Government Organisation Act (*'Arvamus omavalitsuskorralduse seaduse eelnõu väljatöötamiskavatsuse põhiseaduspärasuse kohta'*).

⁹ <https://haldusreform.fin.ee/2015/06/haldusreformi-valitsuskomisjon-arutas-reformi-rakendamise-ajakava-ja-liitumistoetuste-suurendamist/>

¹⁰ <https://www.siseministeerium.ee/et/uudised/ekspertkomisjon-toetab-valitsuse-soovi-viia-labi-haldusreform>

¹¹ <https://haldusreform.fin.ee/2015/11/esitleti-ekspertkomisjoni-soovitusi-haldusreformiks/>

There was also another round of meetings held in the municipalities. First, in early summer 2015, a series of meetings was organised to inform the county-level associations of local authorities of the plans for the upcoming process and invite them to actively participate. In summer and autumn 2015, the Ministry of Finance compiled information on the administrative reform and sent it to all local authorities in order to avoid complaints about a lack of information. These meetings and information letters presented the potential risk that many questions that had been raised will still be left unanswered. But it probably would have been an even greater risk not to distribute the information during that period.

In August 2015, a panel discussion (*'Minu tuleviku vald pärast haldusreformi'*) at the Paide Opinion Festival explored the future of rural municipalities after the administrative reform. The discussion panel included the Minister of Public Administration Arto Aas, ex-minister Tarmo Loodus, the prime minister's advisor at the time Märt Rask, representative of the Association of Estonian Cities Taavi Aas and Association of Municipalities representative Kurmet Mürsepp. The moderators were Külli Taro from the Estonian Cooperation Assembly and Sulev Valner. Despite some hesitancy, the discussion was supportive of the reform and was covered positively by the Estonian television programme *'Aktuaalne kaamera'*. This may have also helped tilt general opinion on the reform in a more favourable direction.

The next round of county deliberations on the administrative reform was held in autumn the same year. The public contract for organising these discussions was won by Cumulus Consulting OÜ. These seminars were held in every county from 21 September to 14 October. Almost 600 people participated in the county seminars and 180 out of 213 municipalities were represented. As the summary indicates, these events mostly included local government representatives (rural municipal government and municipal council members). The participation of local activists, for example, local entrepreneurs, was modest. Cumulus as the organisers used a consistent method to conduct the discussions, where the representative from the ministry gave an introduction, which was followed by

a group discussion on key issues of the reform:

- the characteristics of a future municipality;
- the size of a municipality;
- the rights and obligations of local authorities;
- the organisation of cooperation between local authorities;
- the engagement of regions further away from their centre.

After the meetings, Cumulus Consulting wrote a report that among others included the following general conclusions:

- Participants were rather positive about the need for the administrative reform. Most participants found that the reform was necessary and that the previous administrative-territorial organisation would not ensure a sustainable solution in the long run.
- Therefore, the state has a strong mandate for implementing the reform as people are expecting it. The answers also indicate that a more radical approach is assumed and that the number of municipalities in Estonia could be decreased three-fold. Only a small percentage of the participants thought that the current situation should continue.
- Peripheralisation and making decisions on municipal borders by simply drawing them on a map were among the fears of the participants (the reform should be substantive and not only a mathematical calculation). People are expecting clear messages about what other amendments the reform will bring in addition to the decrease in the number of municipalities.
- The feedback from the participants indicated that considerable scepticism and unanswered questions remain. Because the success of the reform mostly relies on local opinion leaders, it is worthwhile planning a broad public engagement programme in its subsequent process. The key to the success of the reform lies in engaging with the people and ensuring transparency and openness.
- The financial autonomy of municipalities is a recurring topic.

How many municipalities are there in your county in 2018?



Figure 1. Predictions from the county seminar participants in autumn 2015 (average of the numbers predicted by the respondents).

In retrospect, it is interesting to see what predictions the discussion participants gave in the anonymous opinion poll for the number of municipalities in their county (for 2018).

In October 2015, Märjamaa county hosted a forum for all merged municipalities to share their experience of municipal mergers. Märjamaa county was chosen to host the event, as it was a good example of a municipality that had merged early on and it was, at the time, the largest rural municipality in Estonia. The forum was moderated by journalist Lauri Hussar and more than a hundred people from across Estonia came to listen. There were presentations by merger consultants, by the merged Märjamaa and Lääne-Saare rural municipal leaders, and Jüri

Võigemast shared the experience from the Raplamaa rural municipal merger. The event had lively discussions on issues related to merging, such as the fears and myths about peripheralisation and the options for its prevention and management. How has the range and quality of services as well as competency of public officials changed after the merger? What has improved for the resident as a result of the merger? What were the typical mistakes (or model solutions) in the negotiations, merger contracts and post-merger period management?

The conclusion was that many of the fears associated with merging have not materialised. The atmosphere at the forum probably provided assurance for the participating politicians, including minister Arto Aas, that the administrative reform plan could indeed continue.

In December 2015, the draft Administrative Reform Act was presented for official approval and became public through the Information System of Draft Acts. The proceedings of the draft Act are addressed in more detail in other articles. The draft Administrative Reform Act was submitted for approval to the *Riigikogu* along with an explanatory memorandum containing notes and questions from various participants as well as their replies from the Ministry of Finance.¹²

The subsequent proceedings in the government and the *Riigikogu* were quite swift and they culminated in a series of sittings that lasted all night when the opposition attempted to obstruct the proceedings. But this may have had the opposite effect, as it created coherence between three government parties. The *Riigikogu* adopted the Act on 7 June 2016.

After the adoption of the Administrative Reform Act

In August 2016, visits to the merged municipalities took place. The objective of these visits was to show the public that merging is nothing to fear as there have already been positive experiences. One such tour included

¹² <https://www.riigikogu.ee/tegevus/eelnoud/eelnou/fec18826-0e43-4435-9ba8-598b6ed4ea40>

Kose rural municipality, Türi rural municipality (Kabala) and Viljandi rural municipality. A bus had been organised for the day to transport participants from Tallinn, but many came from other locations in their own cars.

Especially significant was the visit to Kabala, which politicians had brought out many times as an example of a poorly conducted merger. At the meeting, rural municipal leaders and local residents of Türi said they did not think merging at that time was the wrong choice.

The second tour included Saue rural municipality, Lääne-Nigula rural municipality (Risti) and Märjamaa rural municipality. In addition to these tours, information events were held in several places for people to visit on their own and learn about post-merger experiences. These events were used to demonstrate to the participants (on average 30 to 40 interested people had travelled to each location), and the broader public through media coverage, a willingness to talk all good and bad experiences of previous mergers.

In autumn 2016, Estonian newspapers *Maaleht*, *Eesti Päevaleht* and several county papers published an eight-page special edition on the administrative reform. This presented the merger experiences in Tapa, Lääne-Nigula and Märjamaa rural municipalities, the expectations of Tõrva and Saue rural municipalities and provided an opportunity for entrepreneurs and opinion leaders to express their thoughts on the subject. The objective was to encourage merger negotiations across Estonia that were at their peak at that time.

In 2016, the Ministry of Finance in conjunction with the merger consultants compiled two information booklets that they distributed on site at the local meetings. The first contained practical recommendations for the parties and followers of merger negotiations. It emphasized that merger negotiations should not remain a closed matter. Potential fears (myths) and sensitive topics that needed to be prepared for were also mentioned. It recommended researching previous merger experiences and using the help of the merger consultants.

The second one offered recommendations on the decentralised governance of the merged municipalities, suggesting forms of activities that could be used (e.g. by municipal council committees, rural municipal districts, community boards, village elders or service centres) in a larger municipality to prevent a sense of the exclusion of regions that are further from the centre.

By order of the Government of the Republic three regional committees were formed that included county governors of the respective areas, specialists and officials from the Ministry of Finance. The committee for northern Estonia included Harjumaa county, Järvamaa county, Lääne-Virumaa county and Ida-Virumaa county. The committee for western Estonia included Pärnumaa, Läänemaa, Saaremaa, Hiiumaa and Raplamaa county and the committee for southern Estonia Jõgevamaa, Viljandimaa, Tartumaa, Võrumaa, Põlvamaa and Valgamaa county.

This was a good opportunity to include experts and county governors in the discussion, who had a tendency to often make policies in their own way. In addition, the committees received direct feedback – primarily via the county governors who were there in attendance – which probably would not have otherwise reached the ministry. These regional committees made recommendations, on the one hand, to the voluntarily merged municipalities regarding the selection of partners, and on the other, in the case of mergers initiated by the government they recommended which municipalities the national government should merge and which proposals they should consider from the feedback they received. Most of the time the government took the proposals into account, though there were individual cases when it did not.

From among the other public engagement deliberations of the administrative reform it is worth mentioning the Estonian village movement Kodukant. This organised various discussions that mostly took place in smaller places away from the county centres.

Surveys among the local population during the final stage of the voluntary and coercive municipal mergers that the counties were

required to conduct by law have received a lot of criticism. The critics say, and often justifiably, that once the decision has been made it is then misleading to play the public engagement game and give the impression that the participants have the power to influence the decision. At the same time, it is hard to imagine that there would have been no criticism that local opinions were not considered without these surveys prior to the mergers.

It has often been difficult for some people to understand that these surveys were inherently meant as a way of consulting or listening to local residents before the municipal council or the government made their decision, and that they were not meant as a referendum.

In many cases, the results of the opinion poll influenced subsequent decision-making, even if that influence came in the form of an essential argument that was used to justify a decision. One of these arguments was made by Nõo and Luunja rural municipalities after they rejected the coercive merger proposal. Overall, it is likely better that these last-minute surveys were conducted before the mergers, even if it turned out to be a formality.

In 2017, two information days were organised – on 30 October in Tallinn and on 6 November in Tartu. These public engagement events were meant for the local authorities of municipalities that had been merged and both had over 100 participants from municipalities across Estonia. The objective was to share practical recommendations about the activities that post-merger local authorities could undertake, so no one would feel that they have been left by themselves to reinvent the wheel. For example, information on organising the first sittings of a new municipal council or creating a rural municipal government.

Training sessions for municipal council members in each of the 15 counties were organised in the first half of 2018. This was also a good opportunity to receive direct feedback on what it had actually been like for the authorities of new municipalities as they started work.

Lessons on public engagement

Openness was the right approach. Talking is always better than not talking.

But whatever the individual issues associated with merging, the honest portrayal of early experiences was overall positive.

It was probably the right decision to visit areas whenever possible, wherever invited and to organise county deliberations even when it wasn't always possible to give good answers to all of the questions. In hindsight, openness also turned out to be the right call in situations where there were complaints about unanswered questions. The municipal council members who had voted against merging were also included in the public engagement process.

The different types of public engagement practices are **information, consultation, cooperation, partnership** and **empowerment**. At the one end of the spectrum, information activities engage the participant as a passive receiver, while at the other end, empowerment gives an engaged public a leading role. We can find examples of all these public engagement practices from the administrative reform.

Publications, web pages, press releases and information leaflets were used to inform people. The coordination of the draft Act and county discussions can all be seen as forms of consultation. A good example of cooperation and partnership was the work that the expert and regional committees did in shaping important decisions over the course of a long period. An example of empowerment can be found in the first stage of the process when the municipal councils were able to decide who they would negotiate with. Generally, the agreed upon terms and partners were not changed.

The administrative reform process had at least three main public engagement interest groups:

- 1) decision-makers at state level and opinion leaders in the field. Their engagement influenced the process of ending up with the necessary decisions for the administrative reform (which considering previous developments was not self-evident);

- 2) heads of local governments and municipal council members as well as other local influencers. Their engagement influenced how strong the opposition to change would become among local decision-makers;
- 3) Residents and their continuing objective attitude, which was a prerequisite for advancement.

It is often mentioned that the reason behind the failure of previous administrative reform initiatives and many initiated municipal mergers was their broad unpopularity. This did not enable the politicians in the *Riigikogu* or the local authorities to make the necessary but often painful decisions. The opinion polls that were conducted during the last stage of the reform indicate that there was already more support for the administrative reform than opposition among the residents surveyed. For example, 48 per cent of residents supported or would likely support the reform and 28 per cent did not support or were less likely to support the administrative reform in autumn 2015.¹³

Each change in the Minister of Public Administration has meant uncertainty for future developments. In summary, the political powers should be commended on their consistency on the key issues of administrative reform during the whole period in question. Even when the municipal meetings had a sense of uncertainty about whether everything would actually turn out the way it was being talked about, the public engagement organisers were not disappointed.

One of the main rules of public engagement is not to give promises that are not going to be fulfilled. For example, saying that proposals will be taken into account when in reality they will not or promising deadlines that will not be kept.

¹³ <https://turu-uuringute.eu/haldusreformi-toetajaid-on-poolle-rohkem-kui-selle-vastaseid/>

Was there a public engagement programme for the whole process that had been agreed upon beforehand? No there was not. As a rule, the engagement schedule was planned for a shorter time frame because planning for a more distant future seemed politically too unpredictable. Just as good communication starts with clear messages, the success of public engagement relies above all on clearly defined positions that can be openly discussed, explained and defended. Many policies of the administrative reform also became clearer over time. One of the advantages of using short-term planning is that it allows greater flexibility in responding to a changing situation.

One might think that the state had some kind of giant machinery operating behind the reform, which by now two consecutive governments have proudly presented as their most important achievement. In reality, over the years, only seven or eight people have worked on the administrative reform at the Ministry of Finance. Considering the scope of all the variations, it has been a very small core team. Of course, when we count everyone that was involved in the process and include the members of the municipal council we get thousands of people.

One lesson is that no matter how much effort is put into bringing a broader range of people to the discussion, such as entrepreneurs and professionals from other fields, most of the participants were still only heads of the local authorities who were directly affected by the reform. Clearly their interest in the topic was greater than that of people from other fields.

There was often a sense of public engagement fatigue due to previous negative experiences. Often people at the county meetings said: we have heard all of this before and have taken part in the discussions. We do not see the point in investing time and energy in the administrative reform when it will end up the same way as before.

Convincing them that this time it was more serious was somewhat successful and somewhat not. We can conclude from the behaviour of many local authorities that some of them did not believe that the Administrative Reform Act would be implemented even after the *Riigikogu* had

adopted it. It is regrettable that many local authorities and other decision-makers lost valuable time at different stages of the administrative reform by making the wrong assessment of the situation, hoping it would pass as it always had. Instead of staying in opposition, that time could have been spent developing more effective and substantial solutions together.