

## Can Green Skills Be the Key to Solving Ida-Virumaa County's Challenges?

### Skills2Capabilities – Blog post

07 November 2025

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How can we support workers and communities as economies move toward greener and more sustainable futures? This question was at the heart of a Skills2Capabilities webinar on November 4, hosted by the Institute of International Social Studies (IASI) at Tallinn University in Estonia.

Researchers Eeva Kesküla, Joanna Kitsnik, and Riste Lehari shared fresh insights with the local Estonian stakeholders from a qualitative study on Estonia's carbon-intensive Ida-Viru County on green skills development, labour market changes and retraining challenges. The results presented in the webinar were from the fieldwork carried out in May and June 2025 in Ida-Viru county in Estonia and Pernik region in Bulgaria as part of the Skills2Capabilities project and explored how the regions' green transition is shaping the need for new skills and retraining—and how educational institutions, employers, and policymakers are navigating this change.

Ida-Viru County, known for its long history of oil shale mining and carbon-heavy electricity production, faces complex challenges as Estonia moves toward a greener economy. While the goals—economic diversification and a cleaner environment—are widely accepted, deep-seated skepticism hinders progress, with some local employers viewing the Green Transition not as a shared vision, but as an externally imposed political directive.

A major finding presented in the seminar was that the transition's biggest barrier is not just technological, but linguistic in the predominantly Russian-speaking region. The move to Estonian-language vocational and re-skilling programs, even those financed by the Just Transition Fund, is cutting off the primary target group: older, predominantly Russian-speaking industrial workers. This creates a dual risk: the workforce cannot acquire the necessary green skills, and a significant segment of the community faces worsening economic inequality. This is further compounded by a legacy work culture emphasizing stability and long tenure. To thrive in the new green(er) economy, the interviewed experts emphasised that the region must

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embrace a cultural shift toward lifelong learning, flexibility, and entrepreneurship, overcoming local perceptions of low self-confidence and inherent resistance to change.

A core issue is the shortage of qualified instructors—especially those with green skills, practical industry experience and Estonian language proficiency. Furthermore, the ability of the existing workforce to re-skill is undermined because companies are often skeptical of the Green Transition's and its agendas. This skepticism makes it difficult for them to justify allowing employees to leave work to acquire new skills, particularly when dealing with shift work or production schedules where employees cannot leave their posts until the shift ends.

In addition, the team introduced comparative findings from Pernik, Bulgaria, where a similar study was carried out as part of the WP4 of Skills2Capabilities project. Both highly carbon-intensive regions face similar core obstacles in their transition to a green economy. Experts in both areas reported a significant disconnect between employers and educators, a lack of support from trade unions, and deeply rooted cultural resistance to change. However, a key difference emerged in the outlook: while Ida-Viru generally views economic diversification as a positive and necessary step to improve the overall quality of life, Pernik was characterized by far greater pessimism, fragmentation, and distrust toward changes coming from above, a sentiment deepened by perceived corruption and prior experiences of marginalization. This difference was evident in how policy makers in Estonia were more willing to openly discuss policy shortcomings, whereas their counterparts in Bulgaria were noticeably more guarded and reluctant to engage with researchers on the topic.

The 45-minute webinar session ended with an open discussion, giving audience a chance to ask questions and share their views on the subject. Webinar was recorded and is available [here](#) (in Estonian)

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