“The limits of my language are the limits of my world”

Every two months, Prof. Dr. Thorsten Arnhold, IECEx Chairman 2014-2019, provides an update on developments within the organisation.

As I have done almost every year since the nineties, I spent my summer holiday in my wife’s home country of Estonia. In addition to the rough beauty of the landscape on the Baltic Sea, the pleasant Estonian people and the good, simple food, I am always fascinated by the tremendous progress made by Estonian society, which I can perceive year after year.

It is not just in the capital Tallinn which continues to develop rapidly, but the entire country. It’s almost unbelievable but it’s true that a small nation of just 1.5 million people has transformed into a modern, technologically vibrant society.

Global companies like Skype and Bolt have emerged during Estonia’s transition where the digitisation of daily life is not just a political catchphrase but is a lived practice for almost all inhabitants. While the residents of my own capital, Berlin, were called to vote for the state government twice in just over a year because the supply of voting papers didn’t work the first time, Estonians have been able to vote in elections via the Internet for years. For me, what are the main reasons for this astonishing development?

First of all, there is the love for the homeland and the pronounced national consciousness of the inhabitants of this small Baltic country. Anyone who has experienced a day at the national song festival, where about a third of all Estonians meet every five years and sing their old and new songs together with enduring enthusiasm, will understand what I mean. In addition to this tradition, however, there is also an obvious urge for education and knowledge that is firmly anchored in Estonian society. It is therefore no coincidence that Estonian students rank 4th in the international PISA study, making them by far the best western country.

Now you will ask yourself, what does all this have to do with international standardisation? Quite a lot actually! After all, worldwide standardisation not only makes it possible to produce and sell goods and services globally, it also has the task of making technical knowledge generally available to mankind and of making scientific and technical progress available quickly and efficiently. Small countries especially, like Estonia which naturally only has restricted scientific-technical capacities, benefit from this!

The famous Austrian philosopher Ludwig Wittgenstein once said: “The limits of my language are the limits of my world”. If we now understand the international technical standards as the language of science and technology, we recognise the correctness of my thesis.

Of course, international standardisation requires the intensive and active cooperation of many experts, which smaller countries like Estonia often cannot afford directly. For this reason, the standardisation rules of IEC or ISO also provide for the participation of the member countries on two levels: firstly, direct participation in the creation and further development of standards at international level in the maintenance teams of the respective Technical Committees (TC) and secondly, commenting on the respective versions of the document drafts in the national mirror organisations. Here, experts from smaller countries can also play an active role in shaping standardisation without having to travel to the site, saving time and money. Furthermore, the international standardisation organisations offer a direct transfer of knowledge via different platforms and media, which one only needs to actively use.

Scientific papers (white papers) are published on the IEC homepage at regular intervals, in which international experts from business and science deal in detail with current topics such as artificial intelligence, cyber security, the future of energy supply or quantum computing. The IEC Academy regularly offers webinars on standardisation and conformity assessment topics as well as related specialist areas. The target group here are often smaller and developing countries, which can access this comprehensive knowledge free of charge. In addition, like ISO, IEC offers numerous conferences and seminars in different locations around the world. For example, in October I will give a presentation on standardisation and conformity assessment for modern hydrogen technologies at the IECEx conference in Niagara Falls, Canada on 2-3 October.

Back to Estonia: the advantages of international standardisation seem to be well used there. The country is a member of ISO and an affiliate member of IEC. In addition, it actively participates in numerous technical committees. I am sure that a non-negligible part of the successes mentioned above is due to the use of international standards and participation in the further development of standards by Estonian experts. ■