



Social cohesion policy is unclear and uncoordinated

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Audit report

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Performance audit “Is the social cohesion policy planned and implemented purposefully?”

The audit was performed based on audit schedule No 2.4.1-28/2023 of the Fourth Audit Department of the State Audit Office of Latvia of 5 June 2023.

The cover design includes an image from the website *www.depositphotos.com*, *Group of businesspeople assembling jigsaw puzzle*, author “.

Dear Reader,

The State Audit Office of Latvia publishes a performance audit report on the social cohesion policy under the responsibility of the Ministry of Culture.

The social cohesion policy is centred on an individual. It is horizontal, connected to the policies of many other areas. However, one should note that the scope of the policy under the responsibility of the Ministry of Culture does not include the social and economic aspects that divide society, and the connection indicated by the Ministry with the policies of other areas is unjustifiably selective.

Consequently, after the audit, there are also questions about the content of the *Guidelines for a Cohesive and Civically Active Society for 2021-2027*. Is it really a social cohesion policy? Does it outline goals and directions of action for various target groups in society? Will the usual funding of the institutionalized sector of infallibility increase the participation of individuals? Highlighting what is stated in the Guidelines that increasing trust is set as a top-level priority, how is it planned to achieve increasing trust?

In the audit, we criticize the policy form and implementation organization of the policy by the Ministry of Culture. The policy is not targeted, it is general, does not provide an understanding of the problems to be solved, the desired situation and the results to be achieved. The established cooperation mechanism, that is, the Guidelines Monitoring Council with more than 20 members is assessed as ineffective. Real policymaking has partly shifted to the implementing institution, id est, the Social Integration Fund, and depends on its incentive and activities. A peculiar situation has arisen, in which the involvement of politicians in policy implementation is more active than in policymaking because the representative of the Prime Minister and five ministers work on the Council of the Social Integration Fund. Millions of euros of state budget funds are allocated for social cohesion but achievable is not clear.

In the audit, we also assessed the organization and implementation of an important measure for a cohesive society, the organization and implementation of Latvian language training for adults. It is carried out in a fragmented manner, with the involvement of the Ministry of Education and Science, the Ministry of Culture, the Ministry of Welfare, the Social Integration Fund and the State Employment Agency, as well as local and regional governments that are involved in ensuring

Latvian language learning on their own initiative with limited funds. Interested parties do not have access to information in one place about



opportunities to learn Latvian. When all of the above-mentioned state institutions provide one type of service, there is a high risk that public resources are not used economically and efficiently. The audit did not identify any impartial circumstances that would limit the possibility of organising Latvian language training for adults in one institution in the future.

When informing the public about the most significant achievements in the first year of the government in September 2024, the Ministry of Culture provided the following information about the achievements in social cohesion (full text), *To ensure the development of a national, solidary, open and civically active society, the Action Plan for the Development of a Cohesive, Civically Active Society 2024-2027 and the Plan for Reducing Racism and Anti-Semitism in Latvia 2024-2027* were developed. To promote the cohesion and sense of national belonging of minority representatives, the Minority Festival in Liepāja was organised and celebrated gorgeously and heartfelt for two days. We expect that the audit recommendations will be implemented. The social cohesion policy of the Ministry of Culture will be clear, targeted, with an effective coordination and cooperation mechanism, and the public will be provided with clear and comprehensive information about the work done, achievements and the funding used to implement the policy.

We would like to thank the Ministry of Culture, the Social Integration Fund, the Ministry of Education and Science, the Ministry of Welfare and their subordinate institutions for their cooperation in this audit. Our gratitude to the representatives of the Saeima, universities, non-governmental organizations, researchers and experts for the facts and opinions provided in the audit, local and regional governments and educational institutions that implement Latvian language education for adults for participating in surveys and providing information.

Respectfully
Ms Inga Vilka
Department Director

Summary

The concept of a cohesive society emerged on the political agenda with the adoption of the Preamble to the Constitution in 2014 in Latvia by expanding and gradually replacing the concepts of social integration and civil society while including these issues within the scope of a cohesive society simultaneously.

A cohesive society is the basis of the internal security of the state. The National Security Concept approved in 2019 provided for the creation of a cohesive society as one of the priorities, including the promotion of citizen participation in decision-making. The National Security Concept approved in 2023 provides for the strengthening of a cohesive society as a priority. It means that all those involved (responsible state institutions, local and regional governments, non-governmental organizations, etc.) had to take care of creating a cohesive society by 2023 while a cohesive society must already be strengthened starting from 2023.

A cohesive society is also one of the action lines in the National Development Plan for 2021–2027 to implement the priority “A united, secure and open society” whose goal is the proportion of residents who feel a sense of belonging and trust in Latvian society and the rule of law increases, therefore people contribute to their own safety, the safety, well-being and development of their fellow citizens and the state, and dishonest behaviour decreases.

A cohesive society is a society that works for the well-being of all members of society, fights against social exclusion, creates a sense of belonging, promotes trust and ensures upward social mobility for its members, or an increase in opportunities for participation and action regardless of social status, as stated in the Guidelines for the Development of a Cohesive and Civically Active Society for 2021–2027, approved by the Cabinet of Ministers in 2021 when referring to the definition of the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development. They also point out that the European Union and other international studies link social cohesion to a sense of community, a society’s ability to renew itself, and an orientation towards the common good. Social cohesion is also closely linked to economic growth and prosperity of countries.

Since 2000, a state institution responsible for social integration and later for the policy of a cohesive society has changed five times. From 2011, the Ministry of Culture has been responsible for the social cohesion policy (social integration). The Social Integration Fund has been operating with the aim of supporting and promoting social integration since 2001. Social cohesion is distinctly horizontal. Sectors, areas under the responsibility of other state institutions and local and regional governments also have a significant impact on ensuring a cohesive society.

The scope of social cohesion under the responsibility of the Ministry of Culture does not include social and economic aspects. In its turn, the Ministry of Culture supplements the term of a cohesive society with the term of civil society in documents, in names of structural units and in communication although social cohesion includes the aspect of civil society essentially. The Ministry of Culture explains it by stating that the social cohesion policy is focused on individual relationships while the non-governmental organisation sector is at the centre of civil society.

This audit assesses the planning, implementation and monitoring of a narrowly focused social cohesion policy. Particular attention is paid to the provision of Latvian language learning for adults as an important measure facilitating cohesion.

Main conclusions

The audit has concluded that the development and implementation of the social cohesion policy under the responsibility of the Ministry of Culture is not purposeful. The established cooperation mechanism for the development and implementation of coordinated policy is not optimal. The institution specially established for the financial support of social integration, that is, the Social Integration Fund, is not only a policy implementer but it also undertakes the tasks of a policy maker while the Ministry of Culture, which is a policy maker, is also involved in policy implementation measures.

The activities carried out so far in social cohesion have not been effective in creating a cohesive society and moving towards achieving the goals set in the National Development Plan for 2021–2027.

The area of cohesive society is horizontal, as measures in other sectors and areas also affect social cohesion. The approach to planning the development of social cohesion and the implemented activities for social cohesion are fragmented and atomistic. Namely, comprehensive information is not available on the social cohesion activities planned and implemented in the country, the mutual interaction of activities and the impact on the expected results. At the same time, the total funding allocated and used for the purpose from the state budget and the European Union funds is not summarised. According to the indicative investment calculations planned in the National Development Plan for 2021–2027, they could be at least 24 million euros per year.

The State Audit Office of Latvia draws attention to the fact that the policy of cohesive society developed by the Ministry of Culture covers only issues under the mandate of the Ministry of Culture; it does not provide information on measures implemented by other institutions related to social cohesion. The social cohesion policy does not cover the level of local and regional governments, which have the most direct connection with their communities and issues of social cohesion are also relevant. Therefore, the State Audit Office of Latvia considers that covering the measures to be taken by all involved institutions (both state and municipal) in social cohesion policy and determining the role of the involved institutions in policy planning and implementation are crucial. The measures in the action plans of the Guidelines for the Development of a Cohesive and Civically Active Society for 2021–2027 developed by the Ministry of Culture are also fragmented and not targeted.

The implementation of targeted measures is also hampered by the fact that the Guidelines for the Development of a Cohesive and Civically Active Society for 2021–2027 do not indicate what specific problems are addressed by this policy and which target groups of society they affect. Researchers identified the problems to be solved by evaluating the progress made in social cohesion in 2022 and 2023. The measures of the plans approved for the implementation of the Guidelines for the Development of a Cohesive and Civically Active Society for 2021–2027 are not targeted and

oriented towards achieving specific results. Activities that do not inherently solve problems in the field of a cohesive society have been defined as policy implementation measures. For example, the activities of the Supervisory Council for the Implementation of the Guidelines for the Development of a Cohesive and Civically Active Society have been defined as a policy measure, the operation of which is already provided for by Cabinet Regulation, or the implementation of a data-based policy in the field of a cohesive society, which is one of the tasks of the Ministry, has been proposed as a measure. Some of the implementation measures of the Guidelines for the Development of a Cohesive and Civically Active Society for 2021–2027 do not specify a clear result that the society and the state will gain as a result of this measure. For instance, the result to be achieved for several measures is a certain number of studies or surveys conducted. In addition, the measures are fragmented among implementers, although their goal is the same, as both the Social Integration Fund and the Ministry of Culture provide support to NGOs and minorities.

The planned funding for the implementation of the Guidelines for the Development of a Cohesive and Civically Active Society for 2021–2027 is 42 million euros, but this is only the budget funding of the Ministry of Culture. Not all measures planned for the implementation of the Guidelines for the Development of a Cohesive and Civically Active Society for 2021–2027 have the required amount of funding. The Ministry of Culture attracts a significant part of the funding for the implementation of the social cohesion policy from the European Union Structural Funds or requests a priority measure within the framework of a draft annual budget law.

In terms of the amount of funding, the most significant measure for the implementation of the Guidelines for the Development of a Cohesive and Civically Active Society for 2021–2027 is the NGO Fund program. For example, the funding of the NGO Fund program was 2.4 million euros in 2024. In the opinion of the State Audit Office, the Ministry of Culture does not use the financing of the NGO Fund program effectively enough as a tool to ensure the implementation of the tasks of the Guidelines for the Development of a Cohesive and Civically Active Society for 2021–2027 and to address current issues. The financing of the NGO Fund program is not focused on specific target groups of society, the results to be achieved are defined in general terms and their connection with the action lines of the NGO Fund is not clear. At the same time, the process of harmonizing the action lines supported by the NGO Fund program should be reviewed, as it is not efficient.

Ineffective monitoring of the implementation of the Guidelines for the Development of a Cohesive and Civically Active Society for 2021–2027

Although issues of a cohesive society, including integration, have been on the political agenda since Latvia regained its independence, a set of indicators has not yet been established to assess the long-term impact of social cohesion policy in Latvia. As a result, assessing whether the measures implemented and the resources invested have had an impact on social cohesion as a whole is impossible.

One of the researcher suggestions, which is submitted to the Ministry of Culture periodically, is the introduction of monitoring for regular measurement of social cohesion. The Ministry of Culture has not responded to this call, and it is also not clear whether the Ministry of Culture will use the Social Cohesion Radar indicators developed by order of the Social Integration Fund for monitoring social cohesion. Simultaneously, the data available to the Ministry of Culture on the results of the

implementation of the measures included in the implementation plans of the Guidelines for the Development of a Cohesive and Civically Active Society for 2021–2027 are incomplete and not structured so that the data can be compared and analysed.

Some of the existing policy performance indicators cannot be assessed because current data is not available or the data collection methodology has been changed. For instance, data on the implementation of the indicator “Proportion of adult population who know Latvian and whose native language is not Latvian” is not available.

A supervisory institution has been established in social cohesion, that is, the Supervisory Council for the Implementation of the Guidelines for the Development of a Cohesive and Civically Active Society, whose functions are to promote unified policy development, policy implementation and cooperation among the state institutions involved. However, the Supervisory Council does not engage actively and does not cooperate in the development and implementation of social cohesion policy; its activities can be characterised as informative rather than aimed at active cooperation among the state institutions involved to safeguard more effective implementation of social cohesion policy. The Supervisory Council does not fulfill the tasks assigned to it in full nor does it exercise the rights granted to it in full.

The domain of social cohesion policy requires a cross-sectoral approach and an understanding of the involved institutions about the importance of their activities in achieving the common goal so that everyone feels belonging and accepted in the community of Latvia. Therefore, the State Audit Office of Latvia finds that the content and form of development planning documents in social cohesion policy should be reviewed so that they include complete information about what is happening in this area, ensure a full exchange of information among those involved in the implementation of the policy, and provide a comprehensive assessment of the results of the implemented measures to the public, the Saeima and the Cabinet of Ministers.

Citizen participation in planning the development of a cohesive society does not produce the desired results

The citizen participation implemented by the Ministry of Culture in development planning for a cohesive society has not been targeted sufficiently. As a result, citizen participation becomes a formal process by devoting both the resources of the Ministry and citizens to it but without achieving the necessary results.

The way the Ministry of Culture provides feedback to citizens who have devoted their time to participating in development planning must also be improved. The submitted proposals must be evaluated on their merits, also providing justification for why proposals were not taken into account.

The development of citizen participation, belief in influencing policy and trust in state administration are based on the positive experience of citizens. Therefore, the Ministry of Culture must implement citizen participation in development planning thoughtfully and substantively and provide high-quality feedback to citizens to ensure the successful implementation of the policy for which the Ministry itself is responsible.

Uncoordinated Latvian language training system for adults

Latvian language courses for adults are one of the crucial issues in the field of cohesive society.

The audit has concluded that a single and coordinated training system for learning the state language for adults has not been established in the country and the problems identified in this area overlap with problems in social cohesion in general. Latvian language learning activities are planned, implemented and results are evaluated by sectors in three ministries, id est, the Ministry of Education and Science, the Ministry of Culture and the Ministry of Welfare, and in two institutions, the Social Integration Fund and the State Employment Agency. Latvian language learning for adults is also offered by some local and regional governments.

The Ministry of Education and Science is the institution responsible for the development, organization and coordination of the state language policy, but coordination of the management of language learning for adults has not taken place, and it is obvious that the existing management model must be improved significantly.

Data on Latvian language training for adults implemented by the state and local and regional governments (on target groups, needs of target groups, learning outcomes and the impact of acquired skills on employment and integration into society, funding required, allocated and used for training, etc.) is not obtained and compiled at the national level. The existence of such data is a prerequisite for developing an evidence-based Latvian language learning and improvement policy for adults and for promoting social cohesion purposefully.

The audit findings show that in a decentralized Latvian language learning system for adults lacking effective management, target groups overlap among the responsible state institutions, and the activities of the responsible institutions are not coordinated. In the calls for projects of the Ministry of Culture, the State Employment Agency and the Social Integration Fund, there are different opportunities and obligations for learners and different conditions are set for educational institutions that provide Latvian language training for adults.

The audit also did not identify any unbiased circumstances that, in the opinion of the State Audit Office of Latvia, would limit the possibility of reducing the number of institutions organizing Latvian language learning for adults in the next programming period of the European Union funds.

A draft Immigration Law developed by the Ministry of the Interior in 2021 has not been adopted by the Saeima, which envisaged determining the scope of early integration measures, including which groups of newcomers¹ should learn Latvian, at what level, for how long and for what funds. Consequently, the Latvian language learning policy for adults is being implemented without clear guidelines for newcomers.

In conditions of limited funding, well-considered and purposeful state support for promoting a cohesive society is of particular importance. However, a Latvian language training system for adults implemented in a fragmented manner, without constantly available funding and clearly defined priorities, does not provide the public as taxpayers with confidence in the economic and efficient² use of the funding invested so far.

The issue of the fragmentation of the existing Latvian language training system for adults was only raised in 2024. Although the responsible state institutions have identified the problems and issues to be addressed, the audit findings show that departmentalism continues to dominate in terms of possible solutions, with each institution seeing its own solution. However, a common understanding and coordinated action directed towards clear goals are critically important in this area, as Latvian language learning for adults is not only a component of the state language policy but can also be part of security, immigration, state language, employment or integration policies, depending on its context and goals.

Key recommendations

Based on the audit conclusions, the Ministry of Culture, as the institution responsible for the social cohesion policy, has been provided with two recommendations, the implementation of which will ensure the prerequisites for effective and efficient planning, implementation and monitoring of the social cohesion policy.

Knowledge of the state language is one of the prerequisites for a cohesive society and integration and a horizontally viewed issue at the same time that is closely related to the state policies implemented by several state institutions (state language, integration, employment, etc.). Consequently, one recommendation has been provided to the Ministry of Education and Science, the Ministry of Culture, the Ministry of Welfare and the Social Integration Fund for the creation of a single Latvian language learning system for adults.

To safeguard constant and transparent monitoring of the policy for strengthening the state language, the Saeima supported amendments to the Saeima Rules of Procedure in the first reading on 9 January 2025, which provided that the Cabinet of Ministers should submit a report to the Saeima on the completed and planned activities in the state language policy. The State Audit Office of Latvia draws attention to the fact that a cohesive society is the basis of the internal security of the state and it is necessary to assess the effectiveness of the measures implemented in this policy openly. Therefore, we call for the assessment of the possibility of introducing similar policy monitoring in the field of cohesive society.

References

- ¹ Foreigners who are residing legally in the territory of Latvia and have arrived in Latvia within the last five years.
- ² The principle of efficiency determines the need to obtain from the available resources as much as possible. If there are several mutually similar organisations, some of which are able to perform the relevant activities cheaper and faster while maintaining constant quality, with higher quality or more, this can be used as a criterion for others to strive for. The principle of economy means reducing the cost of resources while maintaining quality. The resources spent must be available in a timely manner, in an appropriate amount and quality at the best price. ISSAI 3910 “Guidelines on Central Principles of Performance Auditing”, Paragraphs 8 a), b), 38, 41.