

Integration Policy in Latvia A Multi-Faceted Approach

31.03.2005

Since Latvia regained independence in 1991, integration policy has been a key issue in its domestic affairs. The preceding fifty years of Soviet rule left a strong impact on Latvia's social, demographic, and economic development. However, Latvia is dealing successfully with this legacy within a democratic framework, and with due respect for the rule of law and human rights.

The integration of society has been taking place within the context of successful co-operation between Latvia and international human rights organisations. Latvia has ratified several important human rights instruments and consulted with international human rights experts during the drafting of relevant legislation. This has helped ensure that Latvian legislation and practice fully conform to international standards.

The importance of society integration policy is accentuated by Latvia's membership in the European Union. Through the implementation of sound policies in the field of integration and minority issues, Latvia is demonstrating its readiness to be a reliable partner in the building of a united Europe.

Although the integration process as a whole is very difficult to quantify, numerous examples of successful integration exist; although many are not widely known, they can be found across society. Examples of such achievements are outlined below.

Language

Latvia is a distinctly multiethnic society. Latvians live among and work with many ethnic minorities, some of whom have been present in Latvia for many centuries. These communities have developed their own cultures and identities, which the Latvian state helps preserve and maintain. Continuous integration of its various ethnic communities is an essential prerequisite for Latvia's continued stability and future prosperity.

Table: Ethnic composition of the population of Latvia

	Residents	%	Citizens	%
Latvians	1,354,656	58.8	1,351,413	99.8
Russians	660,084	28.7	338,334	51.3
Belarusians	88,230	3.8	27,450	31.1
Ukrainians	58,973	2.6	12,612	21.4
Poles	56,451	2.5	40,440	71.6
Lithuanians	31,696	1.4	17,415	54.9
Jews	9,698	0.4	6,407	66
Estonians	2 532	0.1	1504	59.4
Roma	8467	0.4	7860	92.8
Other	32 148	1.4	12 589	39.2
Total	2 302 935	100	1 816 024	78.9

Source: *The Office of Citizenship and Migration Affairs January 1, 2005.*

The results of census from the year 2000 show that Latvian is the mother tongue of 58.2% residents, out of which 95.6% are Latvians, 42.5% Lithuanians and 39.2% Estonians. Russian is the mother tongue of 39.6% residents, out of which 79.1% are Jews, 72.8% Belarusians, 67.8% Ukrainians and 57.7% Polish.

The proficiency in the Latvian language is constantly improving, especially among young non-Latvians. The statistical data show that at the end of 1990s, around 40% of respondents within the age group of 15 – 34 years stated that their knowledge of the Latvian language is good (they can fluently communicate in Latvian), whereas in the year

2004 already 65% of respondents considered their knowledge of Latvian as well mastered.

Latvian Language Training Programme

Successful societal integration requires the willingness and readiness to learn the Latvian language. During half a century of Soviet occupation, hundreds of thousands of people came to Latvia to work from distant parts of the Soviet Union. Many of them did not learn Latvian and consequently did not integrate into local society. Since Latvia's independence was restored, the role of Latvian has been gradually and consistently changing and has become key factor for social and national cohesion. Knowledge of Latvian facilitates the social, cultural, economic and political integration of non-Latvians and enhances their competitiveness in the labour market.

In 1995, the Government initiated the National Programme for Latvian Language Training (since October 12, 2004, the National Agency for Latvian Language Training (NALLT)), which can be considered one of the most successful projects undertaken in societal integration. The regular polls conducted by Baltic Data House show that in the time the Agency has been operating, proficiency in Latvian among non-Latvians, as well as interest in learning Latvian, has risen. With continued support from international donors, the Agency offers free language courses for professionals who need Latvian language skills in their jobs, including, for example, police and medical personnel.

Since 2004 NALLT devotes special attention to a new target audience – parents of the children attending minority schools. LSL (Latvian as a second language) courses are highly demanded among this social group; they not only help learn the language, but also provide the parents with a deeper understanding of the educational reform carried out in the country and make them feel closer to the school and their children, who already have comparatively good language skills. The Agency develops training methodologies for both minority schools and adult learners. Since its establishment the NALLT has provided Latvian language courses to more than 74,000 people.

The National Agency for Latvian Language Training offers an ever-increasing number of language courses for adults and teachers. Due to increasing demand, the Agency was expanded in 1999. More than 100,000 people have used the study aids developed as part of the Agency's programme. Young people who do not speak Latvian can also take advantage of the language training opportunities offered by the Agency's Internet website.

The newsletter *Tagad* chronicles the Agency's programmes and its activities and is published regularly in Latvian, Russian, and English. Starting with February 2005, NALLT issues a newspaper called "Atslēgas" ("The Keys"), which provides information on the adopted government decisions in both Latvian and Russian thus helping in the language learning process. 30,000 copies of the newspaper are published once in a fortnight and are available free of charge in almost every post office.

Minority Education

The *Education Law* adopted in 1998 serves as the foundation for the minority education system. The Law stipulates that minority education programmes shall include the content necessary for members of minority groups to develop an awareness of their respective ethnic culture, as well as integrate into Latvian society. The Ministry of Education and Science has developed four model minority education programmes, which differ in terms of the proportion of classes taught in the minority language. Minority schools can choose one of the four model programmes or create their own programmes.

Starting in September of 2004, the number of subjects taught in Latvian in the 10th grade in state and municipal general education institutions will increase from 3 to 5. Up to 40% of all subjects will continue to be taught in the minority language. The Minority Education Consultative Council, established in 2001, helps to maintain dialogue between the Ministry of Education and Science, students and teachers in minority schools, parents' organisations and NGOs.

In July 2004 a special working group was established for constructive dialogue with public organisations including representatives of the Association for Support of Latvia's Russian language schools, with a view to continue work on improving minority education curricula

models, taking into consideration the views and suggestions of representatives of national minorities and thus promoting their involvement in the development of minority education. The Social policy centre "Providus" is actively involved in maintaining the dialogue, and in September 2004 it helped organise the Fifth Social Policy Forum *Integration and minority education*.

The OSCE High Commissioner on National Minorities has recognised the necessity of increasing the use of Latvian in the state secondary school classroom, given the status of Latvian as official state language. The Commissioner emphasised that not only it is the right of Latvia to introduce the reform, indeed it is her duty to do so.

Over the last ten years, there has been an increase in demand for education in Latvian, coupled with a corresponding decrease in demand for education in Russian. In the 2004/2005 school year, 75.2% of first-graders began their studies solely in Latvian. This has mainly been due to the interest of non-Latvian parents to ensure that their children receive an education that ensures greater opportunities for access to higher education and increased competitiveness in the labour market.

State Language Law

In 1999, a new *State Language Law* was adopted to ensure the protection and promotion of Latvian as the official state language. The Law sets very strict limits on state involvement in the private sector, where language use is regulated only in cases where legitimate public interests are affected. Any such regulation must take into account the rights and interests of the private company concerned.

The Law, which entered into force in 2000, was developed in close co-operation with international experts from the OSCE and the Council of Europe, thus ensuring compliance with international human rights standards. The adoption of the legislation was welcomed by the then OSCE High Commissioner on National Minorities, as well as by the Presidency of the European Union.

Citizenship

Citizenship is one of the strongest links between an individual and the state in which he or she lives. Latvia, through adoption of the *Citizenship Law* in 1995, and other appropriate legislation, ensures that the procedure for acquisition of citizenship is fair and equitable. Almost 80% of Latvia's population are Latvian citizens, and practically all of Latvia's permanent residents are able to become citizens.

Whenever drafting legislation dealing with issues of citizenship, Latvia has taken into account the recommendations of international human rights organisations (including the UN, the Council of Europe, and the OSCE). These organisations have acknowledged that Latvia's citizenship legislation corresponds to the principles of democracy and human rights. There have been several amendments to the *Citizenship Law*, elaborated in co-operation with experts from the OSCE and the Council of Europe. The latest amendments, affirmed by the people of Latvia by referendum in 1998, have led to the Law being further liberalised.

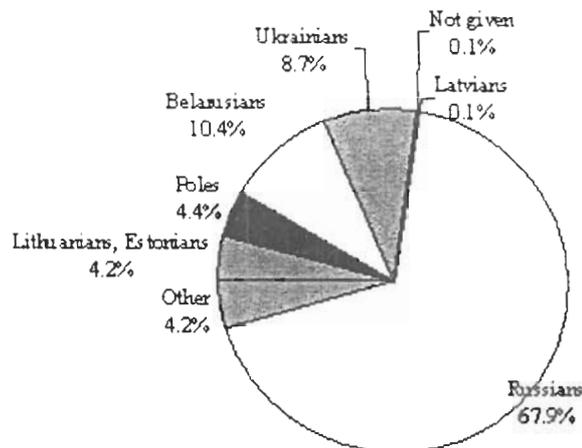
The Law makes provision for citizenship to be granted within the time frame of one year. In practice, however, the procedure takes no more than three to six months. Following liberalisation of the Law in 1998, there was a rapid, almost fourfold increase in the number of the naturalisation applications. Interest in naturalisation remains consistently high.

Between 1995 and January 2005, 85,352 persons have been granted Latvian citizenship by order of the Cabinet of Ministers. A total of 9,844 persons were naturalised in 2002 alone, but in 2003 the number was even higher, i.e. 10,049. In 2004 16,064 persons were naturalised. Children born in Latvia after the renewal of Latvia's independence are entitled to Latvian citizenship automatically.

On 30 April 2004, the Secretariat of the Special Assignments Minister for Social Integration in cooperation with the Ministry for Children and Family Affairs sent a letter to the parents of the 15,000 children who are non-citizens summoning them to register their children as citizens of Latvia and also explaining the due procedure. This initiative incited increased activity from the side of the parents. Since the beginning of the initiative until 31 March

2005, 2,208 applications were received and 1,904 children obtained citizenship, which is a considerable increase in comparison with 2003 when only 356 children were registered as citizens.

The distribution of the number of applicants in terms of nationality (According to the data of the Naturalisation Board for the period from 1995 to 2004).



Language and civics exams forming part of the naturalisation procedure have been simplified on several occasions. As a result, about 90% of applicants pass these tests at the first attempt. Minority school graduates who have passed the final school examination in Latvian successfully do not need to take a language test to become naturalised. Applicants, who have reached the age of 65, need to pass the oral part of the language test only.

In June 2001, the Government reduced the standard naturalisation fee by a third and increased the number of groups eligible for the reduced fee, making the process more accessible to low-income applicants. In September 2003, the Government decided to further increase the number of groups eligible for reduced naturalisation fees. The Naturalisation Board provides Latvian language courses for naturalisation applicants free of charge.

An Information Centre has been established at the Naturalisation Board that disseminates information among non-citizens on requirements for naturalisation in both Latvian and Russian. Brochures and TV ads encouraging people to naturalise, a toll-free information hotline informing potential applicants about requirements for naturalisation, and visitors' days at branches of the Naturalisation Board all contribute to the sustainability of the process.

The Government additionally supports an extensive information campaign on Latvian citizenship and naturalisation, with the aim of providing information on opportunities to acquire Latvian citizenship and encourage non-citizens to apply. As part of the campaign, information has been disseminated to non-citizens through TV and radio advertisements, the Internet, newspapers and personal contact. Information days on citizenship issues have been organised, and an Internet page in Russian created.

It is important to note that citizenship is considered an issue of little concern in terms of its impact on the long-term welfare of society, as reflected in a survey conducted by the Department of Society Integration at the Ministry of Justice. Problems related to citizenship were ranked only tenth by those classifying themselves as feeling "insecure" about their future in Latvia. Issues such as unemployment, problems with the health sector, and economic instability ranked higher.

The OSCE High Commissioner on National Minorities has stated that Latvia has fulfilled all his recommendations regarding citizenship. The European Union has positively commented the application of the Law and the naturalisation process in general.

National Programme - "Integration of Society in Latvia"

The National Programme "Integration of Society in Latvia" (hereafter "the Programme")

incorporates the political, judicial, social, educational and cultural dimensions of integration policy, and reaffirms that the integration of society is a government priority.

Between 1998 and 1999 experts invited by the Government drew up a plan for the Programme. Later the draft concept of the Programme was offered for public debate and elicited some 27,000 suggestions. As a result, the draft concept was reworked and on December 7, 1999 the Cabinet of Ministers adopted the new text of the concept of the National Programme "Integration of Society in Latvia". An expanded version of the Programme, incorporating specific priority projects, was adopted in February 2001.

Reflecting a renewed focus by the government on integration issues, the Secretariat of Minister of Special Assignments for Society Integration Affairs was established in November 2002. In November 2004 Ainars Latkovskis was appointed the Minister. The Secretariat has focused efforts to promote multi-dimensional dialogue among the various ethnic communities in Latvia. The Secretariat is comprised of more than 20 civil servants and several consultants working on specific issues in the integration of society.

The *Law on the Society Integration Foundation* was adopted by the Saeima (Parliament) on 5 July 2001 and entered into force on 1 September 2001. The work of the Foundation is overseen by a Council, which consists of five ministers having some portfolio responsibility for integration issues, five representatives from local governments and five from NGOs. The Foundation's budget is derived from the State Budget and contributions from individuals, organisations, and international donors.

The Foundation works closely with the Government to organise tenders for society integration projects, and supervises their implementation.

The Government continues to fund the SIF. In 2003, the government increased SIF financing to approximately EUR 2,700,000 and to EUR 5,860,000 in 2004. The SIF budget for 2005 is EUR 4,143,000. In 2003 82% of State Budget financing for the SIF was allocated to ethnic integration projects, and similarly in 2004. Since its establishment in 2001, the SIF has financed 535 integration projects. A total of EUR 8,000,000 has been allocated directly to institutions and projects dealing with integration in 2004.

Latvia's experience shows that the peaceful integration of a society working to overcome the legacy of destructive external forces - occupation, deportations, crimes against humanity and totalitarianism - can be accomplished. Integration is occurring in a spirit of goodwill and in line with international standards. Latvia has proved that its integration policy is successful - praise of the policy by our international partners serves as an additional proof of this. Latvia's achievements in society integration over the past ten years serve as a solid foundation for future work.