

Youth policy in Latvia



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Conclusions of the Council of Europe international review team

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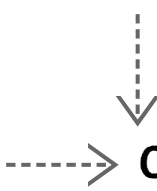
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Contents

- Executive summary** 5
- CHAPTER 1: Background and methodology** 11
 - International youth policy reviews of the Council of Europe 11
 - The Latvian youth policy review 12
 - Structure of the report 14
- CHAPTER 2: Introduction to Latvia** 15
- CHAPTER 3: Youth and youth policy in Latvia** 19
 - “Youth” 19
 - “Youth policy” – the national context 19
 - Funding* 24
 - Legislation* 25
 - Principles* 27
 - Key institutions and actors of regional and local “youth policy” delivery 29
 - Youth organisations and the political representation of young people 32
- CHAPTER 4: Key domains of youth policy** 37
 - Education and learning 38
 - Formal general education 39
 - Formal professional education and labour market matching* .. 45
 - Formal higher education* 47
 - Non-formal and out-of-school education* 49



Employment	54
Health	56
Sports policy	61
Family policy, child welfare, social protection	62
Youth justice	63
CHAPTER 5: Cross-cutting key issues for youth policy	67
Youth participation and citizenship	67
Youth information	72
Elites and outsiders	73
Social inclusion	75
Urban-rural polarisation	81
CHAPTER 6: Supporting youth policy	83
Youth research	83
Youth work, training and working conditions	85
The dissemination of good practice	89
International co-operation and exchange	90
Epilogue	95
Recommendations	97
Sources	107
Appendix 1 – Programme of the first visit to Latvia	114
Appendix 2 – Programme of the second visit to Latvia	115
Appendix 3 – Selected data for Latvia	116
Appendix 4 – National opinion and response to section on minority education and the status of the Russian language	118
Appendix 5 – National opinion and response to section on employment	120



Executive summary

This report represents the findings from the international review of national youth policy of the Republic of Latvia by a team of international experts, selected by the Council of Europe Directorate of Youth and Sport. In addition to a preparatory visit, the main sources informing this report include the following:

- the draft national report on youth policy in Latvia, prepared by the Latvian Ministry for Children and Family Affairs
- two study visits of one week each to Latvia by the International Review Team (IRT) in July and October/November 2007, during which meetings with key institutions of youth policy, as well as youth practitioners and young people, were held in the capital Riga and in the cities of Cesis and Rezekne
- a complete protocol of the meetings and discussions of the IRT during the two country visits
- documents and hand-outs provided by the Latvian authorities and partners in the review process
- additional documents and sources consulted in the course of the preparation of the international review.

The dedication and involvement of the Latvian partners, the professionalism and effectiveness of their contributions and presentations, as well as their hospitality and generosity, were crucial elements of the review process. The IRT wants to express its gratitude to all the parties and individuals involved.

Together with the other two Baltic states, Estonia in the north and Lithuania in the south, Latvia is among those former Soviet countries that regained independence at the beginning of the 1990s. After a rapid and still ongoing socio-economic transformation towards western standards of society and economy, they became part of the European Union in 2004. The development of Latvian youth policy, with all its strengths and weaknesses, has to be assessed against the background of challenges associated with such a radical transformation.

For the time being, the political category of “youth” lacks a clear definition. In Latvia, “youth” is a social group with fuzzy boundaries; it ranges from early teenage



years to the late twenties, depending on the perspective taken, with the policy focus tending to be on the lower half of the age range. Correspondingly, there is little consolidated “knowledge” about youth represented in policy making.

In 2004, the youth policy agenda was transferred to the Ministry of Children and Family Affairs, which currently holds the main responsibility for youth policy co-ordination. However, the Ministry of Education and Science, the former lead department, remains an important player and funding party, though it now has more targeted priorities. Framework legislation for youth policy is outdated, and the revision process is ongoing. More recent additions to the landscape of youth policy institutions include the Council of Youth Policy Co-ordination, which was established in 2005 in order to link the activities and interests of the youth NGOs, regional bodies and key ministers involved. However, while there is some improvement in youth policy co-ordination and communication, the overall funding suffers from the strong priorities of individual actors as well as a considerable imbalance in available funds; this further contributes to the overall actor- rather than content-driven approach to youth policy administration.

Latvian youth policy development is framed by seven youth policy principles that can be clustered into three main dimensions. The *vertical dimension* (a) of political youth citizenship contributes to democratic power sharing, facilitating constructive youth involvement in decision-making and the definition of society. Youth participation and information, as well as the consideration of youth interests, are relevant to this dimension, along which youth policy (in a narrow sense) usually formulates its core agenda. The *horizontal dimension* (b) of socio-economic youth citizenship promotes equality among young people living in different circumstances. Youth welfare, inclusion and non-discrimination are among the key principles characterising this dimension, where the success of youth policy depends principally on co-operation with associated specialised policies. The *reflexive dimension* (c) of youth policy development emphasises its sensitivity to changes in youth preferences, as well as in international best practice. This dimension, which is currently only outlined in Latvian youth policy development, requires further improvement and the consideration of additional aspects like youth research, dissemination of results and good practice, and professionalisation.

Youth policy delivery, below the national level and outside the privileged settings of Riga and other major cities, is insufficient and largely in the making. The concentration of resources remains high and regional disparities in the availability of youth activities are considerable. Furthermore, the perception at the centre of youth policy-making suffers from an overestimation of the actual capacities of municipalities. While the Ministry of Children and Family Affairs encourages, supervises and supports the development of regional and municipal strategies financially, there is still no guaranteed minimum provision of youth policy in the regions. The introduction of Youth Affairs Co-ordinators, as key actors in the municipalities, is likely to improve the situation only if this new position is equipped with both a feasible professional profile and appropriate employment conditions.



The national structures and institutions of youth representation and youth lobbying that provide diverse opportunities to youth involvement are currently under reconstruction. Established organisations of youth representation like the National Youth Council of Latvia, founded in 1992, suffer – like Latvian NGOs in general – from permanent uncertainty about their survival, as sustainable civil society structures and civic involvement are largely underdeveloped. In this respect, the Latvian authorities need to be reminded of their civil society responsibilities. At the same time, the motivation of individual citizens to participate needs to be enhanced, and the membership base of the National Youth Council claiming to represent “the voice of young people” should be broadened.

The high status of education in a country like Latvia is reflected in many ways. First, compulsory education was extended to 11 years, now including two years of pre-school education. This may be a remedy for inequalities in society and low levels of achievement; yet the policy intention behind this reform is somewhat unclear. Second, the increasing participation in upper secondary education is indicative of the general striving for advanced educational merits as well as, clearly, reflective of the bad reputation and quality of vocational and professional tracks. This development causes great concern among Latvian authorities and systematic attempts to anticipate processes of labour market matching are still at an early stage. Third, involvement in higher education, especially at the Bachelor and Masters level, has become a popular way of postponing career decisions among young people and of escaping the unfavourable labour market that characterised youth transitions in Latvia until recently. The popularity of PhD training, however, is very low and institutions are starting to have problems with ensuring an academic succession. Fourth, educational reform is at the core of Latvian policies towards minorities. The school reform of 2004 introduced extensive compulsory teaching in Latvian in minority schools, most of them for young Russians. In this way, the Russian language in particular is further marginalised, despite its importance in economic terms, as well as on an everyday basis. Fifth, Latvia has a strong and excellent tradition of hobby and interest education, providing large proportions of the youth population with opportunities for meaningful out-of-school activities. However, the domination of this traditional form of youth work comes at the cost of more innovative and less conventional types of non-formal education, which need to be developed on a complementary basis.

Although the Latvian labour market has recovered during recent years, unemployment remains a key problem affecting young people. Regional differences persist and continue to reinforce social inequalities. Labour market participation is additionally affected for young women by an absence of child care and pre-school facilities, as well as by high female unemployment after maternity leave. Latvian employment agencies run a programme of summer employment for children and young people from the age of 13 years. While the general idea of providing young people with opportunities for work experience in a protected environment can be supported, the low age threshold invites criticism. The increasing popularity of the measure calls for thorough research into its true causes, in order to establish



the extent to which poverty and difficult economic conditions may be underlying reasons for child involvement in employment.

Latvia follows a strategy of enhancing the youth-friendliness of health services by adopting access to, and provision of, services according to young people's needs within an environment of an overall system where health care provision has a comparatively low profile. So far, very few health centres for children and young people, offering specialised youth counselling for a broad range of issues, have been established. There is clearly a need to build up experience. First of all, issues of confidentiality and professional and gender-sensitive counselling still require improvement. Sex education outside the family – first of all in schools – is another pressing youth health need in a rapidly changing society like Latvia's. With regard to substance abuse, alcohol is currently the biggest threat to youth development in terms of the degree of its negative effect. There needs to be more targeted research and policy encouragement of positive health behaviour. Sports policy could play an important role in the promotion of healthy lifestyles among young people and in society in general.

Despite being one of its main responsibilities, youth policy is not sufficiently integrated with the other policy areas of the Ministry for Children and Family Affairs. Some of the complex youth problems, like family poverty or parents working abroad, can only be solved by co-ordinated policy strategies. Youth justice is another policy area that calls for concerted policies, including the provision of systematic links between probation and prison services and the police on the one hand and social services, schools and parents' organisations on the other.

Currently available forms of youth participation, like the popular school councils at many schools, provide valuable opportunities for responsible youth involvement. However, their status in terms of, for example, citizenship versus leadership learning is unclear. Furthermore, youth initiatives on the ground lack "channels to the top" that would carry their ideas further into processes of decision-making and altogether improve their youth-driven character. The further extension of Internet- as well as institution-based access to youth information will be critical for successful youth participation and citizenship in the future.

Most of the inequalities in the youth population follow the patterns of stratification in any given society. Yet some of these patterns are more closely related to youth policies, as such. In the case of Latvia, the two policy areas of education and participation are particularly at risk of producing elites and outsiders in society. On the one hand, the education system seems to provide few opportunities for young people to move on once they drop out of mainstream programmes. The consequence is the creation of a group of unqualified young people with limited perspectives and life chances. On the other hand, the structures of youth participation are vulnerable to being dominated by small and dedicated groups of young people, occupying all the opportunities in certain contexts.

There is no doubt that a large proportion of Latvian young people experience poverty and social exclusion. There is little that youth policy, in a narrow sense, can actually do to directly improve this situation. This horizontal dimension of socio-



economic youth citizenship requires the successful engagement of additional policy areas. Geographical location, as well as gender, are typical categories that cut across important dimensions of social exclusion like poverty, health, education and housing. Other disadvantaged groups include (young) people with disabilities, or those with special educational needs; they are essentially “invisible”. For different, mostly political reasons, ethnic as well as sexual minorities have a difficult status in Latvian society. Latvian society in general, as well as politicians and religious leaders, share a strong hostility towards sexual minorities, who have to face open discrimination. The category of non-citizens suffering legal disadvantages consists mainly of Russians, among them thousands of children. The integration of this group is slow; leaving the country is often the alternative.

Finally, youth research, youth work training and professionalisation, the dissemination of good practice, and international co-operation and exchange are means to improve the reflexive dimension of youth policy, which have so far been underutilised in developing Latvian youth policy. General as well as specific findings from youth research, or social reporting, are currently neglected, but could be key elements of evidence-based youth policy and information. The present structures of youth work and out of school activities could benefit from complementary and alternative approaches, with stronger emphasis on informality. Working conditions for youth practitioners, as well as their role, status and workload, need to be professionalised. The exchange, discussion and evaluation of national as well as international good practice should be part of such a process. International co-operation with Latvian youth policy is primarily characterised by geographical, cultural and historical criteria, while a stronger, additional orientation along relevant topics could be beneficial. Furthermore, international campaigns promoting the modernisation of European societies towards tolerance, diversity and equality deserve stronger political attention and commitment.



Chapter 1

Background and methodology

→ International youth policy reviews of the Council of Europe

The Council of Europe established its process of reviewing national youth policy a decade ago, when Finland proposed the idea to the European Steering Committee for Intergovernmental Co-operation in the Youth Field (the CDEJ). Indeed, Finland was the first country to volunteer for the process. Since then, the process has been refined but the initial objectives have remained the same. These are threefold:

- to provide an external perspective on a country's "youth policy"
- to offer ideas from that country to the other countries of the Council of Europe
- to build a framework for thinking about "youth policy" across Europe.

The methodology of the reviews is essentially as follows, once a country has requested that such a review should take place:

- a preparatory visit to establish key issues and priorities for attention
- the composition of an international review team, usually comprising three youth researchers (one of whom is designated rapporteur), one representative from each of the statutory bodies of the Youth Directorate of the Council of Europe (the CDEJ and the Advisory Council that represents youth organisations) and a member of the Secretariat
- the production of a national report on youth policy by the country concerned
- a first visit by the international review team – usually focused on the central administration and youth policy objectives and aspirations
- a second visit by the international review team – usually involving visits beyond the capital city and exploring issues of youth policy implementation and practice
- the preparation of a draft international review report
- a national hearing in the country concerned



- the completion of the international report
- an international hearing before the Joint Council of the Youth Directorate
- a follow-up with the country concerned, ideally about two years later.

The process is public and transparent. Both the objectives and the nature of the review process have been defined and elaborated in a number of publications and therefore do not require further detail here (this information can be found in Williamson 2002 and Williamson 2008).

-----> **The Latvian youth policy review¹**

The International Review Team (IRT) was appointed by the Council of Europe and consisted of seven members. The group was chaired by Ms Seija Astala, from Finland, who is a member of the CDEJ. Mr Aleksandar Jovanovic, from Serbia, represented the Advisory Council side of the co-management structure of the Youth Directorate of the Council of Europe. Mr Guy-Michel Brandtner represented the Council of Europe's Youth Directorate Secretariat in the review process. Prof. Howard Williamson, Wales/UK, prepared and co-ordinated the review exercise on behalf of the Youth Directorate of the Council of Europe. Three additional youth researchers complemented the team: Dr Metka Kuhar, Slovenia/University of Ljubljana; Dr Julia Zubok, Russia/Russian Academy of Sciences in Moscow; and Mr Herwig Reiter (rapporteur), Germany/Graduate School of Social Sciences at the University of Bremen.

Though unfamiliar with the Latvian context, the members of the team felt that they complemented each other very well in their previous experience and substantive interests and expertise.² The excellent information provided by the national partners only facilitated the process of understanding the situation of young people in Latvia.

The main sources of information feeding into the review process consisted of information collected during a preparatory visit, the national report (Ministry of Children and Family Affairs 2007) prepared by the Youth Department of the Ministry of Children and Family Affairs, and information and documents provided during two visits to Latvia by institutions, parties and individuals involved in Latvian

1. After the national hearing in January 2008, the national authorities requested the inclusion of the following statement regarding this position: "During national hearing participants emphasised the crucial role of this review process and its assistance for further development of Latvian youth policy. Besides there was the opinion that the review process was not completely objective because it did not include sufficient regional scope as well as lacking wide opinions of regional youth workers and institutions."

2. It should be mentioned that there was one isolated critical voice during the national hearing in January 2008 questioning the "authority" of the IRT for consisting of foreign members only and having had only a very limited time to study and understand the Latvian situation.



youth policy. In addition, documents, websites and research evidence supporting the process and closing gaps in the knowledge of the IRT were consulted. These additional sources are indicated in the list of references.

During the preparatory visit by Prof. Howard Williamson, from 29 to 31 January 2007, key issues of Latvian youth policy were explored and discussed with the Minister for Children and Family Affairs, members of the Youth Department, representatives of youth NGOs, regional and local administrations, and youth researchers. Priorities were identified for consideration in both the Latvian national report on youth policy and in the programme of the first visit of the IRT of the Council of Europe.

In the course of the first visit of the IRT to Latvia, from 16 to 22 July 2007, the information provided in the national report, which was available shortly before, was complemented with an introduction of official and NGO perspectives on Latvian youth policy. During this first visit, which was dedicated to the state youth policy landscape represented in the capital Riga, the IRT also had the opportunity to meet the Minister for Children and Family Affairs on two occasions, as well as the Ministers for Welfare, for Education and Science, and for Interior Affairs (see Appendix 1, visit I). During a concluding meeting of the IRT, common and individual impressions were discussed and those issues identified that required additional information and/or consideration during the second visit, in order to complete and refine the IRT's understanding of, and reflection on, Latvian youth policy.

On the basis of the priorities articulated by the IRT at the end of the first visit, the Youth Department of the Ministry for Children and Family Affairs prepared the programme for the second visit. Additionally, the months between the two visits were used by the Youth Department to collect and provide supplementary information. The members of the IRT used this period to continue to discuss and reflect on their impressions, as well as details of the national report. This resulted in a preliminary draft report that reviewed selected youth policy issues; it was available to the IRT for comment before the second visit.

Apart from some complementary meetings with youth policy protagonists on the national level, the second visit to Latvia, from 29 October to 4 November 2007, was dedicated to confronting all the conceptual information about the national, regional and local youth policy framework, with the reality of youth policy on the ground and outside the capital of Riga. The IRT spent two full days "on the road". The first day led the IRT to the city of Cesis, in the region of Vidzeme, north-east of Riga. Cesis is one of the oldest towns in Latvia with about 18 500 inhabitants, most of whom are ethnically Latvians. It is famous for its mediaeval Livonian castle, one of the most important tourist attractions of the country. Rezekne in the eastern region of Latgale was chosen as a contrast. The city has some 37 000 ethnically diverse inhabitants, and the region is among those with the highest unemployment in Latvia. In both cities the IRT met with youth policy actors at all levels, as well as young people at schools, youth centres and youth clubs (see Appendix 2, visit II).

In the course of both visits, the members of the IRT had the opportunity to ask questions and to discuss and reflect on the information provided. The common



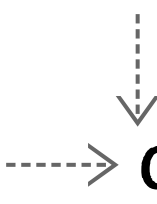
perspective and opinion of youth policy in Latvia established during these discussions provided the basis for the present report. The IRT was invited to assess Latvian youth policy in a moment of transition. Currently, youth policy in Latvia is a “moving target” gathering momentum and the team understands that it has a crucial role in supporting youth policy development in this very moment of transition, by providing a critical perspective on the current situation and the recent past. This is our focus of attention. The national report’s many proposals and intentions for Latvian youth policy in the near future cannot be evaluated at this stage.

Apart from facilitating constructive youth policy development in the country under review, the international review exercise equally aims to contribute to the creation of an international knowledge base of national youth policy development. The country reviews undertaken by the Council of Europe that are now available³ constitute a unique form of policy expertise in Europe. The documentation of both the strengths and the weaknesses of national policies invites the European and international audience to participate in European youth policy development. The two synthesis reports produced so far by Howard Williamson (2002, 2008), which reflect and integrate the available experience from a bottom-up perspective, demonstrate this purpose. The key policy domains and issues identified in these two reports provided the expert team of the Council of Europe with a background, against which the youth policy information provided during the two country visits and in the national report was considered.

-----> **Structure of the report**

In terms of topics addressed and with regard to structuring the argument, the report follows the suggestions made by Williamson (2002, 2008) as well as the example of the recent international review on Cyprus (Williamson, CoE 2007). This is undertaken with the purpose of unfolding the uniqueness of reflecting upon a specific case within a general framework, established on the basis of work done over the last decade. In so doing, the report aims to be “useful” and instructive in two ways. First and foremost, the evidence-based analysis and the formulation of recommendations must benefit youth policy development in the country under review. Second, such a procedure has to ensure that the findings feed into an evolving, comparative and, in research terms, empirically-grounded debate of youth policies and their development in Europe. The progress made so far in structuring and synthesising the process and the improvement in the practical format of the international review exercise seem to sufficiently justify this approach. The notes taken by Howard Williamson throughout the whole review process (including the preparatory visit) and during all the meetings of the IRT in particular, were an invaluable source of detail, which provided the foundation for this report.

3. Since 1997, national and international reports of the reviews of Finland, the Netherlands, Sweden, Spain, Romania, Estonia, Luxembourg, Lithuania, Malta, Norway, Cyprus and Slovakia have been published. Further reviews are currently in process, at different stages (cf. Armenia, Latvia, Hungary and Moldova).



Chapter 2

introduction to Latvia

The Republic of Latvia is one of the Baltic countries in the north-east of Europe with access to the Baltic Sea. In addition to Estonia in the north and Lithuania in the south, it now borders Russia in the east and Belarus in the south-east. The area of Latvia has been populated for thousands of years by various Baltic tribes. In the 13th century, a confederation of separate lands was established under German domination, including the territory of today's Latvia and Southern Estonia, with Riga as an important trading centre of the eastern Baltic region. After the confederation dissolved in the 16th century, today's Latvian territory came under Polish rule. Seventeenth-century Latvia was characterised by struggles between Poland, Sweden and Russia over control of the area. By the end of the 18th century, the Latvian territory was under Russian rule, which lasted for over a century, until 1918 when Latvia proclaimed full independence. The first republic of Latvia lasted for little more than two decades. In 1940, Latvia was occupied by the Soviet Union, then a year later for four years by Nazi Germany and, finally, for a further 46 years by the Soviet Union again. During the long Soviet occupation, Latvian people suffered from massive purges and deportations. One way of undermining Latvian culture and language was the organised mass migration to Latvia of labourers and soldiers and then their families from Russia and other Soviet republics.

The “national rebirth” of Latvia, as Dreifelds (1996) calls it, started as recently as in the late 1980s with the early signs of the crumbling of the Soviet Union. In August 1991, the independence of Latvia was officially restored based on the Constitution of 1922. Today, Latvia is a parliamentary democracy with a vivid political landscape. Since the restoration of independence in May 1990, Latvia has had 13 governments; the current one has been in power since 20 December 2007.⁴ As in the other Baltic states, the process of nation-building and democratic consolidation is ongoing (see, for example, Ehin 2007).

4. www.mk.gov.lv/en/mk/vesture (Last access: 30.12. 2007).



Latvia is a small country. With a population of 2.3 million people and a territory of 64 600 sq. km, Latvia is about the size of the Republic of Ireland but with only half of its population. With an average of 36 inhabitants per square kilometre, the population density of Latvia is rather low but still higher than that of Estonia, Sweden, Norway, Finland or Russia, for example. The concentration of residents in cities is considerable: about two out of three people live in urban areas. More than 700 000 people, about one third of the total population, live in the capital of Riga; another 400 000 people live in one of the other six major cities of the country (Central Statistical Bureau of Latvia, 2006). However, Latvia has more than 400 rural municipalities distributed over 26 districts.

In 2005, the Latvian youth population, between the ages of 15 and 29, amounted to some 520 000 young people. According to statistical projections, the Latvian population will decrease by about 8% between 2005 and 2020; the youth population between the ages of 15 and 29 years is estimated to decrease by 34% in the same period. Changes in fertility, migration and the gradual extension of life expectancy are among the main reasons for this development (Central Statistical Bureau of Latvia, 2006).⁵

About 60% of the population are ethnic Latvians. The high proportion of Russians (28%) has its roots in the Soviet population policy during the occupation of Latvia. Before the Second World War, Russians were below 10%. Other national groups include people from Belarus (3.7%), Ukraine (2.5%), Poland (2.5%) and Lithuania (1.4%) (Ministry of Children and Family Affairs, 2007: 3). The sole state language is Latvian, but Russian remains equally relevant in everyday life, due to the high proportion of speakers of East Slavic languages. Most Latvians can communicate in both languages; in Riga and the eastern province of Latgale, East Slavic languages dominate (Central Statistical Bureau of Latvia, 2006). More than 40% of Latvians have no religious denomination; some 24% are associated with the Evangelical Lutheran Church, about 18% with the Roman Catholic Church and 15% with the Orthodox Church.⁶

The persistently high proportion of members of non-Latvian ethnic groups and related political and societal tensions after the restoration of independence is one of the major legacies of the Soviet occupation (Dreifelds, 1996, chapter 5). After regaining independence, Latvian political elites decided to exclude Soviet immigrants from full citizenship and general elections. Instead, the new status of Latvian “non-citizenship” with restricted civic and political rights was introduced to embrace this group, consisting mostly of Russian-speaking residents (Kruma, 2007). Although access to citizenship was facilitated in the meantime, the share of non-citizens still amounted to about 18% (or 420 000 people) of the resident population at the beginning of 2006 (Central Statistical Bureau of Latvia, 2006).

5. See Appendix 3 for selected indicators of reproductive behaviour, family formation, health, education, child care.

6. *Enzyklopädie des europäischen Ostens*, Internet: <https://claroline.uni-klu.ac.at/eoo/index.php/Lettland> (Retrieved: 28.12.2007) and Graudins (no year).



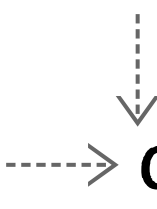
The speed with which Latvia transformed into a democracy and market economy was remarkable. Within less than a decade, and after comprehensive economic reforms, Latvia managed to fulfil the criteria for being invited to access negotiations with the European Union in 1999; in 2004 it became a member. Furthermore, Latvia has become a participant in many other international organisations and agreements, including the UNO and the OSCE (1991), the World Bank (1992), the Council of Europe (1995), the International Monetary Fund (1996), the World Trade Organisation (1999), NATO (2004), and the Schengen travel area (2007).

The socio-economic transformation of Latvia was not an easy one and still demands a lot of patience and resilience from its people. As the social report for 2006 puts it, in a nutshell:

Due to Latvia's transition to market economy in a comparatively short time and the inability of some population groups to adapt to the radical economic changes, society has had to face the problem of poverty and social exclusion accompanying it though, on the whole, the country experienced economic growth. (Ministry of Welfare of the Republic of Latvia, 2007: 106)

According to the GDP development, the economic performance of the country is improving and the average household disposable income is increasing. Yet the capacity of the economy is still weak and the level of social protection is among the lowest in the European Union (Petrasova, 2007). The standard of living is generally low, income levels are polarised, poverty is widespread, and the sensitivity of people to social injustice is high (Aidukaite, 2004; Rajevska, 2005, 2006; Ministry of Economics of the Republic of Latvia, 2007; Eurostat, 2007).

The development of Latvian youth policy has to be assessed against these socio-political challenges associated with Latvia's transformation. Although the IRT was impressed with the overall progress Latvia has made during less than two decades of democracy and open economy, it became equally obvious that the process of reform and development of both Latvian society in general, and youth policy in particular, is ongoing. Against this background, the IRT wants to underline that the recommendations and, at times, criticism, produced in the frame of the review exercise are articulated for entirely constructive purposes: they are intended to support the Latvian partners in assessing the status quo of youth policy and in identifying forward-thinking priorities for youth and youth policy development in a generally difficult societal situation.



Chapter 3

Youth and youth policy in Latvia



“Youth”

Youth is a *constructed* category, and the inconsistency of definitions of youth in the international context underlines this. Unlike childhood, the boundaries of which have become somewhat sharper with the UN Convention of the Rights of the Child coming into force in the year 1990,⁷ the category of youth suffers from such an international attempt to standardise its delimitation. The variation of definitions of youth in policies across countries in Europe and elsewhere, emphasises the fact that youth is first and foremost *politically constructed*: “youth” needs to be defined for the purpose of making legislation relevant, institutions responsible and budgets available. During their first visit to Latvia, the IRT was told that the prepared Youth Act will include such a policy definition of age boundaries of youth, but the discussion about it was still ongoing. Several suggestions have been put forward, all of them indicating the policy struggle and the “youth lobbying” in the background. Within the draft of the national report, the only definition of youth in terms of age range can be found in the context of the discussion of youth-friendly health care services (Ministry of Children and Family Affairs 2007: 83). Following a suggestion of the WHO, youth is defined as the age group between 10 and 24 years – those aged between 10 and 19 years are considered adolescents, those between 15 and 24 years are defined as young people.

Due to this lack of a comprehensive definition of youth in the national report of Latvia, the IRT had difficulties understanding the second dimension attached to the definition of youth, namely its “policy character”: for instance, is youth primarily considered to be a resource, or a problem (Williamson, 2002: 31)? While

7. Article 1 of the UN Convention of the Rights of the Child: “For the purposes of the present Convention, a child means every human being below the age of eighteen years unless under the law applicable to the child, majority is attained earlier.”



it was clear that youth would continue to be an important category in independent Latvia, the national report is not explicit about the current significance of youth in and for Latvian society. There is only an implicit indication that youth is becoming an increasingly valuable social group and human resource. This is, for instance, expressed in the emphasis on the importance of creating youth-friendly environments, the concern about the low level of voluntary participation of young people and, perhaps, the involvement of young people in patriotic education and pre-military service training. Finally, there is no mention of the role of young people in the maintenance of Latvian society: what is their role as citizens both contributing to, and benefiting from, societal welfare? What is their share in the emigration from the country and why do young people leave and not come back?

This shortcoming seems to point to a more general weakness in the national report and, perhaps, youth policy – namely the almost total absence of a research perspective on youth. Apart from a brief mention of the number of young people between the ages of 15 and 24 (359 000) and their share in the total population (15.7%) at the beginning of the national report (Ministry of Children and Family Affairs 2007: 3), there is little evidence, at least in the report, that youth has a particular profile within society. How has the youth population developed over the last two decades? What is its composition in terms of social, educational and ethnic background? Where and under which circumstances do young people live? What does the everyday life of a young person look like and how does it change in relation to ageing within the youth period? What is the level of participation of young people in leaving the country and making use of the more recent options of mobility within the European Union? How are young people different in this respect from the general population?

Questions like these should be interesting not only for youth researchers but for policy makers concerned with improving the living conditions of the young population of the country.

Recommendation 1

In line with the suggestions put forward in the second synthesis report (Williamson, 2008), the IRT therefore recommends the strengthening of a “critically reflective analysis of the social condition of young people’ in Latvia, as the basis for youth policy. Basic demographic data, available from official statistics, needs to be integrated and complemented by targeted and problem-oriented research, in order to provide policy making on a regular basis, with the most fundamental information and knowledge about the life of young people in Latvia, as well as their needs and problems.



-----> Youth policy – the national context

After the collapse of the Soviet Union, Latvian society, like many other European societies with a communist past, had to renegotiate and come to terms with its history in the 20th century. Among the many socio-economic and political challenges that this process involved, the issue of youth policy had little explicit priority in the early years of independence. From the mid-1990s onwards, however, Latvian youth policy, like many other policy areas, started to evolve as a contested policy field at the intersection of traditional interests, originating from the communist and the pre-communist past on the one side and new ideas originating from “the West” on the other. Latvian youth policy at the crossroads was reflected in institutional, as well as in substantive terms. For instance, on the one hand, and most visibly, structured leisure time activities (that is “hobby and interest education”), similar to those of the former communist structures of youth management, continued to exist as an important element of youth policy. On the other hand, international co-operation and counselling in youth policy development and youth work introduced new concepts to the Latvian context. These included civil society development by facilitating participation, establishing NGOs, promoting autonomy and non-formal methods of education and training.

Up to the present day, these two strands in youth policy development are represented by the State Youth Initiative Centre founded in 1996 under the Ministry of Education and Science on the one side, and the National Youth Council of Latvia (founded in 1992), together with associated NGOs on the other (see Table 1, below). Originally competing and subsequently complementary in their orientation, these two parties now share the common goal of involving young people in voluntary and constructive out-of-class activities and other forms of active youth participation. Due to their different histories and status (including funding) within the Latvian landscape of youth policy, both organisations come with distinct approaches and priorities. The State Youth Initiative Centre has its main focus on various forms of hobby education and has, in the meantime, lost some of its importance as a key player in youth policy development. Yet its funding is secured, as it is subordinate to, and financed by, the Ministry of Education and Science.⁸ The National Youth Council of Latvia, which is described below, together with main youth organisations, has first of all representative, co-ordinating and consultative functions, and it has become an important driving force in the process of reforming youth legislation. Yet, due to its formal independence from state structures, the Youth Council seems to lack the certainty of financial survival, despite the fact that this formal independence does not release the state from its responsibility to create appropriate conditions for NGOs.

8. The agenda of the State Youth Initiative Centre is discussed in more detail in the context of the youth policy dimension of education.



Table 1 – Timeline of landmarks in Latvian youth policy development on the national level⁹

YEAR	INSTITUTIONS CREATED AND RESULTS OBTAINED	
1992		National Youth Council of Latvia
1993		
1994		
1995		
1996	Ministry of Education and Science – youth policy responsibility Foundation of the State Youth Initiative Centre (SYIC)	
1997	Rezekne conference: “Co-operation of the state, municipalities and non-governmental organisations to shape and implement youth policy”	
1998	Agreement of exchange of youth issues between Ministry of Education and Science, National Youth Council and the Latvian Student Association State Programme on Youth Policy, 1998-2002 (without budget)	
1999	1st Latvian Youth Congress (origin of the idea of the Youth Policy Co-ordination Council)	
2000		
2001		
2002	State Youth Policy Concept drafted by the SYIC (accepted, still valid)	Youth Act (drafted under the leadership of the National Youth Council)
2003		
August 2004		Ministry of Children and Family Affairs (founded)
September 2004	Transfer of youth policy agenda to the Ministry of Children and Family Affairs	
November 2004		Preliminary formation of the Council of Youth Policy Co-ordination
May 2005		Establishment of the Council of Youth Policy Co-ordination
August 2005		Submission of Youth Act to State Secretaries

9. This overview includes only those youth policy institutions and events that are mentioned in the national report. It is for this reason that other important actors such as, for instance, the National Agency of the EU Youth in Action programme are missing here.



Table 1 (continued)

2006	(State Youth Initiative Centre)	(National Youth Council)
January 2007		Preparatory visit for the Council of Europe youth policy review
April 2007		Council of Youth Policy Coordination – 1st meeting
July 2007		Council of Europe youth policy review – 1st visit
Oct./Nov. 2007		Council of Europe youth policy review – 2nd visit
January 2008		Public presentation of the draft international report of the Council of Europe at the national hearing in Riga
March 2008		Presentation of the final international report of the Council of Europe to the Joint Council of the Directorate of Youth and Sport at the EYCB Budapest

The first State Youth Policy Programme was elaborated by the State Youth Initiative Centre in 1998. Yet, due to the lack of funding, little more than the recognised sub-agenda of interest-education could be implemented – many other key issues already identified by then, but not followed up, remained relevant. In 2002, the State Youth Policy Concept also drafted by the State Youth Initiative Centre was accepted; it still provides the basis for the current youth policy agenda. Yet, the more recent administrative reform of the institutional framework and initiatives to update the legislation suggest a re-orientation of youth policy.

In 2004, the responsibility for co-ordinating and organising state youth policy was moved from the Ministry of Education and Science to the Ministry of Children and Family Affairs. The current configuration of youth policy development and administration puts the Ministry of Children and Family Affairs at the core of a vast network of parties and interests involved. The ministry’s responsibilities, those planned for the near future as well as those that are currently relevant, are constantly growing (Ministry of Children and Family Affairs 2007: 19-20). Only recently the Agency of International Youth Programmes was also moved under its administration and away from the Ministry of Education and Science.

Additionally, a separate Council of Youth Policy Co-ordination was established, in order to link the activities and interests of NGOs, regional bodies and 18 ministries in total, representing more than 300 institutions at different levels, which directly and indirectly contribute to the shaping of youth policy. The council brings together the eight key ministers involved in youth policy – the ministers for Economics, Interior Affairs, Education and Science, Welfare, Culture, Health, Children and Family Affairs, and Special Assignments for Social Integration – as well as the



Chairman of the Latvian Association of Local and Regional Governments, and representatives of three youth NGOs (the National Youth Council of Latvia, the Latvian Student Association and the Latvian School Student Council). Furthermore, several partners and consultative institutions, like the biennial Latvian Youth Congress, are involved in shaping youth policy by means of working groups and other forms of participation. The fact that additional consultative bodies are planned indicates the need to improve the structures of youth policy, as well as the diverse interests in shaping this policy area.

In view of the extensive network of institutions and councils associated with youth policy development and administration on the national level, the IRT strongly supports the idea of a co-ordinated youth policy and finds that the co-ordinating body – the Council of Youth Policy Co-ordination – provides a valuable forum for discussions and information exchange, with a high political profile, expressing commitments on the highest level. However, as the council is first of all an advisory body and meets twice a year only, it does not necessarily ensure efficient implementation of political decision-making in practice. Experience shows that such meetings of political representatives are best informed and prepared by a cross-sectoral group of senior officials, which would then continue to be responsible for further elaboration, implementation and monitoring of the recommendations and guidelines given by an institution like the Council of Youth Policy Co-ordination. This kind of preparatory body could facilitate a workable long-term co-operation between the relevant ministries and would ensure continuity beyond the fluctuation of governments typical of countries in transformation. From this point of view, the IRT welcomes the intention of the Ministry of Children and Family Affairs to establish a “standing joint working group of state administration” (national report, p. 29), which could contribute to the continuity needed in any policy area.

Recommendation 2

The IRT encourages the Latvian authorities to advance the consolidation of its national youth policy structures in order to promote continuity and avoid redundancy, additional bureaucratic structures and competition. It could be the task of a cross-sectoral body to draft a strategy document and action plan, on the basis of an identification of urgent issues, which is then approved by the government. The document should involve all relevant actors (national, regional and local authorities, NGOs, youth researchers, etc.) and suggest a division of responsibilities together with measurable objectives and budgetary implications. In its overall approach, youth policy development needs to move further towards being predominantly content- rather than institution- or actor-driven.

Funding

As in many other countries, Latvian youth policy is funded by several ministries and it is not possible to put precise figures on their individual contributions.



Altogether, the budget for youth policy was continually increased, underlining the growing significance of this policy area. The national report (Ministry of Children and Family Affairs, 2007: 12) even claims that a considerable increase in the overall state budget of Latvia is actually due to youth-related expenses. The report informs the IRT that the total expenses of the Youth Policy State Programme of the Ministry of Children and Family Affairs alone amount to 335 000 LVL¹⁰ for the year 2007; this is 22 times more than in previous years. However, this amount needs to be considered relatively, as the funds are supposed to cover, among many other things, cost-intensive activities like the establishment of youth initiative centres, as well as a youth information system and youth research activities.¹¹

In view of the fact that the Ministry of Defence financed the activities of one single institution, the Centre of Young National Guards (*Jaunsardzes centrs*), with more than 1 million LVL in 2006, the IRT needs to raise the question whether the overall budgeting of the youth policy agenda suffers from a certain imbalance in priorities. The near doubling of the means available for hobby education in towns and regional municipalities (including salaries and social insurance of teachers) from 4 million LVL in 2003 to nearly 8 million LVL in 2007, underlines the somewhat disproportional budgeting of youth policies. It could be one of the tasks of a mediating body of expertise to initiate a strategy of both co-ordinated prioritising of activities and co-ordinated budgeting.

Recommendation 3

The IRT has the impression that the current praxis of youth policy budgeting is characterised by the strong individual priorities of various bodies of state administration. In view of the transversal character of youth policy, the IRT encourages the actors involved to re-evaluate and better adjust their priorities to the needs of young people. If co-ordinated budgeting was possible within the overall framework of government funding, it could especially improve the horizontal dimension of youth policy, referring to the quality of socio-economic youth citizenship in Latvia.

Legislation

The status quo of Latvian state youth policy is characterised by transformation and consolidation. While legislation dedicated to youth policy is rare, there is a range of legislative instruction, as well as strategy documents, guiding youth policy practice.

10. 1 LVL is roughly equivalent to 1.42 EURO.

11. The significant impact of youth NGO funding provided by various EU programmes needs to be underlined additionally, as the discussion during the national hearing indicated. Many youth NGOs with sustainable influence on policy development in Latvia were founded and sustained mainly by these sources.



On the basis of our meetings with government institutions and agencies, the IRT had the impression that youth policy is highly regulated, though indirectly, by relevant legislation in which it is embedded. Through to the end of our country visits and with the Youth Act still being processed, it remained unclear to the IRT to what extent the general legislation is actually facilitating – or hampering – youth policy practice.

The still valid main guiding youth policy document is the State Youth Policy Concept, accepted by the Cabinet of Ministers in March 2002. It defines “youth” as the demographic group between the ages of 15 and 25 and “youth policy” as an “independent sphere of state administration which defines goals, tasks and events in solving the youth-related problems on all levels of the public administration” (Ministry of Children and Family Affairs, 2007: 10). Meanwhile, the process of formulating and ratifying a Youth Act is ongoing; it started as early as 2002 as a major concern of the National Youth Council of Latvia. A final draft of this Youth Act, the outcome of “an active co-operation” (Ministry of Children and Family Affairs 2007: 8) between the Ministry of Children and Family Affairs and the National Youth Council of Latvia, has been submitted to the parliament and is being processed at the time of the review. The Youth Act is supposed to set the agenda for youth policy and specify the responsibilities of the parties involved, as well as the requirements for financial support. The IRT was informed that the key issues include voluntary work, employment and leisure, and non-formal education. The Youth Act will also define the boundaries of “youth” in terms of a policy target group; due to the many administrative issues attached, it is one of the difficulties of the process to arrive at an agreement with regard to a common definition of the age limits of “youth”.

Some parties involved, especially the National Youth Council, the Youth Department of the Ministry for Children and Family Affairs, as well as those responsible for youth policy on a regional level, consider the Youth Act to be a vital stepping stone in youth policy development. The arguments in favour of this particular youth legislation range from indicating its strengthening function for the status of youth policy institutions at and below the national level, to securing the mere survival of the already weak youth NGO structures. The two visits provided the IRT with the opportunity to discuss the issue of the Youth Act with many of the parties involved. The replacement of the fuzzy current state of affairs by a legal “localisation” of the youth policy agenda was a common demand. The postponement of its ratification by the parliament is a source of frustration in the youth policy scene (Laboratory of Analytical and Strategic Study 2007). The IRT also had the opportunity to learn about structures of youth policy delivery in regional and local contexts that certainly deserve the label of “best practice”, but were established without the availability of comprehensive youth legislation. Yet there is no doubt that these structures would not exist without the dedication of highly motivated individuals ready to advance their agenda through personal sacrifices. The IRT observes this development with concern, as it is not sustainable. In the long run, youth policy development and professionalisation will require individual commitment, supported by



appropriate institutional back up. Key legislation, like the Youth Act or a similar regulation, could be an important signal underlining the political commitment to youth policy.

Recommendation 4

The IRT had the impression that the large number of strategy documents directly and indirectly instructing youth policy (for example, the State Youth Policy Concept 2002, Youth Policy State Programme 2005-09, national guidelines on cultural policy for 2006-15, the national programme Culture 2010 and so on), with their implementation and follow-up, posed a great challenge. In the future, it might be advisable to consider the possibility of producing only one strategy document, covering the competencies of different ministries in the youth field. Such a legal tool, or the common action plan suggested above, could serve this purpose. In either case, it would need to determine the links between general legislation and youth policy practice.

Principles

The Ministry of Children and Family Affairs is currently elaborating new guidelines for national youth policy that should be drafted by the year 2008; these guidelines will provide the framework of youth policy development and delivery for the next ten years. The objective of youth policy in Latvia – “to improve youth life quality by promoting youth initiatives, partnership and support” (Ministry of Children and Family Affairs 2007: 11) – is framed by seven guiding principles:

1. *Partnership principle* – to enhance active participation of young people in the processes of the society.
2. *Information availability principle* – to promote the provision of young people with information according to their needs and interests, especially the information that is necessary for active participation in all the processes of society.
3. *Equal opportunities principle* – to provide all young people, without any discrimination, with the potential to take part in all the processes of society and to be equal members of society.
4. *Observance of youth interests principle* – to take into account the interests, rights, needs and possibilities of young people, while solving youth-related issues.
5. *Favourable social and economical premises principle* – to enhance developing such social and economical conditions that provide all young people an opportunity to be accepted and integrated members of Latvian society.
6. *Mobility and international co-operation availability principle* – to provide opportunities for youth mobility, allowing young people to learn new



skills and knowledge outside their place of abode and to promote the implementation of recommendations from other countries and the exchange and adoption of good practice into Latvian youth policy.

7. *Youth integration facilitation principle* – to facilitate youth integration into society, including the integration of minority groups, and to ensure multi-cultural dialogue at all stages of youth policy planning and implementation (Ministry of Children and Family Affairs, 2007: 11).

In line with the main subjects of youth policy identified in previous reviews (Williamson 2002, Williamson/Council of Europe, 2007), these youth policy principles address issues of socio-economic youth citizenship, of political youth citizenship, peer relevance and accessibility, and of openness and development. In other words, Latvian youth policy intends:

- i. to be non-discriminatory, and inclusive (see 3 and 7, above) while at the same time contributing to the improvement of the socio-economic conditions for social integration (5);
- ii. to be participatory and subjectively relevant to young people (1, 4), while at the same time providing access to necessary information (2);
- iii. to open up youth as well as youth policy development itself to the outside world and its influences (6).

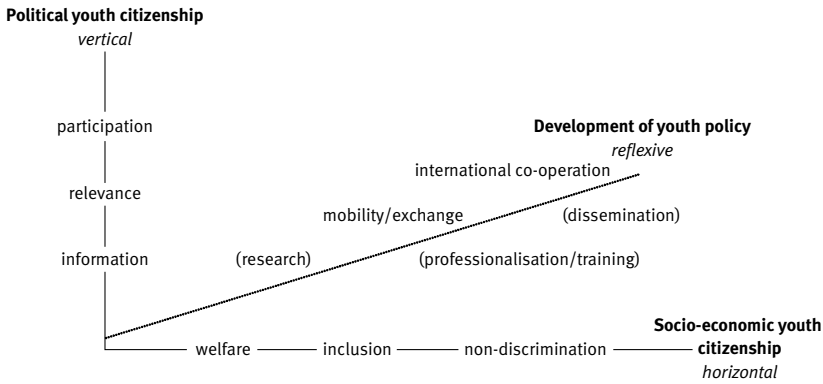
Such a vision of youth policy incorporates horizontal, vertical and reflexive dimensions. The horizontal dimension (i) promotes equality among young people living in different circumstances; this is the dimension where the success of youth policy depends most on the co-operation with associated specialised policies. The vertical dimension (ii) contributes to democratic power sharing and facilitates constructive youth involvement in decision-making and the definition of society. The reflexive dimension (iii) of such a vision of youth policy emphasises its sensitivity to changes in youth preferences, as well as in international best practice. This distinction is first of all analytical, as the dimensions clearly overlap.

In order to introduce an element of “internal assessment” into this primarily “external” policy review exercise, the above-mentioned dimensions underlying the seven principles of youth policy in Latvia put forward in the national report – namely socio-economic youth citizenship (horizontal), political youth citizenship, peer relevance and accessibility (vertical), and openness and development (reflexive) – are applied to discuss cross-cutting key issues on the basis of the review of the key domains of youth policy. In this way, the status quo of Latvian youth policy can be challenged on the basis of its own criteria and possible ways of improvement can be suggested in line with the national authorities’ own standards.

Figure 1, below, outlines the three-dimensional space of youth policy based on these three dimensions. Crucial policy elements that can be added on the basis of the discussion in this review to the axis of youth policy development are included in brackets (that is dissemination, research, professionalisation/training).



Figure 1 – Principles of youth policy



Recommendation 5

The IRT welcomes the youth policy principles established in the national report and encourages the Latvian authorities to further orient their youth policy accordingly. However, as the international review indicates, the reflexive dimension of youth policy development and professionalisation in particular will require additional efforts in order to create the basis for a sustainable improvement.

-----> **Key institutions and actors of regional and local “youth policy” delivery**

Youth policy at the regional and local level is first of all a matter of available funds. The 26 regions of the country are totally autonomous with regard to youth policy and, apart from issues associated with basic infrastructure provision (for example schools, health, and transport), youth policy delivery in regions and municipalities is largely in the making. There is no guaranteed minimum provision at the regional level. Although the Ministry of Children and Family Affairs encourages, supervises and supports the development of regional and municipal strategies including financially, only eight out of 33 municipalities are currently drafting youth affairs strategies. These strategies are among the preconditions of applying for public funding. Meanwhile, some 30 Youth Initiative Centres, essentially institutions providing youth leisure time activities, have been established since 2004, nine of them in 2007. While they do not get involved with their programme of activities, the Ministry of Children and Family Affairs funds these meeting places for young people for a period of up to five years, before the regions have to take over all costs.

Regions and municipalities promoting youth policy development can appoint so-called Youth Affairs Co-ordinators as key actors at the interface of national



guidelines on youth policy and everyday implementation. Their status is not consolidated and their profile, in terms of responsibilities and place of work, lacks clarity. Some of them hold additional positions, first of all in the context of (hobby) education, which is the only aspect of youth policy that is well-developed in all areas of Latvia. Currently, 19 out of 51 co-ordinators work in one of the 26 regions, the others in one of the municipalities. Seven regions do not have Youth Affairs Co-ordinators.

The problem of coverage and local provision of youth policy is recognised in the national report. However, the capacity to deal with the costs of youth policy remains entirely dependent on the tax revenue of the respective municipalities. In turn, no youth policy responsibility is assigned to municipalities, due to the endemic lack of financial resources.

Two full days of the programme during the second visit of the IRT to Latvia were dedicated to regional youth policy. Following a tightly packed schedule, the IRT met with youth practitioners, young people, authorities and other individuals and organisations involved in regional and local youth affairs in Cesis and Rezekne. These meetings provided the IRT with an excellent opportunity to come closer to an understanding of the Latvian youth policy puzzle. The IRT was impressed by the overall youth provision in these two communities and by the professionalism, enthusiasm and commitment with which things are made possible, under conditions that are obviously characterised by considerable financial limitations.

Many details establish these two cities, different as they are, as examples of best practice in municipal youth policy provision in Latvia. For instance, both are characterised by an exceptionally close co-operation between local authorities (including police services), city administration, educational institutions, parents, youth NGOs, individual young people and youth policy professionals. Both communities successfully linked municipal youth issues to the well-established agenda of education. As early as 2002, the city of Cesis founded the City Youth Council as one of the municipal structures responsible for important contributions to community life and providing space for youth participation. The Commission of Youth Affairs in Rezekne has fulfilled similar functions by creating an inter-sectoral network across various city services, like kindergartens or youth NGOs. Both communities managed to set up a permanent infrastructure for young people, despite their limited resources: youth initiative centres, open youth clubs or the open skate park in Cesis, set up in response to youth initiatives, are just a few examples. Finally, both communities understood the value of young people in society and want to provide attractive environments for them. This is reflected, for instance, in the very creation of the positions of professional youth affairs co-ordinators, in the authorities' trust in young people to realise projects independently, and in the readiness to connect structures of youth participation – like the pupil governments in schools – with those of municipal youth policy development.

However, the youth practitioners present at the meetings were concerned about the fragility of certain institutions and the altogether limited possibilities of their communities to compete with other Latvian cities, or with the rest of Europe,



once young people leave secondary education. Emigration is common and few young people return once they have left, despite the opposite assertions of many young people in face-to-face discussions. Furthermore, there is no doubt that, in practice, youth policy in these two communities is built upon a strong sense of internal organisation and a considerable degree of self sacrifice among individuals involved. The IRT was told that voluntary work beyond regular (part-time) employment often continues to be the only way youth practitioners can respond to their actual workload.

When invited to assess the broader picture of regional youth policy, the youth practitioners of these two communities acknowledged their own communities' exceptional status and the privileged situation that they have slowly built up, over several years. This indication of a rather heterogeneous character of regional youth policy is underlined by a recent study on the social and political activities of young people in Latvia, which includes the voices of youth affairs co-ordinators (Laboratory of Analytical and Strategic Study 2007: 33-37). Altogether, there is no doubt that the development of regional youth policy structures in Latvia is still in its infancy, that the concentration of resources is high and regional disparities in the availability of youth activities significant. There is a bias in the perception of youth policy-making at the centre regarding the actual capacity of municipalities.

The following recommendations, regarding youth policy in Latvia, summarise the most urgent issues from a regional perspective. They are the result of an international youth policy seminar in Belgium and were brought to the attention of the IRT during meetings with the town council of Rezekne. Including these recommendations here, as a kind of internal assessment, is a contribution to facilitating communication among those responsible for Latvian youth policy.

Conclusions about youth policy in Latvia from a regional perspective – results of an international youth policy seminar in Flanders, Belgium (15-22/10/2007)

It is necessary...

- 1) *... to have framework legislation (law) for youth policy and a steady financial supporting system for youth issues:*
 - *definition of responsibilities of local government and the local youth co-ordinator; clear description of the job and role of the local youth co-ordinator and youth worker; clarification of the differences between a local youth co-ordinator (LYC) and a local youth worker (LYW);*
 - *financial supporting system for youth organisations, in order to improve the development of youth policy in the regions.*
- 2) *... to have training seminars for local authorities about youth policy, and a professional training system for youth co-ordinators and youth workers.*
- 3) *... to promote youth affairs and youth issues on a national level for a better understanding of youth work in society (adapted from handout Youth in Rezekne, p. 13).*



Recommendation 6

In view of the difficult – and often apparently provisional – status of youth policy delivery observed during the two visits to the regions, the IRT can only encourage the national authorities to contribute to the improvement of the situation by a revised budgetary policy and by, for instance, combining required minimum standards of youth policy with earmarked basic funding. Otherwise, a bottom-up development cannot be expected, due to the severe lack of funding and the equal opportunities principle of Latvian youth policy may be at risk of being undermined by the local realities.

Recommendation 7

The role and status of Youth Affairs Co-ordinators as important youth policy mediators and managers of “regional youth policy hubs” needs clarification. The IRT is aware of the fact that this relatively new occupation is still in the making yet, in order to get the appropriate recognition, the Latvian authorities are encouraged to strengthen its professional profile.

-----> **Youth organisations and the political representation of young people**

The involvement of young people – first of all through the role of representatives of youth organisations as partners in the shaping and development of both youth policy and civil society – is becoming a common standard in the European countries which share a communist past (Jasiukaityte/Reiter, 2004). With regard to youth policy development, this implies that important expertise, together with a high sensitivity for relevant issues, is playing a part in policy making, ultimately improving its quality and impact. The Latvian answer to this important youth policy requirement allows youth participation on several levels.

First, representatives of the National Youth Council, the Latvian Student Association and the Latvian School Student Council are members of the Youth Policy Co-ordination Council. Yet, as this is first of all a political body that has met only once so far, it remains unclear what their status really is among eight ministers and one representative of regional governments.

Second, 12 representatives of youth organisations have functions in the Consultative Commission of Youth Organisations, a kind of youth policy think tank that accompanies and evaluates the policy process. Founded in April 2007, it is not formally integrated into the structures of decision-making, but has advisory and lobbying functions with relation to the Ministry of Children and Family Affairs. As it was established only recently, there is, for the time being, no information about its actual influence on youth policy development. While this is a welcome initiative in terms of knowledge exchange and youth policy lobbying, the IRT has



its doubts about the “leadership” and independence of this commission, as it is chaired by the director of the Youth Department. The legitimacy of this institution will finally depend on the way in which youth NGO representatives are selected onto this body. Moreover, it will depend on the final definition in the Youth Act of the criteria defining a youth NGO (in terms of size, activities, leadership and so on).

A similar argument can be made concerning a third form of NGO involvement. Youth NGO representatives, or experienced individuals, are invited to participate in working groups, where they have the opportunity to comment on policy documents and put forward recommendations. It remains unclear how these individuals are selected and what their mandate is, in terms of influencing youth policy.

A fourth dimension of youth participation is a major youth event, previously called the Latvian Youth Congress but known as the Youth Summit from 2008. Starting in 1999, young people and youth workers from all over Latvia will meet every two years to discuss current issues of youth and youth policy in the country – the last congress in December 2006 attracted some 300 people. The outcome of these summits consists of proposals and policy recommendations that can have far-reaching consequences for youth policy administration. For instance, the Youth Policy Co-ordination Council was one of the outcomes of the event, illustrating its importance. Processes of youth self-government are institutionalised through the Latvian School Student Council and the Latvian Student Association, both of which are members of the Council of Youth Policy Co-ordination.

Three additional platforms for participation are currently in preparation – the Municipal Youth Policy Council, the Standing Joint Working Group of State Administration and the Youth Forum. All three aim at providing the youth policy debate and development in Latvia with a broader basis and a tighter network of information exchange and expertise. The IRT welcomes these suggestions and agrees with their necessity. However, the IRT also feels that some related questions need to be clarified, in order to make all these forms of participation (whether existing or planned) actually work. Although the diversity of opportunities to participate in youth policy development appears to be considerable, the IRT was unable to understand the scope of the practical influence and power of NGOs in any of these bodies. Such an assessment may be premature because, so far, the Council of Youth Policy Co-ordination has convened only six times in total since its foundation in 2005 and only once in 2007.

Yet in which direction could co-operation develop? Is the process moving towards the best practice of co-management and co-decision, as attempted in Lithuanian youth policy following the advice of the Council of Europe but ultimately abandoned (Nurse/Council of Europe, 2003; Jasiukaityte/Reiter 2002)? Or, will Latvian youth policy authorities only invite youth NGOs to voice their opinions and utilise their knowledge, without granting them formalised influence in the decision process? So far, the experiences of co-operation between youth policy actors are ambivalent and seem to require careful evaluation by all parties involved, in order to identify a productive way ahead (Laboratory of Analytical and Strategic Study 2007, pp. 42-52).



Recommendation 8

The IRT encourages those responsible for Latvian youth policy to make good use of international best practice and expertise, with regard to youth and youth NGO participation in policy development and as equal partners in decision-making. There is certainly a need to clarify and improve the manifold opportunities for such participation. Currently its impact is unclear, in part because of overlapping interests amongst Latvian youth policy makers. This should be a key focus of attention within the follow-up process.

The National Youth Council of Latvia, founded in 1992, is the umbrella and common voice of some 50 youth organisations and a member of the European Youth Forum. According to the information on its website¹² the activities of the National Youth Council are related to three main fields, in addition to the membership service of information provision, exchange and mediation. First of all, the representation of the main interests of youth organisations appears to be successful, considering both the council’s membership in the Council of Youth Policy Co-ordination and its role in formulating the forthcoming Youth Act. The national report recognises the council’s role as a policy developing agent and “active partner to various state administration institutions” (Ministry of Children and Family Affairs, 2007: 17), including the process of long-term youth policy planning.

A second point on the agenda of the National Youth Council of Latvia is related to the promotion of non-formal education, according to international standards, as a means of education with nationwide recognition. In this respect, the National Youth Council emphasises the disagreement with state institutions over the definition and practical dimensions of non-standard education. It is hoped that the drafted Youth Act will be able to clarify the disagreement and result in a shared understanding.

Finally, the third dimension of maintaining the representative structures, as such, has become a major concern of the National Youth Council. One pressing issue that was brought to the attention of the IRT concerns the financial situation of the National Youth Council, as well as many of its member organisations. This deteriorated considerably after the financial support of the Nordic countries (starting with Sweden) came to an end after a period of ten years. The accession of Latvia to the European Union in 2004 further diminished the availability of external sponsors. Used to relying on foreign sources like these, the organisations had difficulties dealing with the financial burden, as sustainable structures had not been established in time. Many NGOs discontinued their membership of the National Youth Council and many are, in fact, at risk of disappearing altogether or have done so already. The apparent reluctance of young people to pay participation fees and, ultimately, to sustain the framework for their voluntary activities is considered to contribute to the problem.

12. www.ljp.lv



Furthermore, the recruitment and involvement of young people into youth interest representation, which could possibly initiate a process of generational renewal within the established structures, has proved to be problematic. Voluntary work is unpopular and, as the national report (Ministry of Children and Family Affairs, 2007: 26-27) emphasises, the motivation of young people to get involved in political activities is low.¹³ The bureaucracy of youth activities further contributes to the frustration experienced by youth organisations. While co-operation with the Ministry of Children and Family Affairs is productive in terms of policy development, it is criticised for its rigid character when it comes to project applications and reporting.

A last issue to be raised with the government structures relates, among other things, to the formal criteria for recognising an organisation as a youth NGO. As the definition of what constitutes a youth NGO is awaited, together with the Youth Act, the exact number of youth organisations cannot be identified. However, it is estimated that there are about 200 youth NGOs in Latvia at the moment, involving some 10% of the youth population.¹⁴ In order to benefit from funding by the Ministry of Children and Family Affairs, recognised youth NGOs need to go through a process of external evaluation of their applications to the Youth Department. Typically, representatives of the National Youth Council or the Ministry of Education and Science are members of the evaluating committee. For reasons of budget planning on the part of the Ministry of Children and Family Affairs, the usual funding period is restricted to one year, which leaves the youth organisations in constant uncertainty about their future. At the moment, only the Secretariat of Special Assignments Minister for Society Integration offers co-financing for EU projects of up to three years.

During their two visits to Latvia, the IRT could confirm the (financial) precariousness of youth NGOs in Latvia, in discussions with other representatives. Considering the fact that many of these discussions were characterised by frustration, anger and desperation on the side of NGO representatives, the situation appears to be alarming. The development of “civil society” – a concept and idea that had been new after the breakdown of communism and that evolved together with a programme of extensive “non-governmentalisation” of policy areas, financed by foreign sponsors – is currently at risk of suffering a major setback in Latvia. Also, youth participation and, last but not least, the international standing of Latvian youth policy, will depend on the existence of a strong and lively NGO sector in the youth field. It seems that Latvian authorities need to recognise that the initially

13. Nevertheless, the significance of voluntary work was underlined by one representative of youth organisations during the national hearing.

14. This estimation excludes the quantitatively relevant youth “NGO”, sponsored by the Ministry of Defence. Its “youth work” is discussed later in the report.



pioneering NGO-driven youth policy development cannot be sustained under these conditions.¹⁵

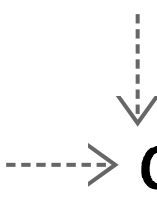
There is no standard remedy for developments like these, where self-sustaining structures were not established in time while external funding was still available, or where they could not be established because willingness to contribute by means of paying fees is simply not an option, be it for reasons of culture or economic hardship. However, the orientation of the funding policy of the Ministry of Children and Family Affairs, with regard to youth NGOs, will be a critical factor in the survival of the NGO sector. One lesson learned from the discouraging outcome of several years of continuous NGO funding could be that much more time is needed to consolidate the civil society sector. Against this background, the IRT wonders whether the current dominant strategy of funding projects for a period of one year only is far too short for both the infrastructure development of single NGOs and the long-term establishment of the (youth) NGO sector. The automatic or “natural” attractiveness of the NGO sector and the persistence of the intrinsic motivation of the actors involved can certainly not be taken for granted.

Recommendation 9

In order to guarantee the survival of basic youth NGO structures, the IRT urgently suggests the evaluation of the practical implications of the funding policy of major sponsors, like the Ministry of Children and Family Affairs, on the youth NGO environment of the country. The omnipresence of financial issues in defining individual and organisational performance capacities also needs to be recognised as one of the driving forces of the NGO sector. The National Youth Council of Latvia is encouraged to actively involve more youth NGOs and broaden its membership base, as this would strengthen its negotiating position at all levels.

From the meetings and discussions with the National Youth Council and other youth NGO representatives, the IRT had the impression that the Youth Act, which has been a major priority for many years, has the status of an all-inclusive solution to the main problems identified above. The IRT agrees that legislation is able to do away with many basic misunderstandings and can, in fact, facilitate the recognition of responsibilities and the means necessary for implementation. The IRT would, however, urge those involved not to overestimate the remedial capacity of legislation, for its purpose is to establish selective perspectives on complex social realities. While it is true that it can, at best, define and stimulate the youth policy agenda, consolidate the status of certain actors, distribute responsibilities and budgets among institutions, and co-ordinate and standardise patterns of response, it might ultimately permanently exclude certain important matters.

15. One of the interventions during the national hearing associated the possible benefit of specialised youth legislation, i.e. Youth Act, with a certain clarification of standard requirements for youth NGOs to be entitled to financial support.



Chapter 4

Key domains of youth policy

In the two synthesis reports, based on the existing Council of Europe international reviews of youth policy, Howard Williamson (2002, 2008) identifies the following key domains of youth policy of common relevance across different national contexts: education, training and employment; youth work and informal education; health; housing; family policy and child welfare; values and religion; leisure and culture; youth justice; national defence and military/alternative service. Despite the extensive character of the international review of Latvia, it was not possible to be equally attentive to all of these policy domains, either in the national report or during the two visits to the country.

The nature of youth policy as a cross-cutting issue makes it more difficult to determine a specific angle that is wide enough to embrace the breadth of the matter but can, at the same time, penetrate its surface. Certain priorities had to be established by the national authorities and the IRT: some were identified during the preparatory visit, together with the national partners; some are recommended by the international policy development agenda of the Council of Europe and were put forward by the IRT; others simply suggested themselves in the course of the review process.

This section starts with a more extensive discussion of issues of education and learning that, for several reasons, are crucial for an understanding of the Latvian case. The attached issue of entering the world of work is also key to young people's life choices in Latvia. Another important policy domain involving, in the Latvian case, strong elements of education, addresses the provision of quality youth work and opportunities for leisure time activities. Access to, and provision of, health services for children and young people are among the major concerns of the national authorities. Other areas, or "domains", of policy affecting young people on which the IRT feels able to offer a perspective, are dealt with briefly towards the end of this section.



-----> Education and learning

The successful transition from education to employment is one of the most important benchmarks in the less and less standardised life courses of young people in modern market societies. Before the collapse of the Soviet Union, these transitions for young people in Latvia tended to be smooth; at the same time, the freedom to choose one's occupation was restricted. With the recovery of independence and the socio-economic mainstreaming of the country towards Western standards, the introduction of labour market uncertainties, like unemployment, constituted a new challenge to the education system and to the preparation of young people and the population as a whole for these new circumstances. The new "rules of the game" (Berryman, 2000) which education systems in former communist countries now have to confront, requires them to contribute to the development of individuals, so that they are prepared for the enduring struggles of working life. At best, on the basis of broad general knowledge and education, individuals should be capable of engaging in self-initiated and regular updating of their skills and employment capacities. Formal education of children and young people is traditionally considered to be closely linked to labour market outcomes and to the chances young people have of finding employment after extensive periods of institutionally organised schooling (Allmendinger, 1989). In this sense, it remains crucial in establishing the foundations of lifelong education careers. Yet, in order to become effective, formal education needs to be combined with other types of learning, including non-formal and informal education.

Furthermore, despite pressures in the world of work, the employability of young people and their preparation for the labour market are not the only purpose of education. Personal development and the communication of societal responsibilities and competences, as well as "life skills" (WHO 2003: 3), need to complement any up-to-date public education agenda.

The greatest national asset of Latvia, as a state with limited natural resources, is its people. Education is one of the means to increase human capital (UNDP, 2006: 57).

The enhancement of human capital is certainly one of the most important ways for a small country like Latvia to remain competitive in an internationalised economic context and, at the same time, to provide its young citizens with the potential for quality of life. The Latvian report emphasises the political commitment to societal development, in line with a "people-based growth model" (Ministry of Children and Family Affairs, 2007: 35); it underlines the importance of lifelong learning and distinguishes four types of education that are recognised by legislation:

- *formal education* – a system that includes basic education, secondary education and higher education degrees. There are state-approved documents of education or professional qualification that testify to acquirement of the respective education programmes;
- *interest education* – realisation of a person's individual educational needs and wishes, disregarding their age or former education;



- *non-formal education* – educational work which is organised outside formal education and corresponds to the demand;
- *further education* – continuation of the former education and improvement of the professional skills according to vocational demands (Ministry of Children and Family Affairs, 2007: 35).

In modern societies, like Latvia, all four types of education are relevant sources of maximising potential. On the basis of the national report and information collected during the two country visits, we will go on to briefly address the major challenges of each of the first three types of education,¹⁶ inasmuch as they are relevant to a review of youth policy.

-----> **Formal general education**

The reform and transformation of the Latvian system of formal education, at the intersection of the Soviet legacy on the one side and Western requirements and standards on the other, is an ongoing process which faces many obstacles. The growing and rapidly changing – but still weak – national economy, the concentration of the population in cities, the heterogeneous composition of the population, the poor infrastructure in rural areas, the political preferences with regard to the national character of Latvian education, but also the confrontation with increasing demands to adapt to international standards, are among the factors contributing to the puzzle of education reform in Latvia (OECD, 2001; Ministry of Education and Science, 2007).

Compulsory education

One key feature of formal education that has been subject to several changes and policy initiatives during recent years is the length, the age limits and the practical implementation of compulsory education. Currently, education is compulsory for 11 years. After two years of compulsory preschool education, children from the age of 7 onwards spend nine years in basic comprehensive education. It should be mentioned that the extension of compulsory education until the end of secondary school was discussed, but abandoned due to the lack of funding. Afterwards, young people can choose between entering the labour market immediately and continuing with general or vocational upper secondary education. Drop-outs from compulsory education have the opportunity to conclude general education through vocational training. Higher education starts from the age of 19 and includes academic and professional tracks. Colleges complement the landscape of tertiary education.

While the extension of compulsory education down to the age of 5 years certainly does have the advantage of introducing children to the world of organised learning

16. The discussion of the fourth category, “further education” that includes lifelong learning, goes beyond the youth policy domain. It is referred to only in the context of the other types of education.



at an early stage, the international team was not sure about its ultimate purpose. Should it first of all contribute to the early building of academic potential, laying the foundations for an extended participation, including tertiary education? Should the early starting age compensate for probable inequalities among children? Or is it a means of compensating for the lack of other childcare facilities? All three may be good reasons for extending compulsory education, but the intention of respective regulations, as well as policy implications, needs to be clear.

Another issue with regard to compulsory education is the fact that preschool education is not entirely state-funded (Zogla et al., 2007: 418). Unlike primary and basic school, the availability of preschool education depends on the budgets of local authorities and parents. Consequently, equal access throughout the country cannot be guaranteed, despite the compulsory character of preschool education (Lace, 2007).

Recommendation 10

The extension of compulsory schooling may have many advantages but the IRT suggests a more incisive clarification of the intentions of such a regulation, thereby weighing up the pros and cons more carefully and establishing a realistic profile of the costs, benefits and responsibilities of those affected.

Other problems with education in Latvia that are identified in the national report include the high number of dropouts and graduates without professional skills. Every education system produces a certain number of drop-outs and unskilled graduates; the Latvian system is no exception. About one in every ten pupils fails to complete compulsory education and gain a school certificate. Two out of ten graduates from comprehensive education do not have a professional qualification; and some 6% of all children and young people of school age do not attend schools at all (Ministry of Children and Family Affairs, 2007: 36). No information about the background of these young people was available. These numbers, together with the increasing orientation of both Latvian education and young people themselves (UNESCO 2006) towards tertiary qualifications, indicate the risk of a growing polarisation in the outcomes of education.

The Ministry of Education and Science establishes the standards for education and teacher training. General education is free of charge and financed from the municipal budget. While the local authorities are responsible for funding the schools and the teaching, teachers are paid by the state and the state is fully responsible for institutions of higher education.

The IRT had the impression that the high ambitions, with regard to education planning and development, reflected in official documents are contrasted with a rather different reality concerning education provision in the regions. The problems of general education, identified in both the national Report and during the two visits to Latvia, are considerable. Some of them are clearly related to the difficult financial situation that continues to burden the system, despite



the increasing state budget expenditures on education (the IRT was told that it nearly doubled between 2002 and 2006). Altogether, the number of students in general education is decreasing and in rural areas in particular, schools have to be closed because of a lack of students. With funding focused on students rather than institutions (Zogla et al., 2007), the IRT wonders whether this recent trend will succeed in reducing the problem of providing more than basic educational infrastructure outside cities and regional centres. From the perspectives of young people and families, it will remain important that schools are available in the vicinity of their places of residence.

Despite the decreasing number of students, the number of teachers remained stable and, consequently, the student/teacher ratio has continuously improved (UNESCO, 2006). However, the average age of teaching staff is increasing dramatically and teachers in general are scarce. The low salaries of teachers make it an unattractive profession for university graduates, which is one reason for the older profile of teaching staff. The infrastructure of schools needs to be updated, in order to meet contemporary requirements; rural areas are additionally disadvantaged with regard to the availability of new technologies. The facilities for young people with special needs are insufficient and need particular attention. As the national report “Education and Training 2010” (Ministry of Education and Science, 2007: 14) notes, only very few of the 1 000 plus schools and educational institutions have been fully or partially adapted to the needs of young people with physical disabilities.

Recommendation 11

The scope of the reform of general compulsory education in Latvia makes it vulnerable in many ways and the IRT recommends the Latvian authorities continue to reform the general education system with great accuracy. The following challenges to general education reform are among those that the IRT could verify during its visits to Latvia: the considerable non-attendance and drop-out rates; the polarisation of educational outcomes; the decreasing local availability of education due to necessary infrastructure reforms; the low attractiveness of the teaching profession and the unsatisfactory policy and equipment for integrating disabled students.

Minority education and the status of the Russian language¹⁷

One particularly important issue in general education, brought to the attention of the IRT during their first visit to the country, refers to the ethnic composition of the population of Latvia. The status of minorities in Latvia and the introduction of the concept of the “non-citizenship” have triggered much international pressure and criticism, especially of the political elite of the country (Galbreath, 2006; Kruma, 2007; Hughes, 2005; Council of Europe, 2004 and 2007). Ever since the country

17. For a response by the national authorities to this issue see Appendix 4.



regained independence, the commitment to the particularities of the Latvian culture and language has been reinforced. Above all, the introduction of Latvian as the only state language and its knowledge as a citizenship requirement, despite a population of ethnic Latvians of at most 60%, has initiated heated debate about the open discrimination against ethnic minorities in Latvia, especially against the Russian population, which forms some 30% of the population and repeatedly articulates its claims to equality. The introduction of Russian as a second state language has been discussed, but was untenable in the current political climate.

The current status of Russian minorities in Latvia is reflected in the reform of minority education. For more than ten years after regaining independence, minority schools have had their equal place beside Latvian schools. This has now changed and Latvian is currently being introduced as the main teaching language in secondary schools. Starting from the academic year 1995/96, a few subjects had to be taught in Latvian, even in minority schools. The more recent school reform of 2004 introduced extensive (60%) compulsory teaching in Latvian in minority schools. From the year 2007/08 onwards, instruction in one of the minority languages in minority schools is guaranteed for, at most, 40% of the curriculum; state examinations are in Latvian only. Upper secondary education from grade 10 onwards, as well as higher education, is available in Latvian only. This reform was accompanied by polarising public debates (Hogan-Brun, 2006), and it has repeatedly been criticised by international organisations, including the Council of Europe (2004, 2007; Ozolins, 2003). In his recent Memorandum to the Latvian Government, the Commissioner for Human Rights reminds the Latvian authorities of critical features of this educational reform (Council of Europe, 2007). Apart from having been implemented without allowing for the necessary dialogue in society, the reform appears to suffer from the unavailability of the required human resources within minority schools: the authorities did not allow sufficient time for the training of teachers in Latvian and for preparing and translating the necessary teaching material.

During our first visit to Latvia, the IRT listened to a highly informative presentation about education for ethnic minorities at our meeting with the Ministry of Education and Science. According to the statistics provided, in the year 2006/07 Russian – by far the most prevalent minority language – was the language of instruction for 22% of children in pre-school education and the language of instruction in 15% of general education institutions. During this meeting, the IRT was also provided with details of the reform of bilingual education in minority schools and had the chance to deepen their understanding of related challenges. Minority schools have great flexibility in dealing with the transformation of teaching requirements, by choosing between various models of bilingual education.¹⁸ However, discussions during the first and second visit confirmed the above-mentioned difficulty of Russian-speaking teachers in minority schools, who were not ready to adapt to the new teaching requirements in such a short period. This underlines doubts regarding

18. The details of these models were included in the presentation at the Ministry of Education and Science but cannot be discussed here. See also Hogan-Brun (2006).



the quality of curriculum delivery. Consequently, the IRT wishes to highlight the need for great care in advancing such reforms, in such circumstances, without jeopardising other political objectives, such as social integration and the crucial formation of language skills.

The IRT wants to stress the position taken by the Commissioner for Human Rights: “Children belonging to minorities must enjoy the same quality of education as Latvian children” (Council of Europe, 2007; paragraph 56). This suggestion is in line with the Latvian understanding of youth policy and in particular its equal opportunities principle. The introduction of compulsory bilingual teaching in minority schools will certainly contribute to abolishing one of the main legacies of the Soviet occupation for Latvian society, namely the segregation of Latvians and Russians in separate schools. Research among Russian-speaking adolescents in Riga indicates that there is indeed a high level of readiness to integrate (Pisarenko, 2006), and the IRT’s discussions with young people of Russian origin in the ethnically diverse community of Rezekne confirm these findings.

Furthermore, the IRT emphasises the fact that there is a major issue concerning the exclusion of the Russian language from further and higher education, as it corresponds to a politically imposed barrier to equal opportunities at all levels of education. Representatives of the Latvian Student Union complained to the IRT about the marginalisation of the Russian language at universities. It was disturbing to learn that – unlike other European languages occasionally used for teaching alongside Latvian, the official language of instruction – Russian is practically banned from classrooms of public higher education.

After the two visits to Latvia, the IRT has the impression that the (in)significance granted to the Russian language in political terms, does not match either its everyday relevance or its application with regard to employment in present-day Latvia. This impression is substantiated by the testimony of both employers and employees.

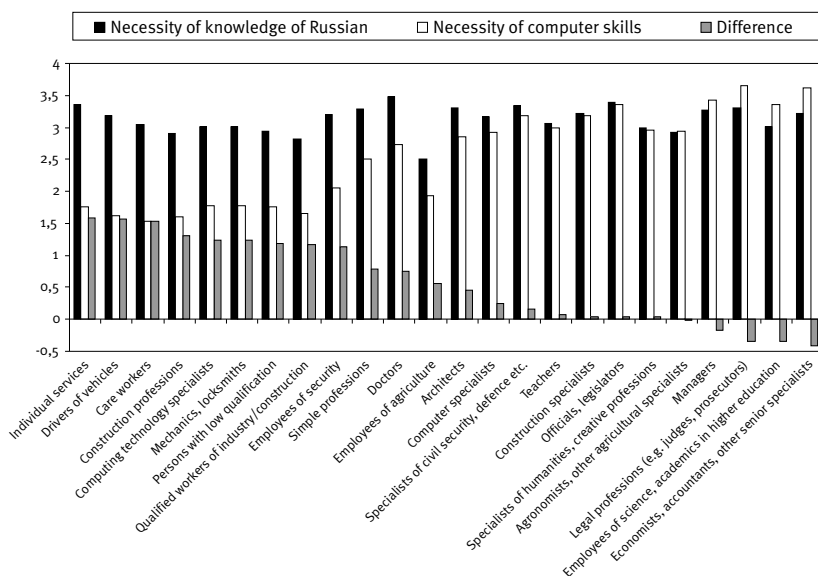
The Latvian Employers Association underlined the unbroken value of advanced skills in Russian for employment in Latvia to the IRT. Due to its geographical and strategic position within the European Union, the Latvian labour market is a bridge to the economically important area at the eastern borders of the EU. While the significance of the cultivation of the Latvian language remains uncontested, the negative consequences of neglecting to equip the Latvian labour force with advanced Russian skills are obvious. The lack of opportunities and encouragement to study Russian beyond the level of everyday communication means that Latvian people are gradually losing Russian language skills; growing up bilingual and benefiting from its advantages will soon become an exclusive privilege for the Russian population of Latvia.

A recent study of the compliance of education with the requirements of the labour market (Sloka, 2007), which was commissioned by the Ministry of Welfare and provided by the Latvian authorities, confirms this opinion. The study measures the assessment of the necessity of certain skills among employees in various



professions on a four point scale from 1 (not necessary) to 4 (very necessary). Figure 2, below, shows that, from the perspective of employees, the value of a knowledge of Russian is uncontested among all groups – for most of them it even exceeds that of computer skills.

Figure 2 – Evaluation by employees of necessity of skills in the current profession



Source: Sloka (2007: Appendix 4), own calculations

In view of these opinions, the IRT is concerned that ill-considered language policies in Latvia may waste one of the country’s major competitive advantages in terms of human resources. Disregarding the painful history underlying the persistent language struggles in the country, Latvia is about to lose its chance to become one of the few genuinely multilingual societies in Europe, alongside privileged societies like Luxembourg or Switzerland. This could be a truly unique offer to its young citizens.



Recommendation 12

The IRT is not convinced that the recent reform of minority education created ideal conditions for the integration of the large Russian population in the country. The IRT has the impression that the reform was implemented without the necessary societal dialogue and without providing sufficient time for the teaching staff to adapt to the new requirements. In line with observers of the international community, the IRT must urge the Latvian authorities to advance the reform with great care and to cautiously monitor its impact in terms of affecting language training, equal opportunities in education, and social integration. Furthermore, the IRT invites the Latvian authorities to listen to the constructive suggestions of the many impartial voices within the country, concerning the secondary status of the Russian language. Failing to reflect the strength of the specific geographical position and economic orientation of the country in language policy is equal to wasting a chance for all Latvian citizens to benefit from one of the country's major competitive advantages.

Formal professional education and labour market matching

One of the main problems currently troubling the policy perspective on youth transitions to professional education is the low participation in forms of professional education after compulsory and/or secondary school. The reasons behind this development are manifold. The IRT's meetings with ministry representatives, as well with representatives of employers and practitioners of the employment service, leave little doubt that the main reasons behind this development are related to problems of prestige, quality and weak links into the labour market.

The reluctance of young people to engage in manual labour in current Latvia appears to be one of the legacies of the Soviet past, where vocational education and manual labour were common, but least valued, in the status hierarchy of society. Curricula were ideologically burdened, and training was predominantly oriented towards industrial, technical and agricultural professions (Matthews, 1982; Reiter 2006). Attempts to construct a positive image of vocational education after the collapse of the formerly Soviet industry were largely undermined by the breakdown of the bridges between training and employment, which used to be one of the main pillars and qualities of vocational training under communism.

Although efforts are undertaken to enhance both image and quality and move away from the primarily school-based character of vocational education, there is little prospect that the situation will improve in the near future. The share of enterprises organising vocational training is decreasing.¹⁹ The IRT was informed

19. The Latvian Central Statistical Bureau reports a survey among enterprises indicating that the proportion of enterprises organising vocational training decreased from 53% in 1999 to 36% in 2005. www.csb.gov.lv/csp/events/csp/events/?lng=en&mode=arh&period=09.2007&cc_cat=471&id=2948# (Retrieved 05.11.2007).



by the Employers' Federation that there are individual models of partnership with schools. Yet there is no indication that these should be replicated across the country. The generally small enterprises (that is less than 50 employees) in Latvia are hardly ready or even capable to invest in training. Only a strict and certainly unpopular "pay-or-train" policy, together with considerable tax relief for training, was identified as potentially being able to trigger a process of rethinking the organisation of vocational education.

Furthermore, the knowledge base necessary for any kind of manipulation of labour market matching processes was lacking until recently in Latvia. As the IRT was told, it wasn't until July 2007 that a Labour Market Observatory was established at the Ministry of Economics, which could help to improve the insufficient communication between and within occupational sectors on the one side, and the rigid education system on the other. The marginal influence of employers and the poor co-operation between different ministries, as well as their shared responsibility for the establishment of a co-ordinated system of vocational education, were identified as inhibiting progress (Zogla et al., 2007: 432). The outcome of vocational education is unsatisfactory and employers complain about young people's low degree of employability, their bad skills profile and the necessity to retrain them on the job later (Sloka, 2007). The representatives of the Ministry of Education had to admit that the current school-based training simply cannot cope with the rapid development of real-life skills requirements in the labour market.

The fact that many young people enter the labour market after years of study, without any professional qualification, is a cause for concern. The advice of the representatives of employers to acquire a profession before entering university is one understandable response. Yet, from the perspective of young people, avoiding vocational and professional education altogether and remaining in general education for as long as possible instead appears to be rational and legitimate behaviour. For the time being, the alternative – entering into a low-quality vocational programme – entails a high risk of giving up future life chances.

In this instance, the IRT can only address their arguments towards those responsible for the framework of vocational and professional education. The problem is, first of all, an institutional one, that cannot be solved by changing or influencing young people's priorities, with regard to professional orientation. Biased "vocational guidance" and career counselling was common practice in socialism, in order to produce some kind of matching between the communist promise of education for all and the "requirements of society", which involved the realistic option of becoming an industrial labourer. Latvian authorities need to address the fact that, unless the system of vocational training is improved significantly and equally recognised by both employers and employees, it will not be able to attract young people. Moreover, if this situation persists, the openness of Latvian society towards Europe is likely to amplify the imbalance of skills needs and demands.



Recommendation 13

The IRT shares the concerns expressed by the Latvian authorities with regard to the low prestige, quality and efficiency of professional education and recognises the urgency of the situation. However, quick solutions are unlikely and should not be expected, as the transformation of either the labour market or the system of vocational education and training will take time. Closer co-operation and an informed dialogue between all parties involved will be necessary. If an agreement on the importance of a professional training system can be reached, monetary concessions and sacrifices on both sides, in terms of tax reductions as well as investments, seem indispensable for its establishment. Nevertheless, the IRT recommends the Latvian authorities find a preliminary but urgent solution for those young people who depend on professional education, because they do not have the capacity or the means to pursue an extended educational career. Young people leaving education unqualified do not have appropriate opportunities, either in Latvia or in Europe as a whole.

Formal higher education

The popularity of education is reflected in the increasing numbers of young people participating in higher education. In the frame of an ad hoc survey among some 30 young people, whom the IRT had the chance to meet during the two visits to Cesis and Rezekne, all but one expressed the intention to study after completing secondary education. This survey is certainly not representative and by no means able to grasp the heterogeneity of youth in Latvia. Yet it is indicative of the strong desire among young people for qualifications.

“Learn or go away” was the student representative’s comment when the IRT investigated this common trend in the discussion. In other words, in order to succeed in the competitive Latvian labour market and to get a quality job and the payment that matches the needs and ambitions of today’s young people, they have to acquire skills, knowledge and educational credentials. At least this is the underlying attitude. Going abroad, studying and/or staying there are relevant alternatives – mass emigration and the “brain drain” are among the major challenges facing societies like Latvia (UNDEP, 2006).²⁰

Over the last few years, the popularity of higher education has reached a level that has started to cause policy concern. Within about a decade up until 2004, the number of students has more than tripled. The national report (Ministry of Children and Family Affairs, 2007: 38) mentions that only the policy of reducing the number of state-funded places, together with raising the fees, finally managed to slow down the trend. In the academic year 2006-07, less than one in four students

20. www.workpermit.com/news – click on 30 November 2007, under Immigration news. Retrieved: 01.12.2007



was financed by the state; the others had to cover the fee if they wanted to study at one of the public or private institutions of higher education. In practice, and despite the consideration of academic merit for attributing state-funded study places, the authorities need to be aware of the fact that such a strongly regulative policy comes at the cost of free access to education and ultimately facilitates money- and wealth-induced educational social inequalities. The current policy choices are in favour of such inequalities.

While the availability of “commercial study places”, as well as student loan schemes and affordable but – as the IRT was informed – rather poor and unpopular student housing, can partially compensate for the costs of education, the combination of studying and part-time work is a common and necessary reaction. The drop-out rates in higher education average about 16%. Only a marginal group continues towards a PhD, which is partly due to inadequate funding of PhD studies (Strehl et al., 2007: 95-99). Universities have difficulties recruiting academic successors into the ageing body of professors and higher education teachers. It is hoped that the reform of salaries of academic staff, in combination with EU-supported doctoral and post-doctoral research, will improve the situation and make the academic labour market more attractive for a new generation of research and teaching professionals.

As in the field of vocational training, the universities suffer from an insufficient harmonisation of academic curricula and skills required in the labour market (Sloka, 2007). Although the system of higher education is not under the control of the Ministry of Education and Science alone, but includes specialised academies administered by the Ministries of Agriculture, Defence, Interior, Welfare and Culture, the professional orientation of tertiary education is not always adequate. While academic as well as professional education is offered in higher education, the involvement of employers in terms of curriculum development and provision of practical work experience is underdeveloped. Representatives of both employers and students shared this opinion with the IRT and proposed the improvement of the relevant structures of co-ordination and co-operation. Practically, and ideally, this could result in an enhanced integration of elements of learning on the job into higher education. The newly established Labour Market Observatory at the Ministry of Economics, operating since July 2007, will certainly be able to contribute significantly to such co-operation in terms of providing the knowledge base for the dialogue.

The bad reputation of technology-based disciplines may be one of the reasons for the low participation of students in natural and technical sciences, regardless of the much higher probabilities for getting a state-funded study place in these subjects. Another reason for partly ill-advised educational decisions may be related to the fact that far-reaching decisions in terms of specialisation are taken at the early age of 16. These decisions are predominantly based on grades, rather than genuine and lasting interest, and the IRT has been confronted with criticism of this early threshold by student organisations complaining about the lack of professional guidance at school. In fact, the Latvian system of career guidance is currently in transformation: since September 2007 career guidance is part of



the agenda of the State Employment Agency. While this may contribute to the introduction of a more “realistic” perspective on labour market opportunities, it remains to be seen whether the counselling services will also be able to establish a balance between giving advice to the unemployed and job-seekers on the one hand, and students on the other. Both groups arguably require a different counselling profile.

As in education in general, the status of the Russian language in higher education is problematic. Latvian is the only official language in public institutions of higher education. Although there are, in fact, a few courses offered in the most relevant minority language (for example the Academic Programme Agency, 2007), Russian is, as the IRT was informed by student representatives, marginalised as a language of higher education, even when compared to foreign languages without local relevance. For young people growing up in a Russian family context, this constitutes a serious practical problem of the interaction of opportunity, choice and capacity. The vast majority of young people met by the IRT wanted to study in Riga; a few, however, all from the city of Rezekne in the eastern part of the country, considered attending one of the Russian universities in St. Petersburg or Moscow. In view of the standardisation of certificates in the frame of the “Bologna process” towards a European higher education area, pursuing education in Russia might involve problems in getting the certificates recognised outside Russia.

Recommendation 14

The IRT understands that the ever-increasing participation of young people in higher education, which is observed with concern by the Latvian authorities, reflects the high value of education in society, as well as the low status and quality of non-academic professional education. This development constitutes a challenge to the system that can only be solved by means of a comprehensive reform, involving the whole range of educational opportunities. A quality system is characterised by a minimum of educational dead ends. At the same time, it will remain both permeable towards tertiary education for graduates from vocational tracks and open for revising one’s orientation. The current necessity to narrow down one’s professional horizon considerably by the age of 16 also makes effective professional counselling at school or specialised institutions services very difficult. The caution indicated with regard to the marginalisation of the Russian language in general education applies also to higher education.

Non-formal and out-of-school education

Like Estonia (Stafseng, Council of Europe, 2001), Latvia has a long and successful tradition of out-of-school education, called interest or hobby education. Under the umbrella of the State Youth Initiative Centre at the Ministry of Education and Science, institutions of hobby education offer free or low-cost out-of-school, leisure and summer activities to children and young people between the ages



of 3 and 25; the core age group is 10 to 15 years old. Some 200 000 pupils were involved in the academic year 2006-07 and supported by some 2 100 teachers in institutions of hobby education, youth centres and hobby centres. The majority of the activities funded by the state as well as by municipalities is offered at comprehensive schools and related to “culture education” (for example, arts, music, theatre, folklore) followed by sports and technical education. It is common for these activities to be oriented towards a national or regional festival, or that they involve competitive features.

The IRT was impressed by the excellent institutional embeddedness and availability of structured leisure-time activities, or hobby education, throughout Latvia and learned about its method of operation during their visits to Cesis and Rezekne. The IRT fully supports this approach to low-cost, low-threshold, quality mass leisure-time activities for young people and the determination of the Latvian authorities to preserve and extend it. The culture of hobby education deserves a truly and, in the best sense, “conservative” backing by youth policy structures, especially in times when a biased understanding of liberalisation usually results in a withdrawal of the state from many of its societal spheres. From the outsider’s perspective of the IRT, the Latvian model of hobby education certainly is a best-practice example of out-of-school education. Thus, the following suggestions should not be understood as undermining criticism but as confirmation of the overall approach – that is, a constructive contribution to the potential improvement of an excellent offer already available to young people.

At first glance, some of what was on offer as hobby education reminded the IRT of rather old-fashioned complementary afternoon schooling in needlework and handicraft for children. However, considering the Latvian cultural history and consciousness, and understanding the scope of the approach, the IRT had to recognise its overall significance in the Latvian youth policy landscape. And, for the sake of quality leisure time and community learning, there is no reason to prefer, say, hip-hop dancing to folk dancing. Nevertheless, the IRT suggested to the staff that they might update the activities available also in order to attract more of the older young people. In their response to this proposal, the teachers pointed to the higher costs that every new programme and activity would entail. For instance, the interest among young people in learning foreign languages and computer skills as well as was mentioned, but cannot easily be accommodated because this kind of modernisation of hobby education would entail considerable additional costs. One of the IRT’s suggestions would therefore be that the “education of educators” that is part of the development of hobby education (State Youth Initiative Centre, 2007) is used as a means of refreshing not only the methodology of teaching and supervision but also the diversity of the offer.

A second issue that the IRT wants to articulate addresses the Latvian stubbornness in interpreting “non-formal education” as either interest education in the above sense, or voluntary work, as in the national report (Ministry of Children and Family Affairs 2007: 40). Many youth practitioners took it for granted that hobby education is the Latvian version of non-formal education. The Latvian case is not the only one where the notion of “non-formal education”, promoted by the Council of Europe



in co-operation with the European Commission, is subject to national, or even individual, interpretation. Cyprus, for instance, is another example (Williamson/ Council of Europe, 2007, pp. 41-43). International co-operation on youth work training has produced a few reports which help to deepen our understanding of non-formal education (Bowyer, 2005; García López, 2005; Chisholm, 2006). They share the understanding that they do not want to impose a set definition, yet highlight a set of commonalities and essential features. Manuela du Bois-Reymond (2003), reflecting upon the relationship between non-formal and formal education in general, identifies specific challenges of providing and organising non-formal education in post-communist countries. They are related to the sudden “openness” of young lives, the devaluation of youth work and the collapse of state-organised voluntary work, and the need to establish a concept of non-formal education that manages to be equally attractive to young people from very different socio-economic backgrounds. Finally, as it does not seem to directly contribute to employability – one of the most urgent requirements of today – non-formal education needs to compete with other more conventional and formalised ways of learning.

The IRT found that the State Youth Initiative Centre and the National Youth Council of Latvia promote two distinct interpretations of non-formal education that do not seem to be compatible. On the basis of many discussions and meetings where this issue was addressed, the IRT concludes that both parties need to try to meet each other half way. On the one hand, it is true that the methodology of non-formal education was specifically developed to deal with youth and societal phenomena that would otherwise be difficult to address. In this sense, traditional forms of out-of-school education need to be complemented by open youth activities, following the principles of non-formality. On the other hand, through its traditional hobby education approach, Latvian youth policy has a powerful tool for providing a huge number of young people with an important and comprehensive baseline offer of leisure-time activities that many western European countries can only dream of.²¹ Thus, the IRT encourages the progressive forces in youth policy to consider some of the possible consequences of an excessively radical modernisation. Destroying established structures is by far easier than building alternatives from scratch; the ideal approach will combine the consolidation of the present structures with internal, as well as complementary, modernisation of youth work.

21. According to the recent study on youth activities in Latvia (Laboratory of Analytical and Strategic Study 2007: 73) more than 70% of young people participate in interest or hobby education.



Recommendation 15

The IRT proposes that all parties involved in youth policy development in Latvia should discuss both the strengths and the weaknesses of the current offer of youth out-of-school activities in Latvia, in order to optimise the interplay of available structures and the necessary introduction of international standards of non-formal youth education. Additionally, they could consider inviting international expertise to accompany the process. This could, for instance, be done in the frame of a Council of Europe short-term youth policy advisory mission, with a clear focus on youth work and non-formal education. Furthermore, the IRT is convinced that an enhanced Latvian version of out-of-school education could be promoted as an example of best practice throughout Europe.

Camps are part of a popular strategy of providing young people with outdoor leisure activities over the summer. The State Youth Initiative Centre, as well as NGOs like the Latvian Scouts and Guides, takes a leading role in this respect. One of the quantitatively most relevant leisure-time organisations in Latvia that needs to be mentioned in this context is associated with, and financed by, the Ministry of Defence. The Youth Guard (*Jaunsardze*), established in 1992 by the National Guard and administered by the Ministry of Defence, has become the “largest youth organisation in Latvia” (Ministry of Defence of the Republic of Latvia, 2004: 63). It has about 7 000 male and female members, between the ages of 12 and 18 and operates throughout the country via a network of some 70 schools in partnership with the Youth Guard Centre. While there were doubts and discussions within the IRT about the value of the Youth Guard, both as a youth organisation and as a non-governmental one – it is operated by a professional and permanent staff consisting of soldiers and civilians and is increasingly generously funded by the Ministry of Defence – there was no doubt that the Youth Guard is filling an important gap in Latvian youth policy.

Originally concerned primarily with patriotic, pre-military education, the Youth Guard extended the share of non-military activities to as much as 70%. Problems in relation to the use of arms by minors some years ago, led to the age threshold for gun use being raised to 18 years or abandoning it altogether. The IRT was told that, in view of the now professional army and the end of compulsory military service, the Youth Guard has shifted its agenda towards citizenship education as well as traditional supplementary or hobby education activities like computing, excursions, exhibitions and hiking. The Youth Guard explicitly seeks to engage disadvantaged young people from “the street” or with a difficult family background. The involvement of young members in the administration and leadership of the Youth Guard is difficult, due to their essentially hierarchical structures, but forms of youth participation are slowly being introduced, by means of pilot projects. One example is a virtual self-government initiative, launched in 2008, where members will have the opportunity to contribute to different relevant debates.



The civic status of youth policy in organisations with a military orientation which involve young people is always questionable. This is true for the Latvian Youth Guard as well as, for instance, their Estonian partner organisations, the “Young Eagles” for men and the “Home Daughters” for women (Stafseng/Council of Europe, 2001: 25; Jasiukaityte/Reiter, 2004). The reservation and mixed feelings with which Latvian youth NGOs, as well as some individual young people whom the IRT were able to question, observe and respond to the Youth Guard and its growing importance is therefore understandable and legitimate. However, during the meeting of the IRT with leaders of the Youth Guard at the Ministry of Defence, the IRT was able to inform itself about its multi-dimensional approach and purpose. Given the fact that the Youth Guard covers, amongst other things, traditional areas of youth work and is open to the modernisation of its methodologies, the IRT encourages Latvian youth NGOs – especially those with a partially overlapping agenda – to rethink their prejudices and open up to establishing a well-balanced co-operation. The Youth Guard itself is encouraged to further develop the non-military elements of its activities, such as civic education and volunteering, and to reach out by actively inviting youth NGOs to get involved and contribute their knowledge and expertise. Ideally, such co-operation could benefit young people, as well as help to develop the organisations involved.²²

Recommendation 16

The IRT appreciates the non-military share of the activities of the Youth Guard (Jaunsardze) and in particular its contribution to the integration of disadvantaged young people who would otherwise fall through the net of conventional youth activity offers. The IRT encourages Latvian youth NGOs to recognise the value of this work and to seek co-operation where it seems to be appropriate, due to overlapping agendas and principles.

The IRT learned that Latvia – through the State Initiative Centre – has recently introduced an “Award” programme designed to recognise the learning and development of young people within the non-formal arena (that is, out of school). The programme derives from the International Award, which now operates in over 100 countries throughout the world and comprises the accreditation of different levels of achievement in areas such as skills, physical activity, service to others and teamwork through expeditions. The IRT supports this as a framework for supporting and validating young people’s learning, so long as it builds from the personal interests of young people and does not become another “imposition” on their leisure time. The IRT feels that the lessons from the establishment of this award programme should be a focus for discussion during the follow-up to the review in around two years’ time.

22. During the national hearing, uncertainty concerning the increasing power of military organisations in the youth field was expressed. Furthermore, differences in methods and philosophy between the Youth Guard and youth NGOs with overlapping agendas were highlighted as being the main reasons for persistent reservations concerning co-operation.



-----> **Employment**²³

As discussed above, the improvement of the system of vocational and professional training is one of the main tasks of the Latvian authorities and employers in the near future, in order to decrease the discrepancy between young people's aspirations and educational decisions, and the requirements of the labour market in general. Nevertheless, the problem of youth unemployment as such is not as dramatic as it used to be a few years ago. Two main reasons were given for the decrease in youth unemployment, (and unemployment in general), during the IRT's two country visits: economic growth and emigration. Considerable regional differences in unemployment, however, persist. The rural communities in the eastern part of the country, which were most affected by the collapse of the former Soviet industry, continue to suffer disproportionately from mass unemployment. Mobility restrictions, due to bad infrastructure, make business development very unlikely in these areas.

In addition to a poor education, gender is an important predictor of unemployment in Latvia (European Foundation for the Improvement of Living and Working Conditions, 2007). One reason is the lack of sufficient childcare facilities which forces young mothers to drop out of employment and assume care responsibilities. Furthermore, the IRT was puzzled to learn about an obvious systemic flaw in the maternity leave regulations, which results in thousands of mothers losing their job security and slipping into unemployment.²⁴ In order to benefit from six months of additional maternity leave, on top of the usual 12 months, women are encouraged to quit the job and, thus, abandon a guaranteed return to their previous employment. The IRT invites the Latvian authorities to look into this matter and to consider closing this hole in the regulations, so that maternity leave ceases to be an unemployment trap and an additional instance of women's disadvantage in the labour market.

Recommendation 17

The IRT asks the Latvian authorities to ensure that women are not at a disadvantage in terms of employment and labour protection in general, and with regard to their re-entry into employment after maternity leave in particular. The availability of childcare and preschool facilities is a pre-condition for women's equal access to employment and needs further improvement.

The IRT understands that the State Employment Agency under the Ministry of Welfare can do little in order to influence the labour market and facilitate job creation and therefore, in principle, supports the activities provided by the agency and its regional offices for young people. Subsidised employment,

23. For a response by the national authorities to this issue, see Appendix 5.

24. The handout received at the meeting with the State Employment Agency indicates that in February 2007, 7 743 persons were unemployed after maternity leave.



paid temporary work and other remedial schemes of training and retraining, are common measures offered by public employment agencies. However, the second most important measure of the agency, in terms of numbers, stands out and requires some reconsideration and criticism: the State Employment Agency organises summer employment for children and pupils between the ages of 13 and 18 in general, specialist or professional education. In the year 2006, some 11 500 pupils participated in the period between 1 June and 31 August. The number of both pupils and employers involved is increasing, due to the popularity of the measure. With the aim of offering the opportunity to work during school holidays and to acquire basic job skills and work experience, summer employment engages pupils for a maximum of two months in “real life” employment of four hours a day, or more, depending on age; certain sectors of the economy and types of employment are excluded. The wage of half the minimum salary is subsidised by the State Employment Agency.

While the IRT sympathises with some features of this scheme of summer employment for pupils, it is critical especially of the low threshold of 13 years, which is exceptional compared to regulations in other countries (European Foundation for the Improvement of Living and Working Conditions, 2007, Annex 3). On the one hand, such a form of summer work, with the permission of the legal guardian avoids involvement in illegal work and provides young people with a fair chance to earn pocket money and gain work experience, while becoming familiar with an everyday work routine and working relationships. The IRT was informed that the overall internal evaluation of this measure by pupils and employers was positive. On the other hand, however, the IRT wonders whether the main purpose of providing school holidays is to make pupils available for work, instead of allowing them an extended period of recreational leisure time and family activities. As the impressive eagerness of young people to earn money in this way can be indicative of the family’s difficult economic situation – indeed, the IRT was told that children from large families are given priority – the Latvian authorities need to make sure this system of pre-employment does not actually turn into a significant contribution to poverty management in families and households. Finally, subsidised summer employment consumes a lot of the State Employment Agency’s funds for “unproblematic” pupils who are in education anyway, while these funds would otherwise be available to problematic groups like unemployed young people.



Recommendation 18

The protection of children and young people from harmful work experiences is a critical achievement of modern societies. It is for this reason that the IRT thinks that the underlying reasons for the popularity of paid part-time summer employment of children in Latvia, from the age of 13 onwards, requires a thorough investigation. Child labour traditionally recruits “victims” from economically weak families and households; the Latvian authorities are advised to make sure that poverty is of no relevance to children and young people in Latvia when choosing to participate in summer employment. Also, public concern about the lack of summer activities for children with working parents is not an appropriate reason for the establishment of such a system. Furthermore, given the fact that more and more young people remain in education until they are 18 or 19 years old, there is no obvious reason for them to start gaining work experience as early as 13. Instead, the possibility of organising alternative forms of work, on a voluntary basis and without a direct financial incentive, should be explored. The funds currently subsidising summer employment could then benefit disadvantaged young people and families directly. The IRT suggests a robust debate “in the round” on these challenging and sometimes rather emotive issues.

-----> **Health**

The question of growing up healthy is a critical one for countries adjusting to post-communism, as they are notorious for their low level of health care provision (UNICEF, 2000, chapter 2 and UNICEF, 2001, chapter 3). Latvia is no exception, with regard to the unsatisfactory general health situation (Joint Inclusion Memorandum, Latvia, 2003). Consequently, the IRT welcomes the prominent status granted to health issues in Latvian youth policy, crystallising in the notion of youth-friendly health services as one of the top priorities identified during the Latvian Youth Congress 2006. However, the fact that the overall health care expenditure in Latvia (as a percentage of the GDP) is among the lowest in the 25 EU countries (EUROSTAT, 2007, table 3.2) needs to be considered when reviewing the youth-related efforts in the field of health services, which were highlighted during IRT’s two visits. Furthermore, the IRT was informed that, although health services are generally free, quality services still require considerable private contributions and regional disparities are considerable. In this respect, it is particularly unfortunate that – as one of the officials commented, pointing to the precarious issue of funding co-ordinated health care – “the largest enemy is the Ministry of Finance”. For instance, despite urgent mental health issues, reflected in the high suicide rates of young people, the IRT was informed that visits to mental health specialists are very difficult, and psychotherapy practically impossible to access, due to a lack of funds and specialists.



As a recent study indicates (Laboratory of Analytical and Strategic Study 2007: 69-71), one of the main reasons for young people's discontent with health care results from restrictions when choosing a medical doctor for free treatment. The primary access point to health care is the institution of the assigned "family-doctor", a general practitioner who can then refer for further treatment.

For young people from the countryside, the most significant aspect mentioned is the lack of confidentiality in the health care system. Quite often they don't visit doctor because they are afraid that doctor will tell someone else about the visit and afterwards their friends and acquaintances will know about it.

The researchers point at the problem that for young people, a doctor's visit is free only through a family doctor, but if they don't want to go to a family doctor in their parish or city, then they need to pay themselves for the medical examination, that again prohibits health care due to financial inaccessibility (Laboratory of Analytical and Strategic Study 2007: 71).

On the basis of the discussions in Latvia and the visit to one of the few recently established Children and Youth Health Centres, the IRT is keen to share some of this concern. On the one hand, institutions like this could play an important role in providing information about health issues and promoting healthy life styles. While young people mentioned to us that they would initially address questions about (sexual) health, as well as problems in general, to friends and parents, there certainly remains a significant need for specialised professional counselling and guidance. On the other hand, however, the IRT was not convinced that the institution visited could guarantee the confidentiality and expertise that the particularly sensitive area of youth counselling would require. Also, it was not clear whether the target group would consist of children or of young people – each group requires different counselling methods and expertise. Although the staff were highly committed to the agenda and open to dealing with issues, ranging from teenage pregnancy to drug abuse or human trafficking, there was an obvious lack of experience in handling more delicate scenarios like these. For instance, the IRT was surprised to learn that, from the perspective of health counselling, there were still doubts whether people seeking advice for drug addiction faced a primarily medical or criminal condition.

In view of the complex but open questions of choice, quality, coverage and confidentiality involved in youth health counselling – issues that are equally relevant for the overall health system – the IRT found that some key questions with regard to youth-friendly health services still need to be answered thoroughly in order to locate this approach appropriately, within the wider institutional frame of general health services:

- Is the movement towards youth-friendly health services a response to the generally problematic situation concerning health services in Latvia, thus a form of remedy that should benefit especially young people at the beginning of their lives? The general lack of qualified professionals is relevant here, as well as the fact that more than 30% of all currently



employed physicians are in the pre-retirement or pension age (National report on strategies for social protection and social inclusion, 2007).

- Or, is young people’s health behaviour so very different from that of adults that it justifies separate treatment?

Policy strategies targeted towards young people would need to be informed by clear answers to these questions, in order to be both appropriate and effective.

Recommendation 19

The IRT recommends a stronger consideration of young people’s actual needs in the development of youth-friendly health services. Their demands for confidentiality and the freedom to choose one’s preferred doctor asks the system to improve its flexibility and availability, as well as discretion in the implementation of its promises. For instance, active gender-sensitive counselling as well as anonymous health services at institutions frequented by young people on an everyday basis, like schools, could be among the additional services. International experience and standards in youth counselling should be taken as examples. Furthermore, the generally low level of health provision demands clarification of the status of youth-friendly health services within the overall framework.

The AIDS and STI Prevention Centre in Riga is one of the institutions that articulated its support for the promotion of youth-friendly health services, for it corresponded with the overall political approach to restrict the spread of HIV/AIDS and sexually transmitted diseases among young people. Official institutions of health care are criticised for generally failing to provide the appropriate service to young people. Issues of confidentiality and confidence were among those addressed. The centre’s prevention activities, with regard to HIV/AIDS – targeted at children and young people from the age of 9 years onwards – are partly corrupted by the low general public tolerance of homosexuals and sexual minorities in society. Meanwhile, additional health counselling activities of NGOs are decreasing, because since the accession of Latvia to the European Union they suffer from a higher competition for funding. The centre itself can support these NGOs only methodologically and it is the only government institution dealing with these issues.

Another difficulty inherent in the prevention work at schools results from the lack of knowledge about effective ways of responding to the heterogeneity of contemporary youth. The experience of the AIDS and STI Prevention Centre shows that health education in general, and at school in particular, needs to be adapted accordingly. Sex education is not part of the curriculum but entirely depends on the teachers’ discretion, despite the fact that the research evidence included in the national report (Ministry of Children and Family Affairs, 2007: 78) indicates that there is urgent need for action: the responsibilities of public education, extended as it were, overlap with the average age for starting sexual relations of 17 years (in fact, this average age underlines that a large proportion of young



people actually become sexually active well before they reach 17). The fact that almost half of young people between the ages of 15 and 24 do not know how to protect themselves against sexually transmitted diseases strongly indicates that the private context is not sufficient as a source of information even if, as young people affirmed in several discussions, parents and friends are the first to be approached for advice. Some of the findings of a recent study launched by the National Youth Council collecting, amongst other things, young people's thoughts for improving the health field, underline the need for more active, more visible counselling as well as practical support for young people's needs. Two of the suggestions are indicative:

- "free consultations for young people on topics such as family planning, sexual health and all kinds of addictions",
- "condom vending machines in Latvian towns – for free" (National Youth Council of Latvia, 2007).

Recommendation 20

In view of the continuously decreasing age for starting sexual activities in Latvia and elsewhere, and the persistent threat of sexually transmitted infections, the IRT believes that sex education for young people both within and outside schools needs to be improved considerably. Responsible sex education will provide up-to-date information, expertise and counselling, while at the same time promoting responsibility, competence, and tolerance towards sexual orientations.

In the course of a meeting dedicated to youth research in Latvia, the IRT was informed that the issue of drug and substance abuse is one of the Ministry of Health's priorities, in terms of research funding. Since 1995, Latvia has participated in the European School Survey Project on Alcohol and Other Drugs (ESPAD), which investigates and monitors trends in alcohol and drug habits among students in European countries. The latest available results indicate that, especially with regard to alcohol consumption and smoking, Latvian youth is above average, compared to the other participating countries, while other forms of substance abuse seem to be less widespread (Hibell *et al.*, 2004; Stirna, 2006). The IRT was informed by youth researchers that, according to the latest yet unpublished results of the ESPAD survey in 2007, the problem of alcohol abuse has got worse. Evidence provided in the national report (Ministry of Children and Family Affairs, 2007: 79) dramatically underlines the related policy concern.

The IRT's discussions with youth policy actors, as well as young people, indicated an additional, social dimension to mass drinking: the pervasiveness of alcohol-related images of social marginalisation in society. The responses to the IRT's astonishment at meeting the many civically committed, communicative and well-educated young people included the common reference to the metaphor of



the young man drinking beer alone in the park. This image is indicative of two major challenges for a society like Latvia. On the one hand, there seems to be a quantitatively unspecified group of young outsiders who cannot be reached by the many offers for institutional integration. On the other hand – and this is directly relevant here – health inequalities in Latvia and in other post-communist countries are strongly gendered. (Young) men drink and smoke more than (young) women; they take more drugs, are affected by death from injuries and poisoning to a much higher extent; they have a higher suicide risk, and a considerably lower life expectancy of some ten years or more (Central Statistical Bureau of Latvia, 2006; UNICEF, 2007). Despite the assertion by representatives of the Ministry of Health that gender differences in life expectancy are first of all work-related, the IRT wonders whether this matter does not call for closer investigation, as well as programmes targeted specifically at both boys and girls. The high abortion figures among young women below the age of 18 years (Ministry of Children and Family Affairs, 2007: 78) together with the fact that respective professional counselling beyond the level of the general practitioner (family doctor) is hardly available, are further indicators of the need for active and gender-sensitive youth health counselling.

Recommendation 21

The IRT fully shares the concern of Latvian youth policy actors with regard to young people's vulnerability to drug and substance misuse. In particular, the problem of mass drinking seems to call for urgent and effective policy responses, which are able to address the gender and poverty issues attached. The measures could range from more actively encouraging positive health behaviour in general, to research into the specific socio-historical origins and traditions of drinking and alcohol abuse in post-Soviet societies, as well as the everyday initiation of young people to rituals of excessive alcohol use. Both could help to arrive at possible roots of and solutions to the problem.

The national report (Ministry of Children and Family Affairs, 2007, pp. 82-85) includes a long list of suggestions of activities and policy strategies to improve the health situation of young people, all of which are fully supported by the IRT. One activity that the IRT wants to highlight is the exemplary nutrition policy implemented at schools. Apart from programmes promoting physical activity, milk is provided free of charge at the level of primary school and, from 1 September 2007, all pupils in the reception class get lunch for free. Furthermore, the Nutrition-Friendly Schools Initiative, launched by the WHO, is being put into practice. In order to promote healthy lifestyles at an early age and prevent childhood obesity a general ban on unhealthy food at schools was introduced and implemented, despite by, for instance, the soft drink industry lamenting the loss of an important segment in the market of young consumers. According to a regulation by the Cabinet of Ministers it is prohibited to sell – for example – crisps, chips, salted nuts, coloured jelly sweets and sweetened drinks.



-----> Sports policy

Latvian sports policy is based on the sports law, adopted in 2002, sports policy guidelines for 2005-09 and the National Sport Development Programme (NSDP) for 2006-12. The sports policy guidelines 2005-09 and the NSDP 2006-12 focus on sport for all, physical education, competitive sports and sport for disabled persons.

Both the national report and the meeting with representatives of the Sports Department of the Ministry of Education gave the impression that the sports policy is well organised and sport, as such, is greatly valued in Latvia. The number of young people engaged in educational training groups (Professionally Orientated Sports Education Programme) amounts to 35 687; the corresponding figure in informal education (Education of Interests) is 35 453. There are 2 983 sports facilities, 27 national sports centres and 17 051 registered young athletes, 80 sports federations and 435 sports clubs in Latvia. According to the Study of Youth, Social and Political Activity (2007) 34.9% of young people are engaged in sports in their leisure time.

Sport seems to play a significant role in young people's lives in Latvia. However, the role and tasks of the consultative body – the Youth Sports Council, subordinate to the ministry's Sports Department – were not clearly defined in relation to other bodies and NGOs active in the field of sport. An open question is how the new trends in practising sport are taken into account in Latvia. The growing tendency to practise sport individually, rather than collectively in sports clubs or organisations, poses a challenge to the authorities.

The IRT welcomes the use of sport as an instrument for social inclusion, integration and equal opportunities, and for combating discrimination (for example, the Children's and Youth Festival of Minority Nationalities of Latvia). Efforts to make sports activities environmentally sustainable (such as the Footprints project) are also very positive. There are many innovative projects going on, or already carried out, including the Volunteer Programme, Dreams and Teams, Be Active, and Posture Teaching. These projects could be used as examples of best practice in the European context.

Implementing the NSDP 2006-12 (financial resources and concrete action plans for the implementation of the programme), drafting and adopting a new physical education law, as well as strengthening co-operation with other bodies active in the sports field and intensifying co-operation with the Ministry of Health, were identified as the future challenges of the sports field.

Recommendation 22

The IRT welcomes the Latvian initiative to strengthen co-operation between the sport and health sectors, in order to reduce overweight, obesity and other health risks. It might also be useful to intensify the co-operation with other ministries (for example the Ministry of Children and Family Affairs) in order to make full use of the possibilities provided by the EU Youth in Action programme and other EU funds.



-----> **Family policy, child welfare, social protection**

Despite the fact that the responsibility for youth policy is with the Ministry of Children and Family Affairs, the IRT has the impression of having learned rather little about the practical interaction of family, child welfare and youth policies. As Williamson (2008) indicates, commenting on earlier reviews, this domain seems to systematically escape the attention of youth policy reviews, despite its obvious significance. It may well be that, in the case of Latvia, this is due to the fact that the youth agenda is a more recent responsibility of the ministry. And this would also explain why the aforementioned study by the National Youth Council (National Youth Council of Latvia, 2007) calls for the renaming of the ministry as the Ministry of Children, Family and Youth Affairs. Furthermore, the unresolved issue of legally defining youth, in terms of age, makes it difficult to assess the relevance and impact of associated policies.

The status of the family is at the core of Latvian social politics. This is expressed in many policy documents such as, for instance, the currently valid National Development Plan:

The family is the basic unit of society; it is the place where the physical renewal of society and the passing on of moral values are ensured. Beneficiaries of support to families are not only themselves the benefit receivers but also the whole society. (Ministry of Regional Development and Local Government of the Republic of Latvia, 2006: 41)

The “improvement of the demographic situation” is a major concern of family policy, in view of the declining birth rate and the continuing trend of postponing both first marriage and first child – a trend that was also unanimously confirmed in discussions with young people. The IRT can only agree with the importance of the corresponding policy measures that are put forward and implemented by the Latvian authorities, like increasing child benefits, extending facilities for childcare and preschool education, or the shift towards family-based care systems for orphans and children without parental care. Additional support is necessary for single-parent households, because of their higher poverty risk, as well as for families with more than two children (Ministry of Welfare, 2007; Lace, 2007; Central Statistical Bureau of Latvia 2006b: 43-44).

One particular problem in the area of childcare and families was brought to the attention of the IRT independently on two occasions – once during the meeting with the Ministry of Health, and once during discussions with young people in the eastern city of Rezekne. It appears that a considerable number of Latvian young people live without parental supervision and care, or they live at their grandparents’ or with relatives, because their parents left the country to work abroad. This could be a new, eastern European version of a phenomenon known in western societies as that of “latchkey children” – that is children returning from school to an empty home, because their parents are working. The IRT met young people who usually only have the opportunity to meet their parents during school holidays, because they live and work in a different country (generally Ireland, the UK or Germany). Statistics on the scale of this phenomenon are not available and



the IRT is of the opinion that the problem deserves further investigation and, if indicated, specific and concerted policy responses.

There are several family policy and social protection topics that are usually of general relevance in youth policies, which had not been addressed during the tight schedule of the IRT's visit to Latvia, nor in the national report. The IRT feels unable to comment on these issues, but wants to remind the Latvian authorities not to disregard them in their future policy development. The status of orphans and young people in residential care remained largely unexplored. The problem of human trafficking was mentioned several times, especially during our visits to the cities of Cesis and Rezekne. Yet, apart from articulating the general concern and pointing to the obvious links to the "life-worlds" of young women in particular, there was hardly any reference to policy responses, or even specific expertise. Domestic violence is an issue which seems to have a similarly "low profile". Finally, and connected to the unexplored question of youth housing, issues like that of street children (especially in big cities) and young people out of education have not been discussed at all during the two visits, or mentioned in the national report, although research indicates that they seem to be among the rather disturbing side effects of the transformation (Lukasinska, 2002). All these issues call for closer investigation in the future.

Recommendation 23

The IRT suggests underlining the additional youth agenda at the Ministry of Children and Family Affairs symbolically by, for instance, adapting the Ministry's name. The IRT also believes that, in view of critical policy issues like lone parenthood among young people, lacking childcare facilities, or young people living without parental supervision due to emigration, the youth agenda needs to be embedded more firmly into the established structures of family policy.

-----> **Youth justice**

New directions in criminal justice policy in Latvia are only just beginning to take root, but they already reflect a progressive and impressive vision. The extent to which they have been implemented, however, is more questionable. The IRT was told that, with regard to youth custody, "not much has really changed since Soviet times", despite warm words and good intentions.

Nevertheless, some of those good intentions are already taking shape and, as with most countries, there is particular focus on young offenders: preventing further offending and preventing youth crimes in the first place. This emphasis is to be welcomed. For those offenders who have already found their way into the prison system, the broad objective is now less to do with elementary punishment and more to do with remotivation and resocialisation, through the provision of



education and the development of skills, which will assist individuals in becoming more “socially positive”.

The state probation service, established in 2003, carries a central responsibility, not only for the supervision of offenders in the community, but for the preparation of pre-trial reports, the undertaking of early release (from custody), assessments and the provision of post-custody support. It delivers a range of programmes to offenders in the community, including young offenders, offers seminars and training in schools, and, since 2005, has overseen forced labour programmes for those over 18 and compulsory social work for those between the ages of 11 and 18. Within the youth prison – in line with new developments in the prison system overall – new programmes for rehabilitation, correction and development have been introduced.

The age of criminal responsibility is 14, but from the age of 11 young people can be sanctioned for administrative transgressions and may be sent to a semi-secure “social correction centre” under the authority of the Ministry of Education. There is one prison for juveniles, catering for young people aged from 14 to 21. Compulsory work in the community is a more likely consequence for lower level offenders, especially those committing breaches of civil rules rather than the criminal code – such as drinking in public places.

The authorities were clear not only about their vision but also about the persisting challenges: suitable employment opportunities, limited human resources, insufficient specific programmes, and very limited financial resources. This seriously curtails what can be done, from the provision of purposeful interventions in the community (though summer camps have now been established with the support of the probation service) to supporting contact between young people who have been imprisoned and their families.

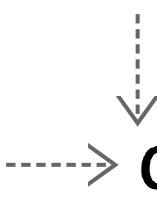
Nevertheless, there is a serious commitment to preventative practice, when this can be put into practice. The public order division of the police, alongside the probation and social services, contribute to preventative and campaigning work. There is a strong belief that family circumstances and parental responsibility (or the lack of it) are central to young people’s relationship with the law. Most preventative work starts with an assessment of a young person’s circumstances, which guides subsequent levels of intervention. This may include social welfare and psychological support, provided by the local government, mentoring, encouragement to participate in constructive leisure-time activity and assistance with education and employment. Notably, there is often close co-operation with municipal parents’ councils. Parents may, indeed, accompany a police officer or social worker as they go about their duties. Models of practice vary at the local level according to resource availability, professional relationships and the developmental stage of provision, but there is a strong sense of building best practice from local experience. This is to be commended. Both young people and ex-prisoners are priority groups for Latvia’s social inclusion strategy and, from what the IRT witnessed both in Cesis and Rezekne, there is a strong desire to improve the quality of early intervention, despite the fact that there is no separate



department dedicated to youth crime prevention and consequently no formal budget line. Nor, to date, has there been much co-operation or involvement of civil society organisations, which might support both prevention and rehabilitation work in the field of youth offending.

Recommendation 24

The IRT was impressed by the work of the criminal justice agencies working with young people: probation, prison service and police. Their practice is at an early stage of development and their resources are limited, but their stated position is worthy of strong political support: a commitment to prevention, the improvement of interventions and programmes, both in the community and in custody, and the need to work collaboratively with social services, schools and parents' organisations. A more explicit youth crime prevention strategy, supported by a budget line and seeking to engage expertise within civil society, could conceivably be the next step in what is already a commendable process.



Chapter 5

Cross-cutting key issues for youth policy

The above discussion of separate and substantive key domains of youth policy needs to be complemented by key issues that cut across these domains; they are relevant in more than one policy field and can constitute independent policy tasks. In his synthesis reports of the previous international youth policy reviews of the Council of Europe, Howard Williamson (2002, 2008) suggests the distinction of the following key issues: youth participation and citizenship, social inclusion, youth information, multiculturalism and minorities, mobility and internationalism, equal opportunities, radicalisation/reaction versus conformity, local versus global pressures, the use of new technologies, centre/periphery, urban/rural polarisation, elites and outsiders, environmental issues, and the role of diaspora.

With the diversity of contexts of youth policy reviewed by the Council of Europe, this list of key issues keeps growing. Some of them have universal significance, some emerge with the progress of social change, and some refer to important commonalities of certain national “containers” of youth policy. For the Latvian case, the discussion focuses on the key issues of youth participation and citizenship, youth information, elites and outsiders, the polarisation of urban and rural contexts, and, finally, social inclusion, which embraces issues of equal opportunities and minorities.



Youth participation and citizenship

Participation and citizenship are two categories in youth policy that address the vertical dimension of including young people into processes of decision making and power sharing, as well as their access to rights and entitlements that are legally or normatively relevant for their every day life experience (Hall/Williamson, 1999). In combination, these two aspects can, ideally, involve young people in powerful and active forms of citizenship, that benefit both individuals and their communities. In practice, activities can range from participation in



forms of voluntary work to responsible youth representation at all levels of decision making.

The study on youth activities in Latvia (Laboratory of Analytical and Strategic Study, 2007) draws a complex and contradictory picture of youth involvement in various social, cultural and political activities. The results of the study, which are too multifaceted to be repeated here in detail, indicate that nearly all young people participate in cultural events and entertainment, 77% in activities at (high) schools, 74% in interest and hobby education, 73% in social and public activities, and 63% in political activities. Yet the authors of the study, as well as the national report, still consider youth participation, and engagement in voluntary work in particular, to be too low. The IRT, however, has the impression that these numbers, taken as a reliable mirror of reality, indicate a remarkably high level of youth participation in Latvia; furthermore, it is obvious from these numbers that a range of opportunities to participate are actually available to young people, at least in terms of quantity.

The political representation of young people through youth NGOs has been discussed before. In addition to the above discussion, this section aims to complement the picture by commenting on the quality and the “how” of those forms of youth participation in general, of which the IRT could get a first-hand impression. The IRT had the opportunity to meet the presidents of the school councils, as well as the ministers of the school governments at the City Gymnasium in Cesis and Secondary School No. 5 of Rezekne. By taking these self-government structures as an example, the following questions can be discussed. How do established forms of local youth participation work in practice? What are their limits within their local settings? And how are they connected to the wider structures of youth policy making in Latvia? In other words, these questions investigate the way in which (local) youth interests are articulated and processed, and what their chances are of being heard and becoming relevant, beyond their immediate context of origin.

Pupil governments play an established role in the map of youth policy institutions on the regional and local level (Ministry of Children and Family Affairs, 2007: 22). Their functions are primarily internal, serving their respective schools; beyond that they are represented in the youth councils of their area or city, where these exist. According to recent research, some 13% of young people participate in representative structures at schools and high schools (Laboratory of Analytical and Strategic Study, 2007: 85). They act as pupils’ representatives, either in student councils, which consist of up to two pupils from each class, or as ministers in student governments, also sometimes called parliaments. These forms of youth participation are promoted and encouraged by the State Youth Initiative Centre under the Ministry of Education and Science. Similar structures exist in schools all over Latvia. In those municipalities where they are available, youth affairs workers co-ordinate and support these pupil governments by organising monthly meetings, seminars and practical workshops, and encouraging co-operation between schools in the district.



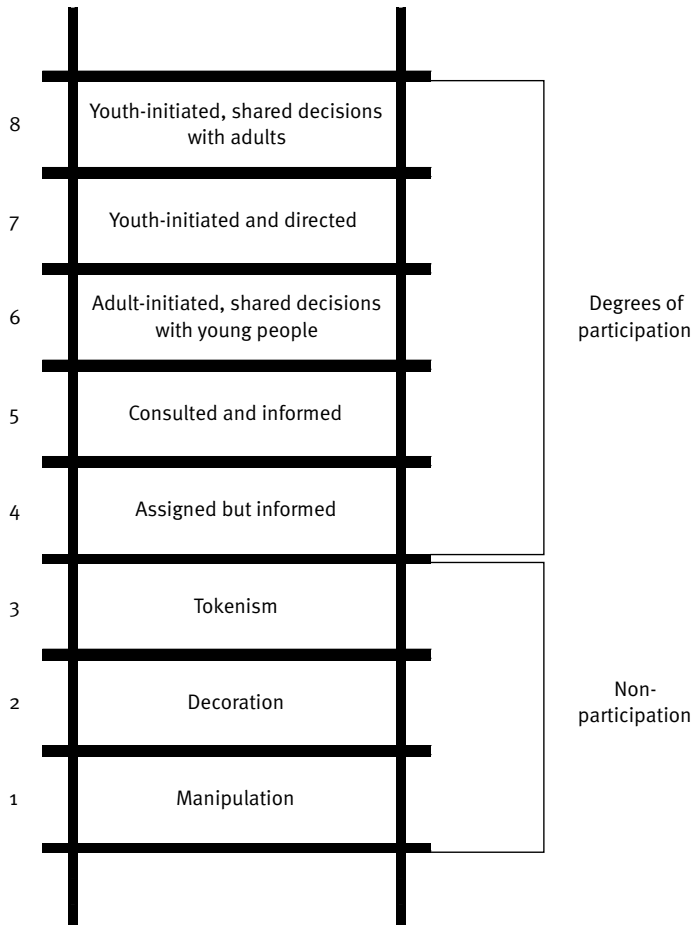
According to its self-description, the school parliament of Secondary School No. 5 in Rezekne has the task of mediating between the interests of students and the school administration (School parliament of Rezekne Secondary School No. 5, handout). Practically, this includes responsibilities like the organisation of events and the maintenance of the school tradition, by preparing celebrations for special days; the approval of important decisions together with the school administration and the school council; the negotiation of problems between students and the school, as well as the support of the school administration in securing the observation of school rules. Additional and more specific tasks are fulfilled by a variety of “ministries” in these two example schools. For instance, the ministry of culture typically tries to involve students in cultural and school events in general; it organises special school celebrations, or welcomes first year students. The foreign affairs ministry mainly co-ordinates exchange with other schools and with NGOs in the region or city. Finally, the interior ministry helps the school administration to supervise relations between teachers and students, as well as their rights and duties, and solves related problems, provides “order” at school events and may even co-operate with the police. The production of the school newspaper and the organisation of sport events or events like the Christmas party are other typical tasks fulfilled by the pupils’ government.

The IRT welcomes these structures of participation and was impressed by the sophistication and enthusiasm inherent in the students’ involvement. The IRT also recognised the friendly atmosphere of exchange and co-operation that obviously characterised the relationship between the students and the representatives of the school administration involved. Nevertheless, the case of school governments can be used as an example to point to some critical issues that are perhaps indicative of youth participation in Latvia in general and that can be suggested for improvement in the context of an international review. While reflecting their own situation, the Latvian parties are invited to recall the well-known “ladder of participation”, introduced by Hart (1992) to distinguish various steps towards fully fledged children’s participation and citizenship (Figure 3, overleaf).

Pupil governments at Latvian schools are undoubtedly an internal service first of all, supplementing a school’s regular offer. They strengthen the flow of information and communication between teachers and pupils, as well as across the institutional levels; their educational added value consists in the fact that they provide a platform of leadership and citizenship training for a few active young people. However, self-governments are certainly adult-initiated forms of participation, following a standardised logic and regulations provided by the State Youth Initiative Centre. In terms of scope and orientation, the activities, tasks, possibilities and limits of self-governments seem to be very similar in different schools. Their autonomy hardly seems to go beyond a certain bounded independence.



Figure 3 – The ladder of youth participation



Adapted from Hart (1992: 8)

In both cases, the self-governments largely depend on the goodwill of the teachers, in terms of budget; and the “ministers” of both pupil governments that the IRT met indicated that their influence on the school administration, or on substantive issues, hardly goes beyond the written or verbal submission and expression of opinions. The majority of activities listed by the two pupil governments have the character of major social events in the schools’ calendar. Due to their long tradition, it is difficult to say whether these activities were assigned to the pupils’ ministries, or whether there exists a genuine interest in organising them.

With some of the tasks of the self-governments mentioned above, like the mediating functions, the students’ governments assume regular responsibilities of school administration. It could be argued that it is only a small step from



such assistance to forms of peer supervision of “problematic” students as well as, perhaps, teachers. At this point, the idea of “participation” would be misunderstood.

Recommendation 25²⁵

The IRT encourages all parties involved in this particular form of youth involvement to come to a sound and honest assessment of the underlying key questions: What is the intended main direction in terms of learning? Is it actual participation, or leadership, or assistance, or merely “activity”? All four of these educational goals are legitimate but probably require different approaches and opportunities.

Finally, the IRT has the impression that the structures of youth involvement established with school governments throughout Latvia could be modified and better integrated into a comprehensive framework of democratic youth participation in Latvia. Currently, school governments establish co-operations between schools in the same region and they are represented in youth councils of the city (or region). However, local youth participation as a whole appears to be covered and restrained by a glass ceiling that cannot be penetrated. Ministers and presidents of school governments could not point the IRT to any umbrella structure that would systematically collect opinions and decisions from young people at schools and feed them into nationwide processes or institutions for negotiating youth policy issues.

Recommendation 26

The IRT recommends the establishment of an official platform for feeding the resolutions of pupil parliaments and governments into a nationwide process of collecting and considering young voices. Young people’s initiatives, opinions and democratic decisions should have the chance to enter “channels to the top” and be perceived by policy makers as a means to facilitate political participation and democratisation and promote the youth-driven character of policy development. A national youth parliament, given the required public attention, could be such a platform. Alternatively, structures like the Latvian Youth Summit or the planned youth forums could be used. To summarise, the IRT believes that Latvian youth policy would benefit from such structures in the sense of improving its youth-driven character.

25. Following the national hearing, the national authorities requested the addition of the following footnote: “During the national hearing there was strong opinion from persons directly involved in youth work that the true value of “school parliaments” lies in engaging youth in active participation, although it is not always so, this essential form which gives first experience of participation for youngsters is still developing.”



-----> Youth information

Quality youth participation, based on the principle of equality of perspectives and partners, requires young people to be able, capable and motivated to make use of relevant information. Several international documents and resolutions have underlined and repeatedly approved the importance of access to information (for example, the UN Convention of the Rights of the Child 1990, Article 13; European Youth Information Charter adopted by the European Youth Information and Counselling Agency ERYICA in 2004; Resolution of the Council and the Representatives of the Governments of the Member States of the European Union on Common Objectives for Participation by and Information for Young People (2006).

Some of the discussions between the IRT and young people, as well as the national report (Ministry of Children and Family Affairs 2007: 32), revealed that there is a lack of information, and/or that they do not know where and how to find it. The Latvian youth study into social and political activity (Laboratory of Analytical and Strategic Study, 2007: 74-77) finds that information is in fact available, but does not reach young people. There are several reasons for this. On the one hand, the study indicates that much of the information available does not seem to be important to young people. On the other hand, different experts – like youth and social workers, or NGO representatives – complain about the passivity of young people and their reluctance to get informed. The majority of young people still prefer to rely on information provided by friends – information about local events and activities are most relevant.

The bottom line is that there are doubts about whether youth information in Latvia corresponds to young people's needs. The above findings raise the question whether the information available is sufficiently relevant, as well as prepared and transmitted in a way that is "youth-friendly". The IRT has the impression that Latvian youth policy still has a considerable way to go, with regard to youth information. It is true that the formation of a youth information and consulting system has already been among the assignments of the State Youth Policy Concept of 2002 (Ministry of Children and Family Affairs, 2007: 10); it is also true that it appears again as one of the priorities in the State Youth Policy Programme for 2007. While it is unclear what happened in the five years in between, there is no doubt that the Ministry of Children and Family Affairs is actively trying to improve the situation by, for instance, organising information campaigns, publishing a monthly bulletin for municipal youth work co-ordinators, establishing a hotline, or by providing methodological material translated into Latvian.

As an important step a youth information website – www.jaunatneslietas.lv – has been established very recently. It was launched only at the end of November 2007 and complements the youth information available on the homepage of the ministry. In terms of ministry activities, budget and research, especially the recent study into youth social and political activities (Laboratory of Analytical and Strategic Study 2007), it is included under the heading of "youth information".



The IRT understands that youth information does not, perhaps, have high priority status in a situation where many urgent youth issues have to be addressed at the same time and with very tight budgets. Yet the IRT has to remind Latvian youth policy that, if it wants to meet its own principles in terms of the vertical youth policy dimension of facilitating constructive youth involvement in decision-making and civic participation, it needs to recognise youth information as a critical building block. The greatest advantage of a having a “late start” in terms of establishing a youth information system consists perhaps in the many experiences and examples of best practice that are already available.²⁶

Recommendation 27

The IRT invites the Latvian youth policy protagonists to make the most of their “late start” advantage, in terms of youth information, to learn fast, absorb good and creative ideas, and catch up quickly with the European midfield. Youth information centres in all regional centres, perhaps attached to established structures, could function as low-threshold youth information hubs and complement the online offer that is currently being established and extended.

-----> **Elites and outsiders**

A nation that is transforming at the speed of Latvia is inevitably producing new sorts of positions and possibilities at the top and at the bottom of society. Some of the youth policy trends reviewed in this report contribute more than others to the moderation of the ongoing sorting and segregation of young people. Yet some policies that are projected to promote horizontal or vertical integration are at risk of being undermined by self-induced, unintended consequences. This danger is particularly visible with regard to the domain of education and the issue of participation.

One of the reasons for the extensive discussion of educational issues in this report is the fact that the formation and maintenance of human resources is both a top priority and a strength of Latvian youth policy. Yet, the system of formal education in particular, is at risk of contributing to a polarisation of society in the future. The trend towards higher education that is further stimulated by policies of international accreditation and recognition of certificates (such as the Bologna process), on the one hand, and the unsatisfactory quality of vocational and

26. Inquiry through ERYICA – www.eryica.org – would probably be the best starting point, but particular attention might be paid to the youth information systems in Finland, Norway and the United Kingdom (England, Scotland and Wales). Another important source is the EC document *Analysis of Member States* – replies to the Commission questionnaires on youth participation and information: http://ec.europa.eu/youth/whitepaper/download/sec_2003_465_en.pdf (Retrieved: 25.12.2007).



professional training for manual jobs, on the other – both observed with concern by the Latvian experts themselves – are producing an increasing competition towards positions of high educational status. At the same time, this development contributes to a general devaluation of educational credentials that hits those (young) people hardest that have the lowest qualifications. In the long run, this development may result in an opposition between a small societal group that actually manages to match its educational capital with appropriate jobs, a large over-educated group without sufficient professional qualifications, and, finally, an uneducated group that cannot keep up with the rising educational requirements. The political campaigns around the status of the two main languages in education will probably attach an additional critical dimension to this development.

A similar argument can be made with regard to the Latvian policy of youth participation. Is it really able to reach young people across all layers of society? Or is it rather constructing a participation elite among young people, a small proportion of youth – students mostly – involved in various activities at the same time? During the visits to Cesis and Rezekne, the IRT was puzzled to learn that some of those young people available for discussion on different occasions were actually drawn into municipal youth activities on several levels. The same young people that held positions in pupil governments were likely to be involved in activities organised by the local youth initiative centre or youth clubs in the field of education; there seems to be a trend among young people to accumulate participation capital in a way that segregates youth. Needless to say, this phenomenon goes hand in hand with the constitution of an associated opposite category of young people that is not participating at all. This category includes, apart from disaffected young people, so-called “no-lifers” – a term that was suggestively used by one of the (active) students in the discussion with the IRT referring to young people who are “invisible” to public life because they “disappear” in their studies.

The recent research into youth activities in Latvia (Laboratory of Analytical and Strategic Study 2007, chapter 6) confirms this impression: a large cluster of “passive youth” (34%) can be identified alongside a small cluster of “plurilaterally active youth” (17%). This polarisation of young people, in terms of participation, is not surprising in view of the multiple challenges they have to face in their “double transition” from youth to adulthood within a society in transition (Kovacheva, 2001). And some priorities simply have a material background. Furthermore, one needs to consider that the socialist past when “voluntary activities” for the benefit of the state used to be a standard, thus quasi-obligatory element of education, is not too far away in a post-Soviet country like Latvia (Jasiukaityte/Reiter, 2004).



Recommendation 28

The IRT recommends that Latvian authorities investigate the polarising features of policies targeted at young people. The policy process would benefit from a continuous assessment and evaluation of outcomes with regard to their (dis-)integrative capacities. In the field of participation in particular, as a prime concern of youth policy, the state responsibility to ensure conditions for youth associations and NGOs to develop and survive needs to be fulfilled. The continuation of the civil society agenda introduced with the restoration of independence of the country will largely depend on the availability of baseline funding framework.

-----> Social inclusion²⁷

The category of youth participation as such, discussed above, mainly represents the vertical dimension of youth policy. Questions of equal access to participation, on the other hand, and the availability of practical opportunities according to, for instance, social and ethnic background, or sexual and religious orientation, address first of all the horizontal axis of youth policy. More concretely, they refer directly to the Latvian youth policy principles of equal opportunities, favourable social and economic conditions and youth integration in general.

Economic growth and employment have long been the two hegemonic remedies for poverty and social exclusion of our time. These two dimensions, together with the priority of economic policy over other policy areas, do not lose their prominent status in current strategies to fight for social inclusion; yet additional aspects of social exclusion, and with them other policy areas, start to become recognised as significant (European Commission, 2007; Colley *et al.*, 2007). While youth policy is one of these additional policy areas, one needs to be realistic about its influence.

In other words, youth policy in a narrow sense, together with single institutions responsible for it, can do little to directly improve the socio-economic or material situation of young people (that is the horizontal dimension of youth policy). More than other policy issues, the realisation of comprehensive social inclusion depends on the contribution and commitment of policy agents outside the youth policy domain. However, youth policy can play a critical role within a concerted “*realpolitik*” (Williamson, 2007) that is pragmatically oriented towards problem solving. The strength of the youth policy perspective consists exactly in the fact that it underlines the transversal character of social exclusion, while at the same time focusing the attention on one specific social group. The youth policy

27. Following the national hearing, the national authorities requested the inclusion of the following comment: “During the national hearing there was strong opinion that, regarding social inclusion, there must be stronger emphasis and focus on children and youngsters with fewer opportunities, especially children and youngsters with mental and physical disabilities.”



perspective demonstrates that successful policies of social inclusion will largely depend on the successful involvement of additional policy areas in co-operation between researchers, NGO representatives and practitioners.

This brief excursion into some of the complexities of the social inclusion agenda is necessary to understand the limited role that youth policy can play when this very youth policy – in this case in Latvia – is reviewed and criticised for some of the shortcomings that it cannot help to reduce, without the participation of other policy domains.

On the basis of the information provided by the Latvian partners, as well as the discussions during the two visits to the country, the IRT has the impression that the issues of social exclusion and poverty are very relevant and critical, but at the same time sensitive topics that are not readily discussed, sometimes even ignored. Reproducing all the problems concerning social exclusion of youth in Latvia, described in the national report and other reports and documents, would go beyond this chapter. The issues cut across all main domains: in a most comprehensive and recent discussion of child poverty issues Lacey (2007) identifies urgent need for action and policy response in all of the following areas with regard to children:

- Income and risk of poverty
- Employment of parents and reconciliation of work and family life
- Health
- Education
- Housing
- Safe environment
- Access to care and services
- Violence against children and discrimination
- Use of addictive substances
- Crime
- Children with special needs
- Culture, sports and recreation facilities
- Participation in society.

Geographical location is relevant for all these aspects. The lack of infrastructure for integrating disabled young people is referred to as problematic under the heading of “special needs education” in the national report (Ministry of Children and Family Affairs, 2007: 36); otherwise disability is hardly discussed at all. To summarise, some of the issues listed above have been addressed elsewhere in this report, others are not covered because the IRT did not gain sufficient knowledge about them.

Gender is a most important cross-cutting aspect of social inclusion. Gender produces inequalities among young people, with regard to issues as dissimilar as



employment participation and protection, human trade and sexual exploitation, criminality, substance abuse, mortality, or education and dropping out of school.²⁸ Yet although gender inequalities are recognised, for instance, by the Ministry of Welfare, the corresponding activities indicated – such as seminars for students, documentary films, computer games, information material, articles in youth journals, and teacher training programmes (Ministry of Welfare, 2007b) – appear to be rather “soft”. At the same time, the application of somewhat faster ways of introducing some kind of equalisation, like the introduction of quota systems, is rejected. Special target programmes for young men are altogether absent.

Recommendation 29

The IRT believes that Latvian youth policy could benefit considerably from stronger gender sensitivity in all key domains. The situation of (young) women and mothers in Latvia in particular needs to be further improved, be it for women in employment, single mothers or working parents. Policies should draw on the considerable work done elsewhere in Europe and through the European institutions, on gender equality in schooling and education and on gender mainstreaming in the workplace/society.

Despite meetings with two state agencies directly involved in issues of social inclusion, the Ministry of Welfare and the Secretariat of Special Assignments for the Minister of Social Integration, the IRT has learned little about what is actually being done in terms of practical social (inclusion) work in the municipalities and at the doorsteps of disadvantaged young people and their families. Following Ziverte/Laiveniece (2005: 109) one could assume that “the profession of social work is not sufficiently accepted by the government and public administration”. Indeed, the IRT left the meeting with the Ministry of Social Affairs to discuss poverty and social exclusion in Latvia, with doubts about the overall status of the profession and the availability of social work services in the regions and municipalities.

One of the reasons for this public silence over issues of social exclusion may be that the political reluctance to address new societal problems that characterised the beginning of the 1990s has never been overcome. For instance, Tana Lace (2007) intently observes in a recent report on child poverty and social inclusion of children in Latvia to the European Commission the political discomfort with poverty problems:

The government declarations, which set its main goals and objectives, since restoration of independence of Latvia in 1991, were characterised by unwillingness

28. During the national hearing, the particular focus on gender as a dimension of inequality was challenged by pointing to the noticeable predominance of women in youth policy matters.



to identify tackling the poverty problem among the priorities of the government. The governments hesitated to mention the concept of poverty and tried to replace it with a concept of welfare. Only in 2004 did declarations of both governments highlight the fight against poverty as one of the priority tasks.

The IRT wonders whether this political reluctance to address certain issues was one of the reasons why Latvia was among those few countries in Europe that did not support, at state level, the Council of Europe's 2006 "All different – all equal" campaign, advocating diversity, human rights and participation.

Recommendation 30

The IRT recommends the implementation of targeted research into issues of poverty and social exclusion and their relevance for growing up in Latvia, in order to fill gaps in knowledge and data collection. In view of the manifold challenges, priorities need to be established on the basis of co-operation between, at least, the ministries of Children and Family Affairs, Welfare, Education and Science, and Regional Development and local governments, so that the horizontal character of this policy field is duly considered. Furthermore, in order to synchronise their efforts with related structures of research and funding available outside the country, the Latvian authorities would be well-advised to embrace international campaigns promoting certain aspects of social inclusion.

Two societal groups that could have been the at the centre of related national campaigns promoting equality and tolerance and which (still) have a difficult position in Latvian society are ethnic minorities, and especially the big group of ethnic Russians, on the one hand, and sexual minorities, on the other.²⁹ Latvia was also repeatedly criticised by international organisations for discrimination against these groups and was put under considerable pressure to improve the situation (for example, Council of Europe, 2004, 2007; Muiznieks, 2006; Kruma, 2007; Putnina, 2007). The situation of (a) ethnic and (b) sexual minorities is briefly reflected in the following.

(a) Because some 30% of the Latvian population belong to the group of ethnic Russians, the IRT is surprised that the national report on youth policy in Latvia fails to address the issue of ethnic minorities in the country. There is no information, beyond an uncommented overview of the ethnic composition of the population of Latvia, indicating that approximately one out of six members of the population has the status of a non-citizen – that is that his/her political rights, opportunities

29. The Roma minority is another social group that suffers considerable discrimination and racism (Latvian Centre for Human Rights and Ethnic Studies, 2003; Council of Europe, 2007). The National Action Plan "Roma in Latvia" from 2007 to 2009 promotes the integration of the Roma population in the three main spheres of education, employment and human rights.



to travel and work are restricted.³⁰ The report does not discuss the implications for young people. It is only through secondary sources that the IRT has learnt about the inconsistent minority policy of the country, the ongoing liberalisation of the naturalisation law, due to international pressure and the fact that still more than 13 000 children are non-citizens (Council of Europe, 2007, paragraph 38). Children born to non-citizens of Latvia are not automatically Latvian citizens, but need to be registered by their parents.

During the two country visits, the IRT received first-hand information about the education of minorities and related problems (see above), about the procedures and requirements of naturalisation, the political struggle in the background, and about the opinion of Russian youth NGOs. The IRT was even confronted with the story of one young man of Russian origin who actually registered for Latvian citizenship only after one of his teachers found out about his situation by accident.

All participants in discussions with the IRT, including minority NGO representatives, have maintained that they were not aware of direct and active discrimination towards the Russian minority. The members of the multi-ethnic community of Rezekne in the eastern province of Latgale in particular, emphasised that living together in mixed settings is unproblematic. Yet, the politically heated debate, particularly about the status of the Russian language in Latvian society is ongoing as was, for instance, confirmed by representatives of a Russian youth NGO. While they emphasised that young people with different ethnic backgrounds do get along well with each other, the general impression is that they do pursue different lifestyles. Young Russian speakers – including ethnic Russians, Ukrainians, Tartars, Jews and Byelorussians – are less involved in the traditional Latvian culture, in civil society activities and youth policy issues in particular. “The government doesn’t need us” was the expression that was used by one of the NGOs’ representatives to illustrate the general attitude of young Russians with reference to the denial of the right to become a civil servant, or to take other high public positions, of mostly Russian non-citizens. Certain disadvantages with regard to applying for state funding because of the Latvian language requirement are obvious – the fact that, as the IRT was informed, no Russian has yet participated in the international exchange programme of the European Voluntary Service is indicative.³¹ In fact, this greater distance to civil society involvement was one of the explanations for why only one Russian youth NGO actually took the opportunity to meet the IRT, although many had been invited well in advance to do so.³²

30. An overview of differences between rights of Latvian citizens and non-citizens can be found in Mitrofanovs *et al.*, 2006, Appendix 1.

31. The full name of the programme is EU YOUTH Programme 2000-2006; Action European Voluntary Service. The follow-up programme: EU Youth in Action Programme 2007-2013.

32. The greater “distance” of members of the Russian population in Latvia from organised civil society was confirmed by a police officer attending the national hearing, who also suggested that problematic and criminal young people come disproportionately from within the population of Russian speakers.



Apart from the somewhat idiosyncratic language policy, which might result in a disadvantage of the ethnically Latvian population not studying the important Russian language any more (see above), the IRT wants to point to the issue of emigration that is widespread among the ethnic minorities in Latvia (Ivlevs, 2007). Ethnic minorities are particularly sensitive to any form of discrimination and will likely react by leaving this context of discrimination. In Rezekne, in the eastern region of Latvia, in particular, the IRT met several young people of Russian origin who lived without their parents, who had left to work abroad. And some of them had the intention to follow their example at some point. In view of the dramatic and increasing labour shortage in the Baltic States, this drain on important human resources may soon become an economic problem too.³³

(b) The status of sexual minorities is a very sensitive indicator of the overall level of tolerance of a society. Despite repeated inquiries into the situation of lesbians, gays, bisexuals and transgender people (LGBT), it was difficult for the IRT to get hold of primary sources and information in the course of the two country visits. The national report does not address the topic at all, although sexual orientations mostly manifest themselves in youth, constituting a particularly vulnerable minority group of young people in society. Furthermore, no official statement or position could be gained at the meeting with representatives of the Ministry for Special Assignments for Society Integration Affairs, despite the fact that the matter is part of its direct responsibility.

What the IRT finally managed to learn is not encouraging. In short, the situation of sexual minorities in Latvia and the discrimination against them continues to be “very disturbing”, as the Council of Europe Commissioner for Human Rights expressed it (Council of Europe, 2007: paragraph 86; also Putnina, 2007). Currently, the tolerance to any alternatives to heterosexuality in Latvia is marginal, but discrimination against sexual minorities is not acceptable in a democratic country. The regular utilisation and exploitation of this issue for political purposes, by religious as well as some secular leaders, fuels the common attitude of rejection on all levels.³⁴ Two examples: first, public demonstrations by sexual minorities, which are currently possible only in the capital of Riga, need police protection if they are permitted at all.³⁵ In 2005, the Gay Pride parade was even forbidden by Riga city authorities and publicly opposed by leading politicians, including the Prime Minister – the event could eventually take place only after a

33. On 7 December 2007, an article in the *Baltic Times*, published on the Internet, contemplated the “new invasion” of “Ukrainians, Belarusian, Bulgarians, Central Asians and Russians” to the Baltic States and the “desperate measures” of employers due to the “severe labour shortage” in the area (www.baltictimes.com/news/articles/19463 Retrieved: 10.12.2007).

34. The Cardinal of the Catholic Church is particularly outspoken, even demanding a ban on gay people holding public office: www.baltictimes.com/news/articles/19468 (Retrieved: 31.12.2007).

35. For the debates around the Gay Pride Parade in Riga in 2007 see: www.baltictimes.com/news/articles/17917 (Retrieved: 10.10.2007).



favourable court decision.³⁶ Second, the responses of young people to questions from the IRT concerning sexual minorities were extremely reserved. They would not openly reject the issue, but suggested it was best to keep alternative sexual orientations private and “invisible”. In any case, the young people expressed the opinion that “divisive” events like LGBT demonstrations were not necessary and would only worsen the attitudes that already exist in Latvian society.

The spokesperson from one of the NGOs, which represents the interests of sexual minorities in Latvia, described their work as very difficult and reduced mainly to targeting media and policy makers. The overall situation of the NGO is precarious; like many other NGOs in Latvia it keeps struggling for survival and can only operate on the basis of unpaid voluntary work by committed individual members. The frustration about intolerance of Latvian society to sexual minorities is considerable. Progress is slow, but can be identified due to the fact that, as the IRT was told, a (civil) partnership law for homosexuals is at least under discussion and supported by four political parties.

Recommendation 31

The IRT urges Latvian policy makers and youth policy professionals at all levels to take responsibility for creating the conditions for young people to be able to go through the difficult process of finding their sexual identities on the basis of impartiality. They are recommended to combat all forms of intolerance and work actively towards an attitude shift in society, with regard to sexual minorities and their marginalisation.

-----> **Urban-rural polarisation**

Do rural areas of Latvia enjoy equal access to youth services and facilities, education, employment and life chances compared with the capital and other cities? Do young people growing up in isolated houses along the road, which the IRT has seen only through the windows of the minibus leaving Riga for Cesis and Rezekne, have a chance to get the same quality and scope of services as young people going out in downtown Riga at night? The dimension of space is an often neglected category in policy making. And we know from research that inequalities have a strong spatial dimension – Latvia is no exception (UNDP, 2006). About one in three people in Latvia live in one of the 400-plus rural municipalities.

With regard to youth policy, the spatial dimension is one of the most crucial in terms of social inclusion and the horizontal dimension of socio-economic youth citizenship. As discussed above, the availability of certain youth provisions in municipalities and rural communities depends entirely on the tax revenue of the respective community, as well as on the commitment of individuals and their willingness to co-operate. The national report addresses this issue only

36. www.baltictimes.com/news/articles/13120 (Retrieved: 10.10.2007).



occasionally: it mentions that schools in rural areas keep disappearing because of insufficient pupils; that the availability of sports facilities is highly restricted; that unemployment and the risk of social exclusion in general is much higher in rural areas. Problems of alcoholism, human trade and female trafficking, as well as emigration, the IRT was told, are among the additional problems of rural areas. And it seems very unlikely that the education and participation elite among Latvian youth has its platform of performance in rural areas.

The IRT did not have the opportunity to investigate this matter sufficiently. While there was the opportunity to observe youth policy practice on the municipal level, no impression could be gained with regard to the rural dimension of youth policy. Formally, the responsibility for rural areas in terms of youth policy lies with the regional co-ordinator – but several regions do not have such a co-ordinator.

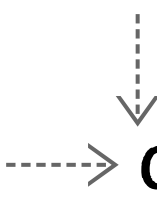
The discussion that the IRT had with young people and youth policy actors in Cesis and Rezekne confirmed some of the above disadvantages of living in rural municipalities. Additionally, there was the opinion that European funds hardly ever reach villages and small communities. One of the main concerns of policy makers is related to emigration. Young people, leaving their families earlier, also leave the place where they grew up for education, higher salaries and better life chances in Riga or abroad. Municipalities cannot offer housing for young people and are not competitive in terms of higher education or employment. In fact, regional youth policy seems to have little to offer to young people beyond the age of secondary schooling, when activities like hobby education will probably have lost some of its attraction.

Youth policy actors in Rezekne responded to this problem by perceiving the active involvement of young people as part of a long-term strategy that, if it should bear fruit in 20 years time, needs to be started now. In times of rapid social change within a country and in a Europe moving ahead at different speeds (Eder, 2004) they understood that youth policy needs to recall the generational character of societal change and come back to thinking in longer time spans, if it wants to contribute to positive regional development. Ideally, the simultaneous consideration of the spatial and temporal dimension in policy making will prevent the region from becoming an “empty space” in the future but instead a lively and attractive place of high quality. Again, this will not depend on successful youth policies alone. Youth policies in the dynamic capital of Riga with a higher fluctuation of (young) people will certainly need a different overall approach, but they can learn from strategies which carefully balance space and time in the more fragile regional communities.

Recommendation 32

The IRT recommends the connection of the youth policy agenda with a broader regional (economic) development strategy that would assist young people dramatically in the process. Spatial inequalities in socio-economic youth citizenship need to be identified, quantified and qualified on the basis of research, in order to be acted upon in terms of policy measures.





Chapter 6

Supporting youth policy

In order to remain relevant, effective and up to date with societal processes, youth policy needs to incorporate an element of permanent self-evaluation and development. This reflexive dimension of youth policy, which supplements the more substantive key issues and domains includes professionalisation at all levels of youth policy, including training and working conditions and processes, youth research and international co-operation, as well as identification, consolidation and dissemination of good practice.



Youth research

Youth research has, alongside policy practitioners and NGO representatives, an important role in the Council of Europe's tripartite approach to youth policy development (Lauritzen, 2004). Research has also been recognised as a significant source for an improved "understanding of youth" as part of the knowledge base for effective youth policy in the EC's White Paper on youth policy (European Commission, 2002: 25). Corresponding programmes and recommendations for evidence-based youth policies and independent research were formulated and distributed to member countries. Beyond that, youth research exists as an original and independent field of applied and academic knowledge production, concerning an important life stage. Findings from comparative research in Europe, in particular, as well as established youth research networks committed to high-quality research into the major issues of youth transitions and inequality due to gender, class and ethnicity, can be informative sources also of national youth policy development (for example. Bradley/van Hoof, 2005; Milmeister/Williamson, 2006; Bendit, 2007; Yndigegn, 2007). Latvian youth research has a long tradition and is well-established in international networks. Academic youth researchers regularly participate in, and contribute to, both European and international research conferences.



The Latvian national report does refer to some original youth research, illustrating first of all young people's participation in, and attitudes to, forms of social and political activity. Yet there is hardly any evidence provided that would systematically represent the condition of youth and important subgroups in Latvian society, as well as its change throughout the period of transformation. While some additional research-based information on the lives of young people and their family contexts was produced by the Youth Department upon request, the IRT had the impression that the actual situation of young people in Latvia did not have the status in policy making that it deserves. It remains unclear how knowledge of young people's lives was considered in a way that would suggest that the development of policy programmes was primarily evidence-driven and related to specific needs of young people in society.

In order to improve youth expertise, the development and maintenance of a knowledge base could become part of the agenda of inter-ministerial bodies like the Council of Youth Policy Co-ordination. Youth research forums and networks could be invited to provide the council with research findings in an accessible way. The involvement of youth researchers in the planned youth forum, as a new consultative body in youth policy, is an important step in this direction.

Furthermore, survey or even original research, like that which is available with regard to the important issue of drug use and abuse, is not always necessary to get a picture of the condition of young people in a given society. A systematic comparative review of available evidence from official reporting and monitoring, as well as research commissioned earlier (for example official statistics, international comparative research, other secondary data), could be used as a starting point for identifying the main policy needs. A good example from Lithuania is the special report on the occasion of the Youth Year 2000, produced by the Statistical Office of the country (*Statistikos Departamentas 2000*). This is a model for joint knowledge production within administrative structures – as the tables were produced in English and Lithuanian, it is also a model for sharing this knowledge with the interested international public by default. From there, youth research can be developed towards specialised issues, as well as evaluation research accompanying concrete policy programmes. Furthermore, the documentation and dissemination of youth research can become part of a comprehensive youth information strategy.

Recommendation 33

The IRT believes that the capacity of research for youth policy development is underestimated and should be strengthened. As a step towards evidence-based youth policy, the IRT recommends making use of the expertise of Latvian youth research by inviting them to participate in committees and by developing an active and regular youth research funding policy. In this way, youth research could also become part of a comprehensive youth information strategy. At the same time, the Latvian authorities are advised to take advantage of knowledge and resources concerning the situation of young people in the country, available from other ministries and public institutions.



-----> Youth work, training and working conditions

Professional youth workers, social workers with a specialised profile, and other “youth practitioners” are important links in the chain of youth policy delivery, starting from the design of policy strategies at the top, all the way down to the face-to-face contacts with young people at the bottom. “Youth worker” does not have the status of a recognised profession in Latvia (Laboratory of Analytical and Strategic Study, 2007: 23) and social work is a very recent professional field altogether, still struggling with the typical teething troubles of a young discipline that involves, for instance, the clarification of the status of professional versus academic orientation, implementation of practical elements, acceptance by public authorities, or the mere availability of sufficient professionals (Ziverte/Laiveniece, 2005).

The establishment of an education and training system for youth workers is one of the proposals that can already be found in the Latvian State Youth Policy Concept of 2002 (Ministry of Children and Family Affairs, 2007: 10). However, up to the present day, a professional training structure to prepare for youth work, in all parts of Latvia, seems to be largely missing. The IRT had the opportunity to meet various types of youth practitioners – ranging from municipal youth affairs co-ordinators with (additional) administrative tasks to individuals working with children and young people on a professional or voluntary basis – all of which qualified for the label of “youth worker”, according to their expertise and their approach. Yet they seem to have built and keep developing their admirable capabilities above all on the basis of everyday practice. While this is certainly an indispensable and necessary source of providing competent youth work, professionalised and sustainable youth work structures require more. For that, common sense and learning on the job needs to be complemented with certain common standards, with regard to the understanding of youth work and the relevant training, working conditions and tasks.

In order to guide the professional preparation of youth practitioners on various levels, the notion of youth work, as well as its status within the overall framework of youth education and development, needs to be clarified. Having listened to many parties involved and trying to distil from numerous conversations and presentations the Latvian understanding of youth work, the IRT has the impression that this clarification is yet to be made – there does not seem to be sufficient agreement about the main features of youth work.

Peter Lauritzen (2006) describes youth work in the following way:

Youth work is a summary expression for activities with and for young people of a social, cultural, educational or political nature. Increasingly, youth work activities also include sports and services for young people. Youth work belongs to the domain of “out of school” education, most commonly referred to as either non-formal or informal learning.



The general aims of youth work are the integration and inclusion of young people in society. It may also aim towards the personal and social emancipation of young people from dependency and exploitation.

Apart from the educational dimension, youth work has the additional features of involving non-formal and informal out-of-school experiences that can facilitate integration/inclusion as well as the emancipation and empowerment of (potentially) disadvantaged young people. In this way youth work can, on the one hand, be considered a framework of youth development and formation that is complementary to conventional education. Complementary youth work could be called Type 1 youth work. But, in case institutional education is deficient or simply not the “right” framework for certain youths, youth work can, on the other hand, also have important remedial functions, for it typically includes outreach activities targeted at underprivileged individuals. Remedial youth work could be called Type 2 youth work; in its orientation and methods it can overlap with youth crime prevention work.

Type 1 youth work – *Complementary youth work is delivered by means of organised out-of-school activities in addition to regular education. Its preventive dimension is characterised by the aspect of occupying and “restricting” large shares of youth free time on the basis of voluntary participation (“restrictive prevention”).*

Type 2 youth work – *Remedial youth work is delivered by means of non-formal involvement of (disadvantaged, criminal) young people instead of or in addition to organised out of school activities. Its preventive dimension is characterised by the aspect of compensating for shortcomings of formalised youth work and education on the basis of voluntary participation (“developmental prevention”).*

Against this background, how can the current Latvian concept and provision of youth work be understood? On the one hand, the vast network of excellent institutions of hobby and interest education under the patronage of the State Youth Initiative Centre, which are attached to schools or located at Children and Youth Centres falls into the first category of youth work, complementing the curriculum of school education (Type 1). According to the IRT, this structure – as it is available in Latvia, and in Estonia to name another example (Stafseng, Council of Europe, 2001) – could be the exemplary best practice of a baseline in youth provision. This form of “restrictive prevention”, as the IRT called it in internal meetings, underlining the positive aspects of “restricting” youth free time, is an example for the international community to learn from. In terms of training, it should not be difficult to provide practitioners typically involved in Type 1 youth work, like



teachers and pedagogues, with the necessary additional skills to competently accompany such youth activities.³⁷

On the other hand, the IRT had the impression that genuine Type 2 youth work, emphasising non-formal activities targeted at disadvantaged and “non-organised” young people – the IRT called it “developmental prevention” – needs some further consideration in Latvia. It requires specialised professional preparation, or additional training of professionals close to social work. A respective methodology of training was rarely articulated. Most importantly, this type of youth work – as it is new in a country like Latvia dealing with societal problems that have not been recognised before (Ziverte/Laiveniece, 2005) – needs extensive political trust in its capacity. And it requires more degrees of freedom, together with unconventional infrastructure solutions for “open” youth work.

Currently, it appears that, in the perspective of both concept and training, genuine Type 2 youth work in Latvia is at risk of being absorbed by the domination of extended institutional forms of out-of-school Type 1 youth activities. While the IRT considers the preservation of this offer for young people of utmost value and importance, it could be one of the medium-term goals of youth policy to profile, promote and establish Type 2 youth work *vis-à-vis* forms of interest education and structured leisure time activities, including competitive sports programmes. In this way, youth policy would have tool for reaching out and touching those non-organised youths who are not otherwise attracted into Type 1 youth work; it could provide them with attention, support and the opportunity to participate. Inclusive features of the profile of youth work in Latvia in general would be strengthened. In the long run, one positive secondary effect could consist in the feedback of experiences of active learning into more conventional forms of education, ultimately stimulating innovation and their modernisation (Bentley, 1998).

Recommendation 34

The IRT feels that the excellent structures of youth out-of-school activities already in place in Latvia need to be complemented by an alternative approach to youth work with stronger non-formal features. With the additional dimension of targeting disadvantaged young people, who are otherwise outside the reach of public support, this approach should be characterised by a strong orientation towards social integration, preventing unfavourable youth development. A diversity of approaches to youth work would ultimately enhance the involvement of young people in Latvia, in terms of both quantity and quality.

37. During the national hearing the Latvian emphasis on out-of-school education through interest education was criticised for being based on adult, rather than youth, decisions and direction. The absence of more strongly youth-driven forms of youth work was, for many, a significant source of concern.





The sustainability, longevity and extension of youth work structures in Latvia will also ultimately depend on the ability of the national and regional/municipal youth policy standards to improve and consolidate the working conditions and job profiles of youth practitioners. The IRT had the impression that, at the moment, especially in regional contexts, individual practitioners are faced with a workload, responsibilities and an extent of practice that does not correspond to the scope of their resources, or even their employment contracts.³⁸ This impression is substantiated by the findings from a recent report commissioned by the Ministry for Children and Family Affairs. With regard to the group of the youth affairs co-ordinators the report, investigating different perspectives on youth policy, points to some of the reasons for frustration among youth practitioners:

A large number of youth affairs co-ordinators point out that they are lacking personnel. Frequently there is only one person in the district responsible for youth affairs co-ordination (YAC), who cannot work alone in all fields. The realisation of youth policy in the real world depends on the co-ordinator. “One has to be involved wholeheartedly, understand youth, be able to do everything” (YAC). Youth affairs coordinators point out – it is not enough with just one person to take care of youth affairs. Especially if this person has to monitor and organise youth affairs and at the same time organise different youth events. The youth affairs co-ordinators are expected to carry out too many functions at the same time. “Those requirements that are drafted for the youth affairs co-ordinator – he’d need to be a superman. Almost like a president. He knows everything, can do everything. He is strong, active, healthy, clever, erudite, consultant, philosopher, and psychologist. He is everything” (YAC). Besides it is underlined that youth workers are paid a very low salary (Laboratory of Analytical and Strategic Study, 2007: 35; original emphasis).

Such indications of discontent need to be taken seriously. It seems to be a rather urgent priority to consider them in the course of the professionalisation of youth policy, in order not to exhaust the enthusiasm and dedication of the people currently involved. In the long run, the professional profiles of the youth worker and other practitioners of youth policy will also require standards of further education and career development, as well as access to professional supervision.

Recommendation 35

The IRT urges the Latvian authorities to advance the professionalisation of the training, as well as the working conditions, of youth practitioners. A common methodology, career development and further training on a regular basis, supervision, and quality standards involving financial guarantees are among the necessary features of a professional youth work system. In the long run, the Latvian authorities will also need to make sure that youth work provision covers all communities.

38. In order to get an impression of the challenges that municipal youth affairs co-ordinators have to face, see the national report (pp. 24-25).



-----> **The dissemination of good practice**

The distribution of practical and methodological knowledge and experience, with regard to youth policy, youth work and non-formal education is an often underestimated aspect of policy development and advancement. Unlike other forms of professional learning, it can become an easily available but powerful element of self-reproductive enhancement.

A recent study in Latvia indicates that the distribution of information about youth policy among people involved needs to be facilitated (Laboratory of Analytical and Strategic Study, 2007). Youth affairs co-ordinators, as well as representatives of youth NGOs and youth workers, equally lament the communication between the central structures of youth policy (that is, “the ministry”) and those parties actually implementing it on the ground. Though information is available, there does not seem to be an active strategy of organising its distribution and allowing for feedback processes.

The IRT was unable to further investigate or verify these claims, but suggests taking these issues of communication seriously, in order to maintain and strengthen the commitment and cohesion of the Latvian youth policy community. Various frameworks of exchange could be set up. They do not necessarily need the direct moderation and involvement of the Ministry of Children and Family Affairs, but could become established in co-operation with associations of professional representation, or institutions of education and training. A moderated web-based platform of exchange and discussion could be the first step towards a more comprehensive information system and interface between top-down and bottom-up elements of youth policy. In this way, good practice and solutions to common challenges would be snowballed throughout the country. Specialised face-to-face workshops could be organised on demand, in order to deepen certain issues and could strengthen the links between youth policy delivery in regions and cities.

A second, equally important aspect of dissemination connects the Latvian experience to the outside world. For instance, the review has identified the Latvian provision of hobby and interest education as an excellent model for a baseline delivery of out of school activities to a large proportion of young people. In other words, there is something to be learned from Latvian youth policy that deserves to be noticed by the interested international community.

In any case, the identification of forms of good or best practice for national or international dissemination needs strategies for assessing activities and programmes. Yet the IRT has not become aware of any structures of systematic evaluation of methodologies and outcomes of policy programmes, or isolated activities and events.



Recommendation 36

The IRT believes that Latvian youth policy could benefit from a strategy of collecting, evaluating and communicating information about experiences, methods and outcomes of youth policy programmes and activities. In order to take full advantage of available knowledge, such a strategy should equally involve youth practitioners and policy makers, as well as youth researchers and associated professionals. A positive side effect could consist in a growing increase in awareness of common issues and in a firmer establishment of the youth policy agenda as a whole. Finally, this strategy should include the invitation of the interested international public to observe and learn from best practice in Latvian youth policy.

-----> **International co-operation and exchange**

As a member of the Council of Europe and the European Union, Latvia is included in all the usual European mobility activities, like the Lifelong Learning Programme incorporating Erasmus, or the Youth in Action programme incorporating the European Voluntary Service. Over the past few years, the number of participants has constantly increased and about 18 000 young people were involved in the former EU Youth Programme (2000-06) alone. Until 2006, both programmes were under the jurisdiction of the Ministry of Education and Science. In 2007, the Latvian Agency of International Youth Programmes, responsible for the Youth in Action programme 2007-13 was moved to the Ministry for Children and Family Affairs (Sedlenieks, 2007: 5). The IRT is not sure about the benefits of separating the institutional responsibility for these two EU programmes, as they require similar administration.

In terms of youth policy development through international exchange, the important status of the National Youth Council in the history of Latvian youth policy is a prime example of the significance of international influence and expertise. Many youth leaders, NGO representatives and youth practitioners, some of whom the IRT met during the two country visits, went through international training seminars, or participated in exchange programmes. In fact, it appears that the establishment of youth policy, in terms of a separate and transversal policy agenda, is first of all thanks to NGO initiatives and was only more recently integrated into ministerial responsibilities. Yet, as the IRT learned during the two visits to Latvia the direct influence of international guidelines, concepts and programmes on the current shape, methods and contents of youth policy and youth work is not so obvious. In short, as one of the commentators expressed it, while Latvian youth policy certainly is developing, international recommendations or benchmark documents, like the EC's White Paper on youth policy, launched in November 2001 (European Commission, 2002), are not always fully considered. The issue of non-formal education, discussed above, is one example of where



international youth policy concepts are subject to considerable re-interpretation in the process of being appropriated by different national youth policy agents.

The IRT's exploration of the possible reasons for this situation arrived at several answers that could all be relevant in order to understand the weak links of Latvian youth policy to its international context. First of all, the IRT was told that Latvian society on the whole is characterised by a somewhat undifferentiated general perception of organisations and institutions representing "Europe". Those who are aware of the differences, for professional reasons, tend to be subject to a selective perception of the role of the Council of Europe and the European Commission, as the two most relevant European bodies of youth policy development. While the Council of Europe is perceived as the major source of values and methodological know-how concerning the youth agenda, its status as a funding body is weak. This role is rather attributed to the European Commission and its programmes. Despite the independence of national institutions informing the Latvian population about Europe and the European Union they do remain accountable to superordinate ministerial structures with which they are associated. Programme managers and NGO representatives equally emphasised that project application procedures and communication with ministries in general can be very tiring and discouraging, due to the time and effort that needs to be invested for bureaucratic reasons alone. Finally, the IRT was told that, from an international perspective, youth policy in Latvia is a rather "slow" agenda in terms of development and recognition. Despite dramatic demographic developments concerning reproduction and emigration that are transforming Latvian society, policy seems to be reluctant to notice the crucial role of youth in this process. However, the notion of youth as a resource is starting to become relevant in the public discourse and youth policy is finally starting to become more established as a policy field.

The IRT is glad to have the opportunity to contribute to the internationalisation of Latvian youth policy and understands the invitation by the Latvian authorities to review its national policy as an important sign and an effort in precisely this direction. One of the questions that emerged during the review, which did not become sufficiently clear, is related to the way in which EU affairs, including youth affairs, are co-ordinated across governmental bodies. The national report does not include any information on this and the discussions in Latvia were not able to fill this knowledge gap.

With regard to already established forms of international co-operation, the IRT was wondering whether the strong orientation of Latvian youth policy towards the Baltic Sea area, as a matter of course, does not in fact suppress more substantive youth policy issues from guiding international co-operation. For instance, the emergence of considerable Latvian communities in countries like the UK, Ireland or Spain seems to justify inter-governmental exchange with these countries. Russia could be another important partner in youth policy for many reasons. Isolated activities, like a pilot project involving young Latvians living abroad, which was mentioned at the meeting of the IRT with the Ministry of Welfare, or a five-year project for street children in the community of Cesis, realised with Canadian support, are indicative of what can be done. Finally, the Latvian best practice of organised out-



of-school activities and the successful motivation of large proportions of the youth population to participate in all forms of education should make it an essential partner and expert for countries searching for improvement in these domains.

Recommendation 37

The IRT recommends the extension of the now mainly geographical, cultural and historical priorities in terms of youth policy co-operation. For a small country like Latvia, exploring additional possibilities for co-operation on the basis of relevant topics could benefit national youth policy development and at the same time contribute to the enhancement of approaches outside the Baltic and Nordic context.

The IRT is critical of the fact that important international campaigns that would be very relevant for youth and society in Latvia are not appropriately taken up and used as a welcome opportunity to reflect the status of the topics promoted within the youth policy framework. In particular the IRT wants to point to the near invisibility of the recent campaign “All different, all equal” in Latvia.³⁹ The campaign, which was launched in 2006 by the Council of Europe in partnership with the European Commission, the European Youth Forum and several international organisations and NGOs to advocate diversity, human rights and participation, was joined by most (42 in total) member states of the Council of Europe. There were six exceptions, including Latvia.

With reference to the legacy of the Soviet mentality in Latvia, some young people active in municipal youth structures mentioned that the indifference to this campaign probably was a lost chance to raise awareness of critical issues of tolerance and diversity in a society where the inter-generational reproduction of hostile attitudes to minority groups is still ongoing.

The IRT wants to express its disappointment to learn from some of the partners in the discussions where this issue was addressed that institutional circumstances, especially of a financial nature, together with a lack of political commitment, resulted in only marginal attention to the campaign. The two ministries of Children and Family Affairs and of Social Integration did not appropriate the “All different – all equal” campaign of the Council of Europe, which was concluded by the end of 2007. Also, youth organisations themselves were not unequivocally supportive of it and were critical of its short-term character. Consequently, a National Campaign Committee, the office in charge of organising the campaign on a national level and access point for participation, was not established. The absent support of the campaign on the state level forced single NGOs that wanted to contribute to this international agenda by organising related activities to acquire funding elsewhere.

39. See: <http://alldifferent-allequal.info/>



Recommendation 38

The IRT believes that the Latvian authorities would be well advised to be open and committed to topics raised by international campaigns. These campaigns are well-considered policy instruments; they are launched with a clear purpose and are sensitive indicators of sometimes alarming or persistent trends in European societies. In the long run, non-participation in established programmes and indifference to European trends will not only be harmful to the quality of Latvian youth policy and its international standing, it will also deprive Latvian society as a whole from participating in important processes of modernisation. The IRT is confident that the Latvian authorities will understand this concern and continue to honour their generally strong commitment to the agenda of building a European area of tolerance, diversity and equality.

Epilogue

The international youth policy review of Latvia took one year from the first preparatory meeting in January 2007 until the national hearing in January 2008. The 12 months in between were characterised by intensive work, both by the Latvian team preparing the national report and organising the country visits and by the members of the IRT, first familiarising themselves with the Latvian situation and then synthesising all the information and impressions into a written review. In the end, it seems fair to say that it has been a co-operation that worked extremely well and was highly constructive and extraordinarily fruitful for both sides.

The general assessment of youth policy practice and development can be approached in different ways. The present report chose to refer to principles of youth policy suggested by the Latvian authorities themselves, distinguishing vertical, horizontal, and reflexive dimensions of youth policy. This reference to internal criteria enjoying a high level of acceptance within the given context, may have the desired side effect of further promoting and elaborating these self-imposed benchmarks. Another strategy that was, for instance, used in the context of the international review of Cyprus (Williamson, Council of Europe, 2007, chapter 6), outlines possibilities for youth policy development along established “external” criteria. Here, the benchmarking framework consists of criteria resulting from a long experience of reviewing youth policies within the Council of Europe: five Cs – coverage, capacity, competence, co-ordination and cost – and eight Ds – (political) drive, decentralisation, delivery, difficulties, debate, dissent, development and direction (Williamson 2008: 47). Both strategies of assessment will lead to valuable starting points for further development and useful criteria for cross-national youth policy evaluation. Interested readers, as well as the Latvian partners in the review process, are invited to try and apply different criteria and perspectives of internal and external assessment to various contexts, in order to explore strengths, weaknesses and the potential of certain national settings.

The final outcome of the review exercise cannot be without gaps and some of the discussions during the national hearing underlined this, as can be seen from footnotes and comments added afterwards. Furthermore, reports from four working groups during the national hearing, on education and educational systems, youth work and training, social inclusion and youth policy structures, fed additional perspectives into the process of further development. The national hearing itself was a significant platform for appropriating the findings of the review and initiating a national discussion. The event also indicated that the dialogue is not concluded, but needs to involve further partners actively, in order to become sustainable and effective. It will be up to the national actors to make good use of this exercise to perpetuate its effects towards, ideally, a follow-up review of how things develop from the current position. This would be an important moment of feedback for the current format of the international youth policy review process. Finally, and self-critically, the IRT needs to acknowledge that, after all the intensive



work, much remains undiscovered; as one member of the IRT expressed it during one of the discussions: “We did not have access to those who do not, did not feel able, or decided not to speak.” Broadening the scope of inclusion of subjects and individual actors of youth policy into the review process is a challenge that will need further consideration in the reflexive development of the procedure itself.

Some of the strengths and weaknesses of Latvian youth policy have been clearly identified in the report in terms of recommendations; others may need a second reading in order to become more obvious. And in between the lines the careful reader will be able to discover many challenges that do not lend themselves to easy and immediate solutions. The IRT is confident that the Latvian authorities will read this review with appropriate care.

Recommendations

Recommendation 1

In line with the suggestions put forward in the second synthesis report (Williamson, 2008), the IRT therefore recommends the strengthening of a “critically reflective analysis of the social condition of young people’ in Latvia, as the basis for youth policy. Basic demographic data, available from official statistics, needs to be integrated and complemented by targeted and problem-oriented research, in order to provide policy making on a regular basis, with the most fundamental information and knowledge about the life of young people in Latvia, as well as their needs and problems.

Recommendation 2

The IRT encourages the Latvian authorities to advance the consolidation of its national youth policy structures in order to promote continuity and avoid redundancy, additional bureaucratic structures and competition. It could be the task of a cross-sectoral body to draft a strategy document and action plan, on the basis of an identification of urgent issues, which is then approved by the government. The document should involve all relevant actors (national, regional and local authorities, NGOs, youth researchers and so on), suggest a division of responsibilities together with measurable objectives and budgetary implications. In its overall approach, youth policy development needs to move further towards being predominantly content- rather than institution- or actor-driven.

Recommendation 3

The IRT has the impression that the current praxis of youth policy budgeting is characterised by the strong individual priorities of various bodies of state administration. In view of the transversal character of youth policy, the IRT encourages the actors involved to re-evaluate and better adjust their priorities to the needs of young people. If co-ordinated budgeting was possible within the overall framework of government funding, it could especially improve the horizontal dimension of youth policy, referring to the quality of socio-economic youth citizenship in Latvia.

Recommendation 4

The IRT had the impression that the large number of strategy documents directly and indirectly instructing youth policy (for example, the State Youth Policy Concept 2002, Youth Policy State Programme 2005-09, national guidelines on cultural policy for 2006-15, the national programme Culture 2010 and so on), with their



implementation and follow-up, pose a great challenge. In the future, it might be advisable to consider the possibility of producing only one strategy document, covering the competencies of different ministries in the youth field. Such a legal tool, or the common action plan suggested above, could serve this purpose. In either case, it would need to determine the links between general legislation and youth policy practice.

Recommendation 5

The IRT welcomes the youth policy principles established in the national report and encourages the Latvian authorities to further orient their youth policy accordingly. However, as the international review indicates, the reflexive dimension of youth policy development and professionalisation in particular will require additional efforts in order to create the basis for a sustainable improvement.

Recommendation 6

In view of the difficult – and often apparently provisional – status of youth policy delivery observed during the two visits to the regions, the IRT can only encourage the national authorities to contribute to the improvement of the situation by a revised budgetary policy and by, for instance, combining required minimum standards of youth policy with earmarked basic funding. Otherwise, a bottom-up development cannot be expected, due to the severe lack of funding and the equal opportunities principle of Latvian youth policy may be at risk of being undermined by the local realities.

Recommendation 7

The role and status of Youth Affairs Co-ordinators as important youth policy mediators and managers of “regional youth policy hubs” needs clarification. The IRT is aware of the fact that this relatively new occupation is still in the making yet, in order to get the appropriate recognition, the Latvian authorities are encouraged to strengthen its professional profile.

Recommendation 8

The IRT encourages those responsible for Latvian youth policy to make good use of international best practice and expertise, with regard to youth and youth NGO participation in policy development and as equal partners in decision-making. There is certainly a need to clarify and improve the manifold opportunities for such participation. Currently its impact is unclear, in part because of overlapping interests amongst Latvian youth policy makers. This should be a key focus of attention within the follow-up process.



Recommendation 9

In order to guarantee the survival of basic youth NGO structures, the IRT urgently suggests the evaluation of the practical implications of the funding policy of major sponsors, like the Ministry of Children and Family Affairs, on the youth NGO environment of the country. The omnipresence of financial issues in defining individual and organisational performance capacities also needs to be recognised as one of the driving forces of the NGO sector. The National Youth Council of Latvia is encouraged to actively involve more youth NGOs and broaden its membership base, as this would strengthen its negotiating position at all levels.

Recommendation 10

The extension of compulsory schooling may have many advantages but the IRT suggests a more incisive clarification of the intentions of such a regulation, thereby weighing up the pros and cons more carefully and establishing a realistic profile of the costs, benefits and responsibilities of those affected.

Recommendation 11

The scope of the reform of general compulsory education in Latvia makes it vulnerable in many ways and the IRT recommends the Latvian authorities continue to reform the general education system with great accuracy. The following challenges to general education reform are among those that the IRT could verify during its visits to Latvia: the considerable non-attendance and drop-out rates; the polarisation of educational outcomes; the decreasing local availability of education due to necessary infrastructure reforms; the low attractiveness of the teaching profession and the unsatisfactory policy and equipment for integrating disabled students.

Recommendation 12

The IRT is not convinced that the recent reform of minority education created ideal conditions for the integration of the large Russian population in the country. The IRT has the impression that the reform was implemented without the necessary societal dialogue and without providing sufficient time for the teaching staff to adapt to the new requirements. In line with observers of the international community, the IRT must urge the Latvian authorities to advance the reform with great care and to cautiously monitor its impact in terms of affecting language training, equal opportunities in education, and social integration. Furthermore, the IRT invites the Latvian authorities to listen to the constructive suggestions of the many impartial voices within the country, concerning the secondary status of the Russian language. Failing to reflect the strength of the specific geographical position and economic orientation of the country in language policy is equal to wasting a chance for all Latvian citizens to benefit from one of the country's major competitive advantages.



Recommendation 13

The IRT shares the concerns expressed by the Latvian authorities with regard to the low prestige, quality and efficiency of professional education and recognises the urgency of the situation. However, quick solutions are unlikely and should not be expected, as the transformation of either the labour market or the system of vocational education and training will take time. Closer co-operation and an informed dialogue between all parties involved will be necessary. If an agreement on the importance of a professional training system can be reached, monetary concessions and sacrifices on both sides, in terms of tax reductions as well as investments, seem indispensable for its establishment. Nevertheless, the IRT recommends the Latvian authorities find a preliminary but urgent solution for those young people who depend on professional education, because they do not have the capacity or the means to pursue an extended educational career. Young people leaving education unqualified do not have appropriate opportunities, either in Latvia or in Europe as a whole.

Recommendation 14

The IRT understands that the ever-increasing participation of young people in higher education, which is observed with concern by the Latvian authorities, reflects the high value of education in society, as well as the low status and quality of non-academic professional education. This development constitutes a challenge to the system that can only be solved by means of a comprehensive reform, involving the whole range of educational opportunities. A quality system is characterised by a minimum of educational dead ends. At the same time, it will remain both permeable towards tertiary education also for graduates from vocational tracks and open for revising one's orientation. The current necessity to narrow down one's professional horizon considerably by the age of 16, also makes effective professional counselling at school or specialised institutions services very difficult. The caution indicated with regard to the marginalisation of the Russian language in general education applies also to higher education.

Recommendation 15

The IRT proposes that all parties involved in youth policy development in Latvia should discuss both the strengths and the weaknesses of the current offer of youth out-of-school activities in Latvia, in order to optimise the interplay of available structures and the necessary introduction of international standards of non-formal youth education. Additionally, they could consider inviting international expertise to accompany the process. This could, for instance, be done in the frame of a Council of Europe short-term youth policy advisory mission, with a clear focus on youth work and non-formal education. Furthermore, the IRT is convinced that an enhanced Latvian version of out-of-school education could be promoted as an example of best practice throughout Europe.



Recommendation 16

The IRT appreciates the non-military share of the activities of the Youth Guard (*Jaunsardze*) and in particular its contribution to the integration of disadvantaged young people who would otherwise fall through the net of conventional youth activity offers. The IRT encourages Latvian youth NGOs to recognise the value of this work and to seek co-operation where it seems to be appropriate, due to overlapping agendas and principles.

Recommendation 17

The IRT asks the Latvian authorities to ensure that women are not at a disadvantage in terms of employment and labour protection in general, and with regard to their re-entry into employment after maternity leave in particular. The availability of childcare and pre-school facilities is a pre-condition for women's equal access to employment and needs further improvement.

Recommendation 18

The protection of children and young people from harmful work experiences is a critical achievement of modern societies. It is for this reason that the IRT thinks that the underlying reasons for the popularity of paid part-time summer employment of children in Latvia, from the age of 13 onwards, requires a thorough investigation. Child labour traditionally recruits "victims" from economically weak families and households; the Latvian authorities are advised to make sure that poverty is of no relevance to children and young people in Latvia when choosing to participate in summer employment. Also, public concern about the lack of summer activities for children with working parents is not an appropriate reason for the establishment of such a system. Furthermore, given the fact that more and more young people remain in education until they are 18 or 19 years old, there is no obvious reason for them to start gaining work experience as early as 13. Instead, the possibility of organising alternative forms of work, on a voluntary basis and without a direct financial incentive, should be explored. The funds currently subsidising summer employment could then benefit disadvantaged young people and families directly. The IRT suggests a robust debate "in the round" on these challenging and sometimes rather emotive issues.

Recommendation 19

The IRT recommends a stronger consideration of young people's actual needs in the development of youth-friendly health services. Their demands for confidentiality and the freedom to choose one's preferred doctor asks the system to improve its flexibility and availability, as well as discretion in the implementation of its promises. For instance, active gender-sensitive counselling as well as anonymous health services at institutions frequented by young people on an everyday basis,



like schools, could be among the additional services. International experience and standards in youth counselling should be taken as examples. Furthermore, the generally low level of health provision demands clarification of the status of youth-friendly health services within the overall framework.

Recommendation 20

In view of the continuously decreasing age for starting sexual activities in Latvia and elsewhere, and the persistent threat of sexually transmitted infections, the IRT believes that sex education for young people both within and outside schools needs to be improved considerably. Responsible sex education will provide up-to-date information, expertise and counselling, while at the same time promoting responsibility, competence and tolerance towards sexual orientations.

Recommendation 21

The IRT fully shares the concern of Latvian youth policy actors with regard to young people's vulnerability to drug and substance misuse. In particular, the problem of mass drinking seems to call for urgent and effective policy responses, which are able to address the gender and poverty issues attached. The measures could range from more actively encouraging positive health behaviour in general, to research into the specific socio-historical origins and traditions of drinking and alcohol abuse in post-Soviet societies, as well as the everyday initiation of young people to rituals of excessive alcohol use. Both could help to arrive at possible roots of and solutions to the problem.

Recommendation 22

The IRT welcomes the Latvian initiative to strengthen co-operation between the sport and health sectors, in order to reduce overweight, obesity and other health risks. It might also be useful to intensify the co-operation with other ministries (for example the Ministry of Children and Family Affairs) in order to make full use of the possibilities provided by the EU Youth in Action programme and other EU funds.

Recommendation 23

The IRT suggests underlining the additional youth agenda at the Ministry of Children and Family Affairs symbolically by, for instance, adapting the Ministry's name. The IRT also believes that, in view of critical policy issues like lone parenthood among young people, lacking childcare facilities, or young people living without parental supervision due to emigration, the youth agenda needs to be embedded more firmly into the established structures of family policy.



Recommendation 24

The IRT was impressed by the work of the criminal justice agencies working with young people: probation, prison service and police. Their practice is at an early stage of development and their resources are limited, but their stated position is worthy of strong political support: a commitment to prevention, the improvement of interventions and programmes, both in the community and in custody, and the need to work collaboratively with social services, schools and parents' organisations. A more explicit youth crime prevention strategy supported by a budget line and seeking to engage expertise within civil society, could conceivably be the next step in what is already a commendable process.

Recommendation 25

The IRT encourages all parties involved in this particular form of youth involvement to come to a sound and honest assessment of the underlying key questions: What is the intended main direction in terms of learning? Is it actual participation, or leadership, or assistance, or merely "activity"? All four of these educational goals are legitimate but probably require different approaches and opportunities.

Recommendation 26

The IRT recommends the establishment of an official platform for feeding the resolutions of pupil parliaments and governments into a nationwide process of collecting and considering young voices. Young people's initiatives, opinions and democratic decisions should have the chance to enter "channels to the top" and be perceived by policy makers as a means to facilitate political participation and democratisation and promote the youth-driven character of policy development. A national youth parliament, given the required public attention, could be such a platform. Alternatively, structures like the Latvian Youth Summit or the planned youth forums could be used. To summarise, the IRT believes that Latvian youth policy would benefit from such structures in the sense of improving its youth-driven character.

Recommendation 27

The IRT invites the Latvian youth policy protagonists to make the most of their "late start" advantage, in terms of youth information, to learn fast, absorb good and creative ideas, and catch up quickly with the European midfield. Youth information centres in all regional centres, perhaps attached to established structures, could function as low-threshold youth information hubs and complement the online offer that is currently being established and extended.



Recommendation 28

The IRT recommends that Latvian authorities investigate the polarising features of policies targeted at young people. The policy process would benefit from a continuous assessment and evaluation of outcomes with regard to their (dis-) integrative capacities. In the field of participation in particular, as a prime concern of youth policy, the state responsibility to ensure conditions for youth associations and NGOs to develop and survive needs to be fulfilled. The continuation of the civil society agenda introduced with the restoration of independence of the country will largely depend on the availability of baseline funding framework.

Recommendation 29

The IRT believes that Latvian youth policy could benefit considerably from stronger gender sensitivity in all key domains. The situation of (young) women and mothers in Latvia in particular needs to be further improved, be it for women in employment, single mothers or working parents. Policies should draw on the considerable work done elsewhere in Europe and through the European institutions, on gender equality in schooling and education and on gender mainstreaming in the workplace/society.

Recommendation 30

The IRT recommends the implementation of targeted research into issues of poverty and social exclusion and their relevance for growing up in Latvia, in order to fill gaps in knowledge and data collection. In view of the manifold challenges, priorities need to be established on the basis of co-operation between, at least, the ministries of Children and Family Affairs, Welfare, Education and Science, and Regional Development and local governments, so that the horizontal character of this policy field is duly considered. Furthermore, in order to synchronise their efforts with related structures of research and funding available outside the country. The Latvian authorities would be well-advised to embrace international campaigns promoting certain aspects of social inclusion.

Recommendation 31

The IRT urges Latvian policy makers and youth policy professionals at all levels to take responsibility for creating the conditions for young people to be able to go through the difficult process of finding their sexual identities on the basis of impartiality. They are recommended to combat all forms of intolerance and work actively towards an attitude shift in society, with regard to sexual minorities and their marginalisation.



Recommendation 32

The IRT recommends the connection of the youth policy agenda with a broader regional (economic) development strategy that would assist young people dramatically in the process. Spatial inequalities in socio-economic youth citizenship need to be identified, quantified and qualified on the basis of research, in order to be acted upon in terms of policy measures.

Recommendation 33

The IRT believes that the capacity of research for youth policy development is underestimated and should be strengthened. As a step towards evidence-based youth policy, the IRT recommends making use of the expertise of Latvian youth research by inviting them to participate in committees and by developing an active and regular youth research funding policy. In this way, youth research could also become part of a comprehensive youth information strategy. At the same time, the Latvian authorities are advised to take advantage of knowledge and resources concerning the situation of young people in the country, available from other ministries and public institutions.

Recommendation 34

The IRT feels that the excellent structures of youth out-of-school activities already in place in Latvia need to be complemented by an alternative approach to youth work with stronger non-formal features. With the additional dimension of targeting disadvantaged young people, who are otherwise outside the reach of public support, this approach should be characterised by a strong orientation towards social integration, preventing unfavourable youth development. A diversity of approaches to youth work would ultimately enhance the involvement of young people in Latvia, in terms of both quantity and quality.

Recommendation 35

The IRT urges the Latvian authorities to advance the professionalisation of the training, as well as the working conditions, of youth practitioners. A common methodology, career development and further training on a regular basis, supervision, and quality standards involving financial guarantees are among the necessary features of a professional youth work system. In the long run, the Latvian authorities will also need to make sure that youth work provision covers all communities.

Recommendation 36

The IRT believes that Latvian youth policy could benefit from a strategy of collecting, evaluating and communicating information about experiences, methods and outcomes of youth policy programmes and activities. In order to take full advantage



of available knowledge, such a strategy should equally involve youth practitioners and policy makers, as well as youth researchers and associated professionals. A positive side effect could consist in a growing increase in awareness of common issues and in a firmer establishment of the youth policy agenda as a whole. Finally, this strategy should include the invitation of the interested international public to observe and learn from best practice in Latvian youth policy.

Recommendation 37

The IRT recommends the extension of the now mainly geographical, cultural and historical priorities in terms of youth policy co-operation. For a small country like Latvia, exploring additional possibilities for co-operation on the basis of relevant topics could benefit national youth policy development and at the same time contribute to the enhancement of approaches outside the Baltic and Nordic context.

Recommendation 38

The IRT believes that the Latvian authorities would be well advised to be open and committed to topics raised by international campaigns. These campaigns are well-considered policy instruments; they are launched with a clear purpose and are sensitive indicators of sometimes alarming or persistent trends in European societies. In the long run, non-participation in established programmes and indifference to European trends will not only be harmful to the quality of Latvian youth policy and its international standing, it will also deprive Latvian society as a whole from participating in important processes of modernisation. The IRT is confident that the Latvian authorities will understand this concern and continue to honour their generally strong commitment to the agenda of building a European area of tolerance, diversity and equality.

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Appendix 1 – Programme of the first visit to Latvia

Council of Europe International Review Team's first visit to Latvia
OFFICIAL MEETING programme – 17-20 July 2007

Time	17 July Tuesday	18 July Wednesday	19 July Thursday	20 July Friday
9:00-11:00	09:30 Opening of first visit With Youth Policy Co-ordinating Council and Youth Organisation Consultative Commission, delegates of ministers	Meeting with representatives of Ministry of Health Meeting with representatives of State Probation Service and prison administration	Meeting with representatives of Ministry of Education and Science Meeting with representatives of Council of Higher Education	Meeting with representatives of Ministry of Welfare
11:30-13:00	Meeting with representatives of Ministry of Children and Family Affairs	Meeting with representatives of Ministry of the Interior and the state police Meeting with representatives of Secretariat of Special Assignments Minister for Society Integration	Meeting with representatives of Ministry of Education and Science	Meeting with representatives of State Employment Agency and Professional Career Counselling State Agency
14:30-16:00	Meeting with representatives of Ministry of Children and Family Affairs	Meeting with representatives of State Youth Initiative Centre	Meeting with representatives of Riga City Education, Youth and Sports Department (local youth co-ordinators) Meeting with representatives of Riga Addiction Prevention Centre and Public Health Care Agency	International Review Team discussions
16:30-18:00	Meeting with representatives of Ministry of Children and Family Affairs	Meeting with representatives of National Youth Council of Latvia and youth organisations	Meeting with youth researchers	Meeting with representatives of Ministry of Children and Family Affairs



Appendix 2 – Programme of the second visit to Latvia.

Council of Europe International Review Team's second visit to Latvia
OFFICIAL MEETING programme
29 October to 3 November 2007

Time	Tuesday	Wednesday	Thursday	Friday
9:00-11:00	Meeting with representatives of Ministry of Children and Family Affairs	Visiting Cesis city gymnasium and meeting with representatives of school parliament	Meeting with representatives of Town Council of Rezekne, local and regional youth co-ordinator.	Meeting with representatives of The National Youth Council of Latvia, and youth organisations
11:30-13:00	Meeting with representatives of Ministry of Defence	Visiting Cesis Youth Education and Health Centre	Meeting with representatives of Rezekne education administration, Youth Council, Visit to Rezekne secondary school and meeting with school parliament	Meeting with representatives of Latvian Student Union and Trade Union, LDDK
14:30-16:00	Meeting with representatives of minority organisations	Dinner at Province	Dinner in city hall café	Meeting with representatives of Ministry of Children and Family Affairs
16:30-18:00	Meeting with representatives of "Independent institutions": Latvian offices of European Commission, Council of Europe etc. Transparency International Latvia Providus, and others	Visit to Youth Club <i>Saules Zootropi</i> Meeting with representatives of Cesis City Council Meeting with representatives of Cesis City Youth Council	Meeting with Rezekne University students council (cancelled) Meeting with representatives of State Naturalisation Agency, Rezekne office Meeting with representatives of local employment office	Meeting with the Minister of Children and Family Affairs



Appendix 3 — Selected data for Latvia

Indicators of reproductive behaviour, family formation, health, education, childcare

	1989	1990	1991	1992	1993	1994	1995	1996	1997	1998	1999	2000	2001	2002	2003	2004	2005
<i>Reproductive behaviour</i>																	
Total fertility rate (births per woman)																	
2.04	2.00	1.85	1.74	1.52	1.52	1.41	1.27	1.18	1.13	1.11	1.18	1.24	1.21	1.23	1.29	1.24	1.31
Average age of mothers at first birth (years)																	
23.4	23.2	23.1	23.0	23.0	23.0	23.4	23.5	23.6	24.0	24.1	24.2	24.4	24.6	24.8	24.9	25.0	25.2
Adolescent birth rate (live births per 1 000 women aged 15-19)																	
44.7	49.9	50.8	48.6	44.1	34.0	34.0	29.9	25.8	21.5	19.0	19.0	18.3	17.2	16.0	16.6	16.1	15.9
Share of non-marital births (% of total live births)																	
15.9	16.9	18.4	19.6	23.0	26.4	26.4	29.9	33.1	34.8	37.1	39.1	40.3	42.1	43.1	44.2	45.3	44.6
Abortion rate (abortions per 100 live births)																	
–	93.4	112.1	108.7	117.1	110.5	110.5	120.1	122.5	115.6	108.4	93.0	85.1	79.6	73.3	69.1	67.5	59.5
Abortion rate among women under age 20 (per births) (abortions per 100 live births)																	
–	–	70.2	81.5	22.6	22.6	87.5	106.1	123.2	143.5	128.0	109.1	99.8	96.7	104.7	101.0	103.4	100.6
<i>Marriages and divorces</i>																	
Average age of women at first marriage (in years)																	
22.7	22.7	22.7	22.9	23.0	23.0	23.0	23.3	23.7	24.1	24.5	24.7	24.9	24.9	25.4	25.4	25.6	–
Average age of men at first marriage (in years)																	
24.8	24.5	24.4	24.5	24.8	25.0	25.0	25.4	25.7	26.2	26.5	26.7	26.9	27.0	27.5	27.5	27.8	–
General divorce rate (per 100 marriages)																	
45.9	45.7	49.6	77.0	70.4	72.7	72.7	70.6	62.8	63.0	64.4	63.9	66.6	62.0	61.1	48.3	50.8	50.6
<i>Health</i>																	
Suicide rate for population aged 15-19 (per 100 000 relevant population)																	
14.1	13.6	14.0	20.5	18.5	17.0	17.0	15.9	15.9	13.3	15.3	10.8	13.4	9.9	8.1	7.0	7.5	9.8

Suicide rate for females aged 15-19 (deaths per 100 000 relevant population)														
10.1	7.9	3.5	3.6	4.9	6.2	6.2	6.2	7.2	4.7	4.6	5.6	3.3	2.2	3.3
Suicide rate for males aged 15-19 (deaths per 100 000 relevant population)														
17.8	18.9	23.9	36.7	31.8	28.7	25.2	20.2	23.1	16.8	21.9	14.0	12.7	10.5	12.7
Incidence of sexually transmitted diseases in population aged 15-19														
-	-	297.3	414.3	737.7	696.7	596.1	551.7	413.0	305.8	187.6	111.0	62.5	67.8	75.4
Female life expectancy at birth (in years)														
75.2	74.6	74.8	74.8	73.8	72.9	73.1	75.6	75.9	75.5	76.2	76.0	76.6	76.8	77.2
Male life expectancy at birth (in years)														
65.3	64.2	63.9	63.3	61.6	60.7	60.8	63.9	64.2	64.1	64.9	64.9	65.2	65.4	65.9
Education														
Pre-primary enrolments (net rates,% of population aged 3-6)														
53.9	45.8	37.1	28.4	32.6	40.1	47.5	51.3	52.9	56.7	62.0	63.5	65.6	77.7	78.0
Basic education enrolments (gross rates,% of relevant population)														
a	95.7	97.5	94.2	91.8	89.3	88.8	89.3	91.4	92.2	92.4	93.3	96.5	99.4	101.0
Upper secondary enrolments (general and vocational/technical; gross rates,% of population aged 15-18)														
b	92.2	87.2	87.0	81.7	82.9	82.2	82.6	86.3	85.9	89.0	94.8	93.5	90.3	89.5
Higher education enrolments (gross rates,% of population aged 19-24)														
c	24.7	24.9	25.1	23.0	21.6	22.0	26.1	37.6	43.3	50.6	56.1	63.2	67.3	70.3
Child protection														
Children in residential care (in 1 000s)														
0.9	1.7	1.6	1.8	2.0	2.3	2.9	3.3	3.3	3.7	3.7	3.6	3.6	3.4	3.1
Children in care of foster parents or guardians (in 1 000s)														
d	-	-	-	3.3	4.6	5.5	5.8	6.6	7.7	7.9	8.8	9.2	9.6	12.3

a. Children aged 7-15. b. Refers to 16-18 years. c. Refers to 19-23 years. d. Data for 1993-97 refer to guardian care only.

SOURCE: TransMONEE 2007 Database, UNICEF Innocenti Research Centre, Florence.
www.unicef-irc.org/databases/transmonee/2007/Tables_TransMONEE.xls (Retrieved: 28.12.2007)

Appendix 4 – National opinion and response to section on minority education and the status of the Russian language

Received: 16 January 2008

Latvian is the only official state language and Latvia is the only country in the world where Latvian language can develop and fulfil its functions. Considering political and demographic processes in the region, Latvia is among countries where consistent implementation of reasonable language policy principles is essential for the maintenance of the language. The purposes of the State Language Law are: the preservation, protection and development of the Latvian language, the integration of national minorities in the society of Latvia while observing their rights to use their native or any other language.

Education in national minority languages is a precondition for maintaining the cultural identity of national minorities in Latvia. The Latvian government provides state-financed education in eight national minority languages, even where only a small number of children are seeking instruction in a certain language. In general, the state support for education in minority languages in Latvia exceeds that of many other European countries.

As the knowledge of Latvian is an indispensable prerequisite for a successful career, both in the state and private sectors, the aim of minority education reform was to create an education system able to provide equal opportunities in the labour and education markets for graduates from both Latvian and minority schools.

The education reform has been introduced gradually and flexibly since 1995. From September 2004, the number of subjects taught in Latvian language for the grade 10 students of state and municipal secondary schools has been increased from three to five. The reform is phased in, with grade 11 shifting from three to five subjects in Latvian in 2005 and grade 12 in 2006, 40% of curricula remain taught in minority language. Every educational establishment is entitled to determine independently which subjects they teach in Latvian. Primary schools continue studying bilingually. Students can choose the examination language. According to statistical data prepared by the Ministry of Education and Science of Latvia in 2007, 61% of minority schools pupils chose Latvian as the language of examination. The government remains engaged to render assistance in case of encountering any adaptation problems. There is absolutely no reason to believe that the quality of education is downgrading. Statistical data collected by the Ministry of Education and Science of Latvia clearly shows that the examination



results in minority schools do not differ substantially from the results observed in previous years. Examination results in some subjects are even better than before.

In 2005, the National Agency for Latvian Language Training developed a two-year (2006-08) training programme for secondary school teachers. The aim is to raise the teacher professional mobility in secondary education; to provide methodological support for minority secondary school teachers, as well as teachers who work with minority students in Latvian schools; to allow non-Latvian teachers to perfect their knowledge of Latvian, help them organise a tutorial system for pupils in difficulty, provide support in preparing for examinations, and last, but not least, to help them establish co-operation processes between minority and Latvian schools.

The OSCE High Commissioner on National Minorities, Rolf Ekeus, welcomed the reform. Mr Ekeus affirmed during his visits to Latvia that the reform was in line with international minority rights standards and expressed the belief that increasing the use of Latvian in the classroom is necessary, as Latvian is the official state language. The Commissioner emphasised that not only has Latvia right to introduce the reform, indeed it is its duty to do so.



Appendix 5 – National opinion and response to section on Employment

Received: 8 February 2008

Comments of Ministry of Welfare of the Republic of Latvia on the draft report “Youth Policy in Latvia: Conclusions of the Council of Europe international review”

On 18 January 2008, a presentation took place in Riga on evaluation of the Latvian Youth Policy by a Council of Europe (hereinafter CoE) team of experts. This activity was part of a CoE Directorate of Youth and Sport initiative to evaluate national youth policies in some of the CoE member states. As mentioned at the presentation, the report on the situation in Latvia will be presented to the Steering Committee for Intergovernmental Co-operation in the Youth Field in March 2008.

The Ministry of Welfare of the Republic of Latvia (hereinafter the ministry) should like to express its appreciation concerning the way the CoE has organised this evaluation. We are particularly pleased by the opportunity to communicate directly with the experts and to present our comments on the draft report orally during the mentioned presentation and in writing afterwards. Hence, below are further comments and information prepared by the ministry on issues within its competence for the experts' consideration in preparing the final report version. Our remarks are in particular addressed to recommendations 17, 29 and 30.

Recommendations 17 and 29, among other things, state that the situation of young women and mothers in Latvia could be further improved. One of the crucial arguments to support this recommendation is that there seems to be an “obvious systemic flaw in the maternity leave regulations that results in thousands of mothers losing their protection and slipping into unemployment. In order to benefit from six months of additional maternity leave, on top of the usual 12 months, women are encouraged to quit the job and thus abandon their guarantees to re-entry to their previous employment” (p. 40). While the availability of childcare institutions in Latvia for the youngest age groups of children is insufficient to satisfy the current demand, as also expressed in the CoE draft report, we would welcome a re-evaluation of the above-cited argument about the Latvian social security system. The following information should be useful for this exercise.

There have been significant political and legislative changes in Latvia during 2007 and at the start of 2008. As part of these changes, the gender-sensitiveness of the social protection system has been specifically raised. As of 1 March 2007, the amount of child benefit for persons who are employed, but are not on childcare leave (that is, they continue to work), and who are raising children under 1 year of age, was defined as 70% of the average gross wage, upon which contributions have been paid during 12 months, but not less than LVL 56 per month and not more than 392 LVL per month). From 2 March 2006 to 1 March 2007, the aforementioned persons received child benefit of 50% from the calculated benefit amount (50%



from 70% of the average gross wage upon which contributions have been paid during 12 months, but not less than LVL 56 per month). Therefore child benefit was provided in full to persons who are employed, but are not on childcare leave (that is, continue to work). Previously the caring parent had to make a choice between receiving the benefit or a salary. Before the mentioned legal change, parents had to choose to forgo their pay to receive the benefit, or vice versa, which is not the case any more.

In order to further gender-mainstream the social protection system of parents and also to improve possibilities for private and work-life balance, as of 1 January 2008 a new social insurance benefit – Parent’s Benefit – has been introduced to replace child benefit for socially insured persons who are raising children under age of 1 year. The amount of benefit is 70% of the average gross wages upon which contributions have been based during 12 months, but not less than LVL 63 per month. In contradistinction to child benefit for socially insured persons who are raising children under 1 year of age, which was paid to a maximum amount of 392 LVL per month, the maximum amount of Parent’s Benefit is not restricted. With the introduction of the Parent’s Benefit, socially insured persons who are raising children under the age of 1 year, are in reality given the equivalent of the previous net working wage.

Additionally, persons who are granted the status of an unemployed person by the State Employment Agency (hereinafter SEA) as well as job seekers, *inter alia* persons after child care leave, have the right to participate in active labour market measures – professional training, paid temporary public works and other active labour market measures. Special measures are in place for persons after childcare leave in order to involve them in the labour market. At the end of 2006, SEA started to implement new measures for persons after childcare leave. In order to reconcile professional training and family life, unemployed persons after childcare leave can be involved in extramural courses by distance training and e-courses. Also, from July 2007, SEA offers childcare facilities for training participants – unemployed persons after childcare leave. As a result of all these measures, there has been a significant decrease of persons after childcare leave in the total registered unemployment – from 11.6% or 7 968 persons in 2006 to 7% or 3 662 persons in 2007. Additionally, it should be noted that a number of these individuals have not been employed and, hence, socially insured before their maternity and childcare leave. This means that while these persons’ legal status changes, it is not related to previous employment and employment-related social security provisions.

In line with the Lisbon strategy, the Latvian employment and social security policies put an emphasis on retaining current workers in the labour market and on attracting previously economically inactive persons to employment. There is clear evidence in Latvia, and elsewhere in the EU, that the longer a person remains outside the labour market the harder it is to return to work and economic independence. Hence, work is seen by society and the policy makers as the main instrument for securing individual and family welfare. At the same time, the experience of state socialism has left a significant demand for high levels of social security in society. As an example, these circumstances have led to some



of the highest standards of social security and protection for women during the maternity period and for both sexes during childcare leave in Latvia.

As a transition society and economy, Latvia is still trying to find the best balance between these often conflicting realities, but is however having some success. For example, with regard to parenthood and work, it can be concluded that currently parents are free to reconcile their work and family obligations without a state-infringed loss in the amount of childcare-related benefits. This greatly improves the possibilities for reconciling work and private life. It is intended (but yet to be confirmed) that the recent changes in the social protection system could also promote a more active participation of fathers in family life and childcare (taking into account that the monthly working wage is higher for men). It is relatively easy for women to exit and re-enter the labour market; however, the policy makers are aware that a higher qualification and more skills can be retained if absence from the labour market is shorter.

A brief comment on Recommendation 30 about the “implementation of targeted research into issues of poverty and social exclusion and their relevance for growing up in Latvia in order to fill gaps in knowledge and data collection”. When evaluating this recommendation, we found it complicated to link the recommendation with its supporting arguments. We would also welcome more detail about the missing data and knowledge on social exclusion and poverty in Latvia. According to our review, a broad array of indicators is available on these issues. As an example, at-risk-of-poverty data are already calculated, based on household surveys which contain demographic information – that is, information with regard to persons who live in a household, as well as persons who have left it, on housing and housing conditions, housing expenditure, the household’s economic situation, its total income and household mutual aid. This data is complemented by information on each surveyed household member (aged 16 and over) regarding his/her employment, income, education and health, gender and age.

In conclusion, we again congratulate the work done on the evaluation of the Latvian youth policy and note the great time and effort invested in preparing the report. At the same time, we hope that our comments will be examined with due thoroughness and will contribute to further improvements of the text.

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This international review of the national youth policy in Latvia, like preceding reviews, aims to fulfil three distinct objectives:

- to advise on national youth policy;
- to identify components which might combine to form a harmonised approach to youth policy across Europe; and
- to contribute to a learning process in relation to the development and implementation of youth policy.

The Directorate of Youth and Sport of the Council of Europe embarked on its international reviews of national youth policy in 1997. Latvia, at its own request, is the fourteenth country to be the focus of an international review. This report goes from the historical background through to the present day and includes information gathered by the international review team as well as its analyses and recommendations concerning the development, perspectives and challenges for the future of youth policy in Latvia.

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