

Statement on Progress of Implementation of European Landscape Convention in Latvia

Landscape identification and assessment: an exercise in democracy

Latvia is one of the greenest and less urbanized countries in Europe representing high diversity of species, natural habitats and landscapes - a special value of Latvia is its natural and semi natural rural landscapes. Therefore, the landscape policy, particularly the landscape assessment, is of great importance for Latvia.

Approaches to the landscape assessment have changed during the last century. The method of scientific investigation dominated in the first part of the 20th century – studies of landscapes were based on the studies of relief and vegetation. As a result of these studies were identification of different types of landscape. These types of landscape were used as basis for determination of geographical areas for whole territory of Latvia. The first nature protection areas in Latvia - Moricsalas and Grīņu nature reserves - were established and more than 1000 cultural monuments were approved during this period.

After incorporation of Latvia in USSR on the second half of the last century, all land was nationalized and farms were managed as collectives (kolkhoz). Therefore, the scientific evaluation of landscape served for the purpose of intensification of the agriculture and forestry, which included the consolidation of small rural land and forest properties and massive drainage campaigns. Based on landscape studies, the areas with limited economic activity, for example, nature reserves, nature parks, national parks and areas of landscape protection were established, which were integrated into the system of specially protected natural areas.

After the regaining of independence Latvia launched a site assessment according to criteria, which were agreed in the policy documents of the EU, for example in the Council directive on the conservation of natural habitats and of wild fauna and flora. Therefore the assessment of sites focused on the inventory of natural habitats with EU importance, but the general evaluation of landscape was not carried out. However several international projects were carried out, which also included the identification and assessment of landscape in different places:

- landscape ecology plans were elaborated for the Northvidzeme Biosphere Reserve and National Park Rāzna. These plans also included recommendations for the local spatial plans;
- in the Northvidzeme Biosphere Reserve the unknown cultural heritage values in a rural landscape, particularly forests were revealed and mapped, thus important information was delivered for local planners and society;
- in collaboration with the Danish experts landscape of Kuldīga district was assessed and guidelines for landscape assessment, planning and management in rural areas were elaborated.

Since ELC came into force in Latvia in the year 2007, landscape management, planning and development issues are being emphasized increasingly. Landscapes have been recognized as one of the most valuable component of the Latvian cultural and natural capital at the national level. It is underlined in the first long-term planning document of the country- Sustainable Development Strategy of Latvia up to 2030 that was approved by the Parliament in the 2010. The Strategy is the main development planning document for the country. Its Spatial Development Perspective defines preservation of natural and cultural heritage and landscapes as one of the main targets to be achieved. The Strategy includes directions and actions aimed towards maintenance of diverse, unique and characteristic types of Latvian landscapes. The long term Strategy Latvia 2030 settles these main tasks to be fulfilled:

- Integration of landscape planning and nature protection in sectoral policies, legislation and spatial development planning.
- Identification of typical and unique landscapes and development of proposals for landscape management and monitoring.
- Education and involvement of the general public in the management of natural and cultural landscapes.
- To define requirements and regulations for development, management and protection of significant nature and cultural heritage areas when developing territorial plans for municipalities.

It have become clear that local governments and communities can ensure most appropriate protection, planning and management of the landscapes. Municipalities, for example Sigulda district, recognize values of natural, untouched landscape increasingly. Some cities, like our capital - Riga City for instance, is paying particular attention to urban landscapes. Landscape inventory and assessment has been performed and proposals for landscape management and planning have been developed for Riga City planning documents.

In order to implement the Strategy and ELC, Ministry of Environmental Protection and Regional Development elaborated a Landscape Policy Strategy, which was approved by the Government in August 2013. This strategy was developed in close cooperation with other ministries, universities, planning regions and non-governmental organizations. There was a Working Group established and a information on the development of Strategy was placed on ministry`s website to ensure public participation.

The Working Group identified the main pressures impacting landscapes in Latvia. The first one is overgrowing of previous agricultural areas, as traditional land management has become not profitable and depopulation of rural areas is taking place, the second - degraded former industrial sites and third - an urban sprawl of the largest cities that due to the financial and economic circumstances has been stopped for a moment. Significant impact on landscape has changes in forest structure due to forest harvesting.

The Working Group concluded that the current landscape management is ineffective: the information on these processes is not sufficient and existing situation in landscape inventory, assessment and planning varies highly from the region to region and from the municipality to municipality. One of 5 planning regions in Latvia – Vidzeme, as well as Sigulda municipality and some other municipalities participate in international projects on landscape management, but the overall capacity at regional and local level is insufficient.

Therefore the main challenge at the moment is landscape management improvement, emphasizing landscape assessment and planning - a elaboration of a methodology for landscape assessment, to perform the integrated landscape inventory at the national, regional and local level, as well as development of landscape management plans for the areas of high landscape value and produce a Landscape Catalogue as it has been done by many other countries.

However a new approach on the landscape assessment in Latvia is needed: up to now the assessment of landscapes was mostly done in the field by the experts and general public just faced to the consequences of these researches. Therefore the conclusions of experts tend not to be accepted by general public and are widely discussed. Therefore a elaboration of a methodology for landscape assessment, emphasizing the role of society, is very important for Latvia. In order to develop this new approach for the landscape assessment, international cooperation and knowledge on experiences of other countries is and will be very important.

Besides, I would like to inform you about our efforts to popularize the Landscape award of the Council of Europe. Three years ago none of Latvian authorities or groupings considered that their activities would qualify for this particular honor, but last year two municipalities participated in the national selection of tenders for Landscape award of the Council of Europe. Therefore we do hope that there will be even more applicants for the next round!