

Political participation of third country nationals on national and local level: Latvian country report

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Part I: State actors, national and European policies

Legislation

Third country nationals in Latvia enjoy minimal political rights as they:

- Don't have the right to vote and cannot stand for election in parliamentary and local elections,
- Don't have the right to be members of political parties and form political associations,
- Have the right to establish non-governmental organizations, or engage in already existing civil society organizations and trade unions,
- Have the right to take part in marches and protests, but not all third country nationals have the right to organize such events.

According to Latvian legislation, fully taking part in the democratic life of the country is reserved only for Latvian citizens, in some cases extending this right to the citizens of other EU countries residing in Latvia. Only Latvian citizens have the right to vote and stand for election in national elections, while Latvian citizens and EU citizens residing in the country have the right to vote and be elected in local elections.¹ Just like Latvian citizens and EU citizens residing in the country, an additional group – Latvia's non-citizens – are allowed to be members of political parties. However, no political party can be established without a significant number of Latvian citizens, since the law requires that in a party with 400 members at least 200 of them should be Latvian citizens.²

As to civic participation, any person has the right to establish and be a member of a non-governmental organization. The leaders of non-governmental organizations should be 18 years old and have a declared residence in Latvia, while there are no restrictions as to the members of these organizations.³ Every inhabitant of Latvia working and studying in the country can take part in a trade union.⁴ In addition, every inhabitant of Latvia has the right to take part in assemblies, marches and protests. At the same time, third country nationals with a temporary residence permit don't have the right to organize or lead such events. Only Latvian citizens, Latvian non-citizens and persons with permanent residency permits are allowed to be the organizers, leaders, leader assistants and guardians of meetings, marches and protests.⁵ Thus, also the citizens of other EU countries residing in Latvia with a temporary residence permit can't be among the official organisers of such events.

¹ The Law "On the Election of City, County and Rural Councils" (Article 5, Article 8) and the Saeima Election Law (Article 1, Article 4).

² "The Law on Political Parties", Article 26.

³ The Law "On nongovernmental organizations and their associations" says that members of these organizations should be 16 years old or – if they are younger than 16, they should have a written parents/ guardian's approval (Article 5, Article 6). The "Society and Foundation Law" says that any individual has the right to establish and be a member of such an organization (Article 23).

⁴ The Law "On Trade Unions" (Article 2).

⁵ The Law "On Assemblies, Marches and Protests" (Article 3, Article 4).

Pro-active government policies

Latvia's immigrant integration policy has been marked as the least favourable among 31 European and North American countries by the latest Migrant integration policy index. It stresses that Latvia has projects "but no coherent strategy" for immigrant integration.⁶

This has not been among the priorities of the country because the numbers of newly arriving third country nationals are relatively small and the integration of third country nationals is inevitably linked to the general social integration policy in a country with a sizeable Russian-speaking population that arrived here during the Soviet era. According to data from the Office of Citizenship and Migration Affairs, approximately 15% of Latvia's population of 2.2 million inhabitants are non-citizens - a special legal status given to permanent residents of Latvia who have not become Latvian citizens, nor are the citizens of another country.⁷ Most of foreigners residing in Latvia are Russian citizens – 1.6% of Latvia's population, followed by citizens of Lithuania, Ukraine and Belarus (see table). A majority of them have lived in Latvia for a few decades and obtained their citizenship recently⁸, which explains why two thirds of approximately 55 000 foreigners residing in the country possess permanent residence permits.⁹ Most foreigners with a temporary residence permit come to Latvia for family reunification (55%), followed by employment (34%) and studies (6%).¹⁰

Population data on 1 June 2010

	Numbers	%
Citizens of Latvia	1 854 684	82.9
Non-citizens of Latvia	326 735	14.6
Citizens of Russia	36 638	1.6
Citizens of Lithuania	3754	0.16
Citizens of Ukraine	3198	0.14
Citizens of Belarus	2035	0.09
Citizens of Germany	1174	0.05
Other foreigners	8748	0.39
Total:	2 236 966	100

Source: OCMA http://www.pmlp.gov.lv/lv/statistika/dokuments/2011/ISVP_Latvija_pec_VPD.pdf

Since 2003 the responsible institution for social integration, including immigrant integration, was the Secretariat of the Special Assignment Minister for Social Integration. But due to austerity measures and

⁶ (2011) Migrant Integration Policy Index. British Council and Migration Policy Group.

⁷ Most of them arrived in Latvia during the Soviet-era and lost the citizenship of Soviet Union in 1991 when the country regained independence.

⁸ For example, 3000 non-citizens acquired the citizenship of another country in 2009, with more than 2300 becoming Russian citizens. Source: OCMA

⁹ Source: OCMA <http://www.pmlp.gov.lv/en/statistics/residence.html> (Last time visited on 31 March 2011)

¹⁰ Data on temporary residence permits on January 2009. Source: OCMA data published in Zepa, B., Šūpule, I. (ed.) (2009) „Imigranti Latvijā: Iekļaušanās iespējas un nosacījumi” (Immigrants in Latvia: Possibilities and Conditions for Inclusion), Riga: Baltic Institute of Social Sciences

the need to decrease the size of the public administration, the secretariat was closed in 2009. Since then the function of immigrant integration policy has been shifted between four ministries – first it was moved to the Ministry of Children and Family Affairs (January 2009), then – to the Ministry of Justice (May 2009), and as of 1 April 2011 the responsible institution is the Ministry of Culture.

This has had a negative effect on activities in the field. For example, several non-governmental organizations have complained about the planning and the implementation of the European Fund for the Integration of Third Country Nationals (EIF) – the calls for proposals are issued later than planned, but as the eligibility period of the fund's annual programs is limited, the activities of NGOs have to be squeezed in a few months (see next chapter for more details).

Another consequence is the failure to adopt an integration strategy. The Secretariat had failed to do this on several attempts. The Ministry of Justice was in the final stages of this process at the end of 2010, when the government decided to move this function to the Ministry of Culture that is currently working on a new policy document (plans to finalize the work until October 2011).

However, the latest institutional changes may also bring positive results for immigrant integration. The Minister of Culture herself initiated that the social integration policy became the responsibility of her ministry thus indicating that this is among her priorities. Immigrant integration was not among the first priorities for the top officials of the Ministry of Justice. *“The significance of implementing EIF has been respected and everything necessary for its implementation has been secured [in the Ministry of Justice]. (...) The fact that this function will be moved to the Ministry of Culture is logical because for the minister the issue of social integration, including the integration of immigrants, is among her top priorities. The change is hopeful because – as we see through the reorganization of the ministries – until now social integration issues have not been given adequate consideration and attention.”* (Ministry representative)

At the same time not everybody views this change with enthusiasm. One of the two coalition parties – the Green's and Farmers' Union – believes that this is a short-term solution dictated by the current tight budgetary situation. *“If more funding would be available, then a special institution should work with integration, like it used to be in the times of Secretariat of the Special Assignment Minister for Social Integration. We can debate whether it worked well or not, but it showed that this issue was a priority. But as soon as budget had to be consolidated, the function of integration policy received far less attention.”*

In March 2011 only the draft of the introduction of the document entitled “National identity and social integration – problems and goals” was available. But it has already caused visible resonance as it applies the term of immigrants to the Russian-speaking population that has not managed to naturalize and fully integrate. The document says that Latvia has a number of ‘new immigrants’ - third country nationals who live in Latvia with a temporary or permanent residence permit and who have arrived in Latvia after 1991 when it regained independence. At the same time, a more considerable number of persons living in Latvia are ‘long-term immigrants’ – citizens of the former Soviet Union who came to Latvia during Soviet occupation, live here permanently, but have not acquired Latvian citizenship or have become the citizens of a third country, living in a “parallel world”.

The goal of the new integration policy is to establish a strong Latvian nation – a national and democratic community that ensures the conservation and enrichment of its unifying foundations – Latvian language, culture and national identity, European democratic values, unique cultural space – for the balanced development of Latvian nation state. According to the policy document, every person has the possibility to become Latvian and can choose whether to have multiple identities.¹¹

Although there is no policy document outlining immigrant integration policy of Latvia, there are regular activities in the field funded by the European Fund for the Integration of Third Country Nationals (EIF). The list of the activities of the fund is impressive¹², but the driving force seems to be the available funding, pressure from non-governmental organizations and European commitments (the need to implement EU's basic principles on integration). Latvians do not support immigrant integration policy – 60.9% of the respondents did not support budget spending on integration policies in 2008¹³, and it is safe to assume that this figure is even higher in the current economic and budgetary crisis.

Before 2007, prior to the operation of EIF there was no systematic attention to immigrant integration, with a few projects mainly managed by non-governmental organizations.¹⁴ This also applied to the promotion of political participation of third country nationals – prior to the establishment of the fund, no systematic activities towards raising immigrant capacity and promoting participation took place. Non-governmental organizations could apply for project funding to the Social Integration Fund and other state bodies, but they mostly supported promotion of traditional culture and occasionally promotion of tolerance.¹⁵

The impact of EIF on immigrant integration in Latvia was emphasized by the ministry representative working with the fund. *“It's an instrument that put immigrant integration on the agenda in Latvia. Before the establishment of this fund immigrant integration was practically not discussed in this country, there was no institution responsible for the integration of third country nationals. Without EIF, and with the economic development of Latvia, I would say that immigrant integration would definitely not be on the political agenda.”*

The multi-annual program of EIF (2007-2013) includes three areas of activities - providing practical information to migrants on access to public authorities, health care and emergency services; improving legislation in this field; and working on awareness-raising among the public to enhance more tolerant attitudes towards immigrants. The multi-annual program only slightly and indirectly addresses the political participation of third country nationals via the following goals:

¹¹ The document (in Latvian) is available on the website of the Ministry of Culture.

http://www.km.gov.lv/lv/jaunumi/?news_id=1846

¹² In the three years of funds activity (2007, 2008 and 2009 annual program) 48 project will be implemented. Source: Reports on the projects implemented or proposals accepted for the annual programs of the fund.

¹³ “The effect of migration on ethnic relations in Latvia”, Sociālās Alternatīvas Institūts, 2008.

¹⁴ Multi-annual program (2007-2013) of the European Fund for the Integration of Third Country Nationals in Latvia, Secretariat of the Special assignment minister for Social integration, 2007.

¹⁵ Zankovska-Odiņa, S. Immigrant Integration and Participation in Latvia. In Muižnieks, N. (ed.) (2009) Immigrant Integration in Latvia. Advanced Social and Political Research Institute University of Latvia.

- Enhancing social contacts between Latvian society and third country nationals by engaging them in common activities, thus developing mutual trust and understanding,
- Strengthening the competencies of state institutions and non-governmental organizations and their cooperation on immigrant integration,
- Analyzing imperfections and problems of Latvia's immigrant integration system, including political participation.

The 2007-annual program focused on analysing the imperfections and problems of immigrant integration in Latvia. An ongoing activity was capacity building and the development of intercultural competencies of public authorities, as well as exchange of good practices. The annual program includes the following objectives with regard to participation:

- Enhancing the establishment of social contact networks between third country nationals to assess their needs and provide help - widening the social capital of third country nationals as an important factor that would help to establish contacts to local population,
- Supporting dialogue and common activities of third country nationals and local population - encouraging cooperation and learning about different cultures,
- Strengthening the competences of NGO and international organizations as information resource centres for third country nationals.

The 2008-annual program does not include any activities even slightly relating to political or civic participation of third country nationals. It funded the following activities:

- Raising public awareness about potential benefits from immigration;
- Creation of integration programs and measures enabling migrants to acquire basic information about Latvia;
- Creation of programs providing services to special groups of migrants like children, elderly, persons with special needs;
- Training of teachers working with migrant children and training for public authorities, municipalities, social service and health care service, non-governmental organizations providing services to migrants.

The 2009-program continues some previous activities, including establishing support points for migrants; helping repatriates who are third country nationals and creation of teaching programs and materials for migrant children in the age 13-18 age group.¹⁶ With regard to political participation, the 2009 program plans to:

- Support activities that help immigrants fulfil their rights and integrate into Latvian society. Among others, the EIF would support the promotion of civic participation of immigrants and the promotion of societies, foundations and associations for the advocacy of their interests, to increase the possibilities to participate in political processes and consultative mechanisms as well as provide a support system for immigrants. This would also include involving third country nationals in the development and implementation of integration programmes and course content, serving as a bridge between immigrant groups and state or local institutions.

¹⁶ Information from the annual programs of the European Fund for the Integration of Third Country Nationals in Latvia, available on http://www.tm.gov.lv/lv/ministrija/arv_fin_pal/integracijas_fonds.html (last visited on 30 March 2010)

- Support the National Integration centre and regional support points for immigrants. Among other activities, this would also include the establishment of a consultative board with the goal of integrating and promoting immigrant participation in social and political life and improve relations between immigrants and the rest of society, including state institutions, non-governmental organizations and the majority of society.¹⁷

Out of the projects already implemented via EIF, no project has specifically addressed the enhancement of political or civic participation of third country nationals in its objectives. A couple of projects touch this subject in their activities. Most notably, the non-governmental organization Workshop of Solutions compiled a compass on living in Latvia for students- third country nationals. This compass includes information on opportunities to get involved in social activities like voluntary work and philanthropy, or getting involved in student organizations, associations of national cultures, or other civil society organizations and religious organizations. The compass also includes basic information with links to more resources on how to establish an association or a foundation.¹⁸

In the same project, based on an analysis of students' needs, the NGO made a recommendation to the state to enhance the establishment of an association for foreign students and to enhance the involvement of third country nationals – students in the existing NGOs by increasing the capacity of the existing NGOs to work with student issues. According to the assessment, although Latvian legislation allows persons with residence permits to establish or be involved in NGOs and trade unions, students did not use their right to be involved in associations or non-governmental organizations, thus not ensuring that their rights and interests are respected. Students involved in the project knew about the existence of diaspora cultural organizations, but said they would rarely contact them in case of problems. Very few students – third country nationals were involved in student bodies as they think that they do not represent their interests. Among the obstacles for involvement are lack of knowledge about the existing opportunities and the language barrier. According to the NGO, this could be solved by increased understanding in the student body on the specific interests of students – third country nationals, and by enhancing more contacts between the student body and students – third country nationals.¹⁹

While several other projects also provided basic information about the country to third country nationals, most of them did not include information on political or civic participation possibilities. One exception is the website of the National Integration Centre that includes information on how to establish a non-governmental organization.²⁰ Another exception was training for third country

¹⁷ The call for proposals for the 2009-annual program was issued in November 2010, so the activities will take place until summer 2011.

¹⁸ (2009) "Compass for living in Latvia for students – third country nationals", Workshop of Solutions.

¹⁹ Karlsberga A., Miezaine Z., et al (2009). "Ziņojums un ieteikumi politikas veidotājiem" (Report and recommendations to policy makers). Workshop of Solutions

²⁰ The National integration centre for immigrants was opened to provide third country nationals with all the information necessary about public and private services – free of charge lawyers and social workers' consultations, organization of Latvian language classes, re-qualification and qualification improvement courses. But it was operational in November – December 2009 (3-4 specialists helped approximately 30 immigrants) due to specific requirements for the management of the fund (this activity was financed from the 2007 annual program, so the funding ended on December 2009; there are

nationals that included a module on institutions and legislation, and cooperation possibilities with non-governmental organizations.²¹

As the analysis of the programs and the implemented projects reveals, the approach seems to be to first focus on providing services to immigrants and strengthening the capacities for those working with this target group. Enhancement of political participation of third country nationals possessing temporary residence permits (the target group of the fund) receives less attention.

This is confirmed by the ministry representative working with EIF. *“Political participation has to be seen as the highest stage of participation. We are more talking about civic participation, and we are working to enhance informal engagement. In 2009 working program (which we inherited from the Secretariat of the Special Assignment Minister for Social Integration) these aspects are not emphasized. Despite that we tried to enhance such activities by the criteria set for implementation of the program, i.e. applicants could earn extra points for their project proposal if the establishment of immigrant NGOs or NGOs that represent the interests of immigrants are enhanced; if immigrants are involved in or introduced to voluntary work in an NGO.”*

Office of Citizenship and Migration Affairs

The first institution that deals with all third country nationals as it issues residence permits – the Office of Citizenship and Migration Affairs (OCMA) – does not provide information on political participation opportunities. The only exception is information on naturalization opportunities where OCMA has organized information campaigns in several towns.

Several interviewees said that the provision of information about political participation opportunities is not among the tasks of OCMA, as its responsibility ends once the person receives his/ her residence permit. While some said that the atmosphere in OCMA was not one “where a person wants to ask for more information”, several NGO representatives and politicians agreed that OCMA could be a good channel to the target group. With regard to projects implemented via EIF, NGOs that provide services to immigrants are requested to provide information about their activities via OCMA, e.g. brochures or links about this service on OCMA website or offices. As soon as immigrant integration policy is established, the government could strengthen the link between arriving in the country and living in the country.²²

One of the NGOs interviewed already had a positive experience with cooperation with OCMA which had promoted a material for third country nationals about life in Latvia that the NGO had compiled. *“We placed an informative banner on OCMA website, so if a person was interested, he/ she could use our resource in four languages about the basic information on employment, housing, health care etc in Latvia.”* (Shelter “Safe House”)

plans to finance this centre as a multi-annual activity that will be outsourced (not managed by the ministry).

<http://www.integration.lv/lv/bied.php>

²¹ Biedrība “Izglītības attīstības centrs”, program of the training (in Latvian) <http://www.iac.edu.lv/3valsts/programma.pdf>

²² Interview with ministry representative.

But the engagement of OCMA in the dissemination of information to third country nationals poses some problems linked to the Latvian language law. *“OCMA was unable to disseminate NGO project brochures to the target group because of Language law permitting only brochures in Latvian language to be disseminated via state institutions. In the end, following a meeting with OCMA, an unofficial solution was found – if a Ukrainian third country national would contact OCMA then the office would give him/her the brochure in Latvian/Russian or Latvian/ Ukrainian.” (Dialogi.lv)*

Consultative councils

Various advisory bodies focus on promoting the exchange of views between state or local authorities and ethnic groups traditionally residing in Latvia, i.e. the national minorities. Among them there is a council for national minorities re-established under the President’s Chancellery in 2008,²³ but it is unclear what functions and competences this council can have, considering the President’s own limited constitutional role.²⁴ There is also a national minority organizations council on participation. It was established in 2006 under the Secretariat of the Special Assignment Minister for Social integration, and continues working under the leadership of the Ministry of Culture.²⁵ Experts point out the lack of assessment of the use of such bodies²⁶ or stress their formal nature, unclear principles of operation and lack of set membership criteria, as a result of which consultative councils have not enabled national minorities to influence decision-making process on issues affecting their interests and rights.²⁷ The few representatives of immigrant associations that have been involved in such consultative bodies admitted that sometimes their participation was seen as just a formality.²⁸

“The problem with these councils is that they meet after decisions are taken, and the role of these councils is to get NGOs informed about decisions. These councils do not work as forums where NGOs can do the agenda setting or influence decisions. It is also unclear how these councils are formed - who is included and why. Most likely state institutions select the NGOs of their liking or those who will be predictable.” (Latvian Centre of Human Rights)

However, there are new plans to establish a consultative council for immigrants with the help of the European Fund for the Integration of Third Country Nationals. According to the plan, the consultative council would gather persons and organizations working on immigrant integration. The leading

²³ See the website of President’s Chancellery http://www.president.lv/pk/content/?cat_id=6407&lng=en

²⁴ Brands-Kehris, I. “Citizenship, Participation and Representation” In Muižnieks, N. (ed.) (2010) “How integrated is Latvian society? An Audit of Achievements, Failures and Challenges”. Riga: University of Latvia Press

²⁵ This leadership of this council has been shifting with the moving of the social integration policy function. First the function of the Secretariat of the Special Assignment Minister for Social Integration ministry was moved to the Ministry of Children and Family Affairs (January 2009), then – to the Ministry of Justice (May 2009) and Ministry of Culture (1 January 2011).

²⁶ Brands-Kehris, I. “Citizenship, Participation and Representation” In Muižnieks, N. (ed.) (2010) “How integrated is Latvian society? An Audit of Achievements, Failures and Challenges”. Riga: University of Latvia Press

²⁷ Zankovska-Odiņa, S. Immigrant Integration and Participation in Latvia. In Muižnieks, N. (ed.) (2009) Immigrant Integration in Latvia. Advanced Social and Political Research Institute University of Latvia.

²⁸ Ķešāne, I., Kaša, R. Learning to welcome: the integration of immigrants in Latvia. In Akule, D. (2008) Learning to welcome: the integration of immigrants in Latvia and Poland. Centre for Public Policy PROVIDUS. Riga

organization would be the Ministry of Culture, but the organization of the meetings would be ensured by the National Integration Centre.²⁹ *“This council should be the place where all issues that affect third country nationals should be discussed – starting from everyday topical issues to legislative amendments and their possible consequences for third country nationals. The Consultative Council would also be able to invite other institutions and experts to their meetings from municipalities or the parliament to ensure links to these institutions.”* (Ministry representative)

Position of political parties in the governing coalition regarding the political participation of immigrants

The current government is made of two political alliances – centre-right Unity and centre Greens’ and Farmers’ Union:

- Unity is made of three political parties, with approximately 3000 members in total.³⁰ It was formed in 2010, so formally it is in the government as of November 2011, following a victory in general elections.³¹ However, the current Prime Minister Valdis Dombrovskis comes from one of the parties forming Unity – New Era – and has been in the coalition since March 2009. In the current government Unity has the following portfolios: defence, foreign affairs, economy, finance, interior, justice, culture.
- Greens’ and Farmers’ Union is made of four political parties, with approximately 2000 members in total.³² Greens’ and Farmers’ Union has been among the ruling parties since 2002 when it was established. It has been part of 7 governments, including the current coalition where it is in charge of agriculture, environment and regional affairs, welfare, education, health care, transport.

Unity’s Minister of Culture Sarmīte Ēlerte initiated the shifting of responsibilities on social integration policy, including immigrant integration, from the Ministry of Justice to her ministry. Thus, it is not surprising that their positions on research questions are more detailed. As to Unity’s goals with regard to immigration, the party would support the employment of third country nationals only in specific professions as a last-resort solution – after the requalification of local workers, the enhancement of return migration (of emigrated Latvians) and the improvement of education system in line with labour market needs. *“Only then, if there are labour shortages, we can allow labour migration in defined professions.”* (Unity)

²⁹ The Ministry of Justice organized the opening of the National integration centre for immigrants which was operational in November – December 2009 due to specific requirements for the management of the fund (this activity was financed from the 2007 annual program, so the funding ended on December 2009). There are plans to finance this centre as a multi-annual activity that will be outsourced (not managed by the ministry).

³⁰ New Era has 1362 members, Civic Union - 630 members, For different politics - 1033 members. Source: <http://www.kandidatiuzdelnas.lv/kandidati-un-partijas/vienotiba/>

³¹ Unity got 31.22% of voter support, thus increasing its representation in the parliament from 25 to 33 seats.

³² Green Party has 600 members, Farmers’ Union - 1810 members, Source: <http://www.kandidatiuzdelnas.lv/kandidati-un-partijas/zalo-un-zemnieku-savieniba/> .

Unity's position on naturalization is that no changes are needed in Latvia's legislation, as naturalization requirements are "relatively simple". At the same time, the minister acknowledged that more support for applicants may be needed. *"It is possible that we have to offer longer and better preparation for persons willing to naturalize – with regard to language teaching, with regard to learning about history and legislation."*

As to Unity's goals in integration, the party sees the need to create *"a consolidated society that has a common foundation that has to be Latvian language, enhance a common social memory and support the unique Latvian cultural space. Integration means feeling belonging to a state, i.e. civic integration. In such a consolidated country it is obvious that everyone – next to feeling belonging to a common formation [community] – has the right to keep his/her distinct ethnic identity. (...) If the biggest part of the new immigrants arriving to Latvia today are essentially very related to those groups of immigrants who arrived in Latvia during the [Soviet] occupation, do they need a specific policy or does the state need one common inclusion and integration policy? Do these new immigrants stand out/ differ so much if they often join their relatives? (...) It is very important not to allow the creation of new segregated ghetto societies – we have to learn from the rest of Europe, from their experiences. It would not be right to close our eyes towards this group and say that integration policies should not exist."* (Unity)

The representative of Greens' and Farmers' Union is a newly-elected parliamentarian Iveta Grigule. According to her, immigration is not among the ten priorities for her party as immigration is seen as less problematic in comparison to emigration. *"We could support the Norwegian model that once the person has arrived in the country then he/ she can attend integration courses provided by NGOs with cooperation of employers – courses on local culture, history, situation in the country, providing basic knowledge of Latvian. Knowing the current budgetary situation, in the next 10 years we would most likely not be able to provide such courses in such a quantity as Norwegians can, but this could be the direction that we should take. That's how we see that we could integrate these persons better – if they come to our country with the intention of staying longer and maybe even stay forever. As to citizenship, (...) we are a conservative party therefore we think that citizenship should also include duties. (...) If a person can get additional citizenship easily, without having to choose, then the symbolic significance of Latvian citizenship decreases. If only one citizenship is available, then the person would think more carefully about whether he/ she needs the citizenship of another country."*

Both coalition parties see mostly economic benefits from immigration. *"One of the benefits, if we look back a couple of years ago, was the fact that immigrants could fill shortages in labour market with Latvians having emigrated. Currently, with the high unemployment, there are no jobs for them and for local workers. In a normal economic situation immigration has benefits. For example, people don't want to work in agriculture – there are problems with labour in this sector even now. Of course, they contribute also to other areas, not just economy. Yes, we have Chinese, Armenian restaurants, etc. But it is still linked to economy – they don't come to Latvia to tell us about their national dishes and culture, but to establish a business."* (Greens' and Farmers' Union)

Both interviewees also addressed negative consequences of immigration. Unity's representative talked about the "absorption capacity of the country" saying that "Latvia needs to substantially increase capacity for integration if we think that in certain professions labour migrants will be needed".

Representative of the Greens' and Farmers' Union raised the issue of enlarging the Russian-speaking population. *"The question remains – how do they integrate into our society, if they enlarge the population that speaks in Russian, and do not have a comprehension of Latvian culture and development... We really like the Norwegian model – when a person gets a residence permit, then he can learn about the history, traditions, language. If we would have such a model, then the possibility increases that this person understands both communities of this bi-communal country."*

As to existing opportunities of political participation for third country nationals, both politicians named meetings, consultative bodies both on national and municipality level, and being involved in non-governmental organizations.

"Until they become naturalized, all options but voting rights are open to them. When they become Latvian citizens, then they can also participate in elections. We know that among Unity there was one candidate who was not born in Latvia,³³ so I don't see obstacles to political participation. They can be engaged in NGOs, active civic position – meeting with MPs and state institutions telling of their problems and finding solutions. I don't see problems here." (Greens' and Farmers' Union)

"Consultative councils on municipality and ministry levels exist but they are councils of minorities, not councils of 'new immigrants'. But taking into account that the largest group of immigrants coming to Latvia right now arrive here for family reunification or are otherwise linked to people who already live here, they are not specifically new groups of immigrants or the new groups – not linked to locals – are very small. This means that they are already represented in the ethnic minority organizations. The new groups are not adequately represented." (Unity)

It should be stressed that until now no ethnic minority organizations have applied to EIF, although they have been informed about this possibility by the responsible ministry. According to the ministry representative, these NGOs mostly work with preservation of cultural heritage, not engaged in promotion of political participation.

Both coalition parties are not open towards granting voting rights in municipality elections to third country nationals, but Greens' and Farmers' Union seems more flexible: *"We are not saying "never ever", but right now we don't see possibilities to grant voting rights for next municipal elections."* (Greens' and Farmers' Union)

"Absolutely not – Latvia is not among the last EU countries where voting rights in municipality level are not granted to third country nationals. Latvia has a very liberal naturalization procedure – it is relatively easy to naturalize in Latvia, so by becoming a Latvian citizen the person receives all political participation rights on municipality and national level." (Unity)

³³ Latvian doctor of Lebanese origin Hossam Abu Meri run for election in Latvian Parliament in the elections in October 2010 from the political alliance Unity. He was not elected, but since early 2011 he is the freelance advisor on migration for the Minister of Interior.

This indicates the view that there is a trade-off between enhancing naturalization and providing more political rights to those who are not Latvian citizens, assuming that providing more political rights would decrease the motivation to naturalize. This also shows the choice to focus on legally based arguments.³⁴

Research indicates that not all third country nationals in Latvia are eager to vote in local elections. Some argued that they did not possess enough knowledge about the socioeconomic processes to cast a competent vote, while others believe that any tax payer should have the right to elect their representatives in municipalities.³⁵ But a recent study shows that only 45% of citizenship applicants (Latvia's non-citizens) said voting rights were an important reason for naturalization.³⁶

A third country national can apply for naturalization after having lived in Latvia for 5 years with permanent residence permit which can be granted (after passing Latvian language test) after 5 year temporary residence. Thus, naturalization is open after minimum of 10 years residence in Latvia.³⁷ However, Latvia's citizenship legislation includes a ban on dual citizenship, i.e. a third country national has to refuse his/ her original citizenship to become a Latvian citizen.³⁸ This is a serious obstacle for naturalization.³⁹ Since early 2011 discussions have started on amendments to Citizenship law, allowing dual citizenship for citizens of the European Union, NATO and European Economic Area countries.⁴⁰ This amendment would, however, not help many third country nationals.

Aside from the dual citizenship ban studies show that Latvia's relatively liberal citizenship regime has several other restrictive aspects, e.g. the requirement to pass tests and language requirements at a higher level than in several other EU member states.⁴¹ In this regard, it is important to note that the public support for learning Latvian language for naturalization applicants has been criticized.⁴² Currently 98% of citizenship applications come from Latvia's non-citizens.⁴³

³⁴ Brands-Kehris, I. "Citizenship, Participation and Representation" In Muižnieks, N. (ed.) (2010) "How integrated is Latvian society? An Audit of Achievements, Failures and Challenges". Riga: University of Latvia Press

³⁵ Zepa, B., Šūpule, I. (ed.) (2009) „Imigranti Latvijā: Iekļaušanās iespējas un nosacījumi” (Immigrants in Latvia: Possibilities and Conditions for Inclusion), Riga: Baltic Institute of Social Sciences

³⁶ More important factors were acquiring EU citizenship or close ties (long residence) in Latvia. Source: „Nepilsoņu viedoklis par Latvijas pilsonības iegūšanu” (The opinions of non-citizens about naturalization in Latvia). Office of Citizenship and Migration Affairs, 2011.

³⁷ A person may not request or receive permanent residence permit immediately after 5 years residence in the country with temporary permit.

³⁸ Citizenship law requests applicants to hand in a notice regarding the renunciation of their former citizenship (nationality) or a document certifying the loss of citizenship (nationality).

³⁹ Zepa, B., Šūpule, I. (ed.) (2009) „Imigranti Latvijā: Iekļaušanās iespējas un nosacījumi” (Immigrants in Latvia: Possibilities and Conditions for Inclusion), Riga: Baltic Institute of Social Sciences

⁴⁰ Latvia's president initiated this discussion on 1 February 2011.

<http://www.president.lv/images/modules/items/PDF/motivacijas%20vestule.pdf>

⁴¹ Brands-Kehris, I. "Citizenship, Participation and Representation" In Muižnieks, N. (ed.) (2010) "How integrated is Latvian society? An Audit of Achievements, Failures and Challenges". Riga: University of Latvia Press

⁴² Krūma K. Integration and naturalisation tests: the new way to European Citizenship. Country Report Latvia. November 2010. Centre for Migration Law, Radboud University Nijmegen

⁴³ Ibid.

Debates on granting more political participation rights to third country nationals are inevitably linked to discussions on political rights of Latvia's non-citizens. Although non-citizens form 15% of Latvia's population in 2010, they don't have the right to vote or stand for election in municipalities. Thus, "the conceptual framing of political participation within the context of citizens and non-citizens has arguably had a side-effect of creating obstacles to participation by third country nationals".⁴⁴

It should be noted that the widening of political participation opportunities for non-citizens is not supported by most political parties currently represented in Saeima. This position is also largely supported by the public.⁴⁵ The only exception to this rule is the opposition centre-left Harmony Centre who advocate for more political participation rights for non-citizens and would, assumingly, also be in favour of granting these rights to third country nationals.⁴⁶

As to the general openness of the political elite towards including third country nationals in policy debates, interviewed politicians had contradicting opinions:

"The political elite is quite open towards debating with third country nationals. It is not open towards transformation of the elite, of letting in fresh ideas and new people. If you haven't been in the system for some time, it is very difficult to break in. But with regard to debates Greens' and Farmers' Union is open, we are ready to debate with immigrant NGOs. I can't image that anyone in the Parliament would say no to a meeting with immigrant NGO who has shown such interest. Municipalities work very well with their population – I haven't seen problems with their openness." (Greens' and Farmers' Union)

"The political elite is not open. Latvian society has thought about this issue too little. Immigration is seen as a threat. Maybe this is linked to the sense of Latvia's longevity or long-term future – that we need this small, wonderful and strong country but we lack some economic resources to develop it like that. In addition, there are many historic traumas. Very few nations in the world have seen such an enormous inflow of migrants as Latvia. 1.5 million people came to Latvia during the 50 years of Soviet occupation, and half of them stayed here. I think that this trauma is still vivid in the society, and although many things have been done with regard to integration – still the society is divided and parallel. All this does not enhance openness. More time needs to pass." (Unity)

Interviewees also had different views on the media coverage of the needs and the interests of third country nationals. While Unity's representative thought that media provide an adequate picture, the parliamentarian from the Greens' and Farmers' Union thought immigrants were not visible in media.

⁴⁴ Brands-Kehris, I. "Citizenship, Participation and Representation" In Muižnieks, N. (ed.) (2010) "How integrated is Latvian society? An Audit of Achievements, Failures and Challenges". Riga: University of Latvia Press

⁴⁵ 43% respondents were negative about granting voting rights in municipalities to non-citizens; 27% were supporting this proposition; 24% were neutral on this issue and 8% said it was difficult to answer. Source: Makarovs, V., Dimitrovs, A., (2009) „Latvijas nepilsoņi un balsstiesības: kompromisi un risinājumi” (Latvia's non-citizens and voting rights: compromises and solutions).

⁴⁶ "Kā veicināt naturalizāciju? Vai piešķirt nepilsoņiem tiesības vēlēties pašvaldību vēlēšanās?" (How to enhance naturalization? Should voting rights in municipalities be granted to non-citizens?), Dialogi.lv, 21.04.2010

“Media cover immigrants in a fragmented way – they either cover good examples of immigrants that have integrated well (telling such human stories is very important in creating mutual trust), but it is not a topic that is on the agenda. Other cases when media cover immigrants is when they cover incidents of attacks on immigrants etc and media react really strongly, protecting migrants.” (Unity)

“I can’t remember any media publication on this topic recently in Latvian media (I rarely read the press in Russian). Immigrants are invisible in this country. 30,000 [third country nationals] is not a small number, but you don’t see them in mass media.” (Greens’ and Farmers’ Union)

Finally, as to the activities of the European Fund for the Integration of Third Country Nationals, only the Minister of Culture knew about EIF, although she admitted of not having detailed knowledge of the funds’ activities.⁴⁷ However, both politicians had ideas on the future use of this fund, and both mentioned the significance of language and integration courses.

“Priority should be on integration courses (language, history and culture), especially when Latvia does not have enough resources and this could be done via EU funds. We also think that the improving of qualifications for third country nationals should be ensured – when the person learns about the local system and the situation, and also improves his/ her qualification. Thus, by teaching the basics, including qualification if necessary, we would also ensure that this person gets more in touch with local processes and knows how to get involved in public processes.” (Greens’ and Farmers’ Union)

Unity’s representative thought that EIF should work with information and awareness-raising – information for immigrants about work and life in the country, awareness raising for the rest of the society about immigrants, their rights and needs, etc. She also supports training for professionals working with immigrants as well as support to NGOs and social workers who could provide specific help to migrants. In addition, *“it is very important for these persons and their children to learn Latvian, and acquire knowledge about Latvia – what is this country and how to orient him/herself here. I think that we should at some point think about integration contracts similar to the ones existing in the Netherlands – that the person, when arriving in Latvia, signs a contract committing to learning Latvian language and integrate well in the local society, etc. In addition, it is very important that persons willing to come to Latvia start thinking about this country and this language already before they come here, which means that some integration courses could be provided already then in the form of materials and e-courses. This could include the learning of some basic Latvian that could be checked by the border guard when they enter the country.” (Unity)*

⁴⁷ The function of immigrant integration policy was moved to the Ministry of Culture as of 1 April, 2011.

Part II: Immigrants’ political participation: view from inside

Scope of activity of NGOs fostering the political participation of immigrants

There are no representative data on the members of non-governmental organizations. But there are only a few organizations that directly represent the interests of immigrants or provide services to third country nationals in Latvia. Some of them – like Afrolat, Arab cultural centre and the Latvian-Lebanese society – have worked on combating intolerance and discrimination, while state funding priorities have inclined them more towards cultural activities.⁴⁸ They have also been engaged in consultative political discussions which indirectly affect the issues of immigration, but overall the self-organization of the non-governmental organizations dealing with immigration is rather weak and their political and social participation is not noticeable.⁴⁹

Five NGOs were selected for interviews:

- 4 of them have worked with the integration of immigrants by implementing activities via the European Fund for the Integration of Third Country Nationals - Dialogi.lv, Latvian Centre of Human Rights (LCHR), Patvērums “Drošā Māja”/ Shelter “Safe House”, Risinājumu darbnīca/ Workshop of Solutions.
- One NGO represents third country nationals - Afrolat.

Most of the organizations were established rather recently and their membership is rather limited. Most of them don’t have any or a significant representation of third country nationals among their members. The only exception is Afrolat – 26 out of 30 members of this organization are third country nationals, while the rest (4 members) are naturalized first-generation immigrants.

	Dialogi.lv	Latvian Centre of Human Rights	Shelter “Safe House”	Workshop of Solutions	Afrolat
Year of foundation	2005	1993	2007	2009	2003
Number of members	27	10	15	3	30
Number of members - third country nationals and naturalized first-generation immigrants	1 (Russian citizen, started naturalization procedure)	None	None	None	30 (26 third country nationals, 4 naturalized first-generation immigrants)

⁴⁸ Zankovska-Odiņa, S. Immigrant Integration and Participation in Latvia. In Muižnieks, N. (ed.) (2009) Immigrant Integration in Latvia. Advanced Social and Political Research Institute University of Latvia.

⁴⁹ Ķešāne, I., Kaša, R. Learning to welcome: the integration of immigrants in Latvia. In Akule, D. (2008) Learning to welcome: the integration of immigrants in Latvia and Poland. Centre for Public Policy PROVIDUS. Riga

Website	www.dialogi.lv (not accessible since summer 2011)	www.humanrights.org.lv	www.patverums-dm.lv	http://workshopofsolutions.com	www.afrolat.lv (not accessible since summer 2011)
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For most of the organizations work with immigrant integration is among many of their areas of activities. Although it may not be included in the statutes or NGOs mission statement, most of them work with providing assistance to immigrants, organizing cultural events and representing their interests in policy making processes.

“Our areas of work are enhancement of tolerance, intercultural dialogue, and the representation of interests of groups that face discrimination.”(Dialogi.lv)

“We work with eliminating of discrimination and intolerance, human rights in closed institutions, and social integration, which includes all minority-related and tolerance issues. A new area is refugees and asylum seekers. LCHR provides legal advice to anyone who contacts the centre (including third country nationals) – intolerance and discrimination issues; residence permits and naturalization issues. LCHR works with the participation of minority organizations, including information about the political participation of third country nationals – in reports and in discussions with international organizations.” (LCHR)

“We work with victims of human trafficking and refugees and asylum seekers. Later the statutes were changed to include immigrants. We provide assistance in the form of legal, social, psychological, medical and other assistance, also representing their rights, defending them in state institutions, enhancing their involvement (their level of activism) in solving their problems with the state institutions. We also do cultural events – introduction in Latvian culture, for example – but that is only organized within projects.” (Shelter “Safe House”)

“The main aim of our NGO is to enhance dialogue with state institutions and help to improve the quality of decisions, in general. With regard to third country nationals, we were interested in students because of personal experience in education.” (Workshop of solutions)

“Our main aims are to protect the rights of Afrolat members; to help integrate into society; to stand against any ideology that contradict Human Rights Conventions; to network with other NGOs with similar goals; to encourage ties between Latvia and Africa; to acquaint Latvian people with African culture. Some years ago cultural activities were organized to show African culture and to show to Latvians that Africans live here. We have assisted people with advice on what to do (health care, etc); also where to meet other third country nationals and locals interested in African culture.” (Afrolat)

As to the constituency of the NGOs, they are defined by different criteria. Some focus on third country nationals from one country of origin or one ethnic/ linguistic group, for example, Afrolat mainly works with migrants from African countries, while Dialogi.lv has worked with third country nationals from Ukraine and planned to extend their activities to Russian-speaking third country nationals. For others the target group is linked to the location of the NGO – Shelter Safe House work with migrants based in or close to the capital. Workshop of Solutions works with third country nationals – students. Latvian

Centre of Human Rights defines a wide constituency starting from the general public to decision-makers and state and municipality workers. With regard to third country nationals, the centre works with groups that face discrimination and intolerance risks, including third country nationals.

Evaluation of the impact of the European Fund for the Integration of Third Country Nationals

Out of the 5 NGOs interviewed in this study, 4 have implemented a project funded by EIF (activities in 2009) and 3 of them will continue to work with the fund in 2011. At the same time, Afrolat – the NGO established by third country nationals – has never worked with the EIF. It had applied for funding once, but the proposal was rejected.

Two of the NGOs' projects financed by the EIF focused on provision of information and awareness raising among third country nationals, while two centred around the training of professionals working with immigrants. In short, the projects included the following activities:

1. Latvian Centre of Human Rights – in 2009 the project provided training for professionals that work or will work with third country nationals: policemen, medical staff, social workers in municipalities, state institution workers. A training material on intercultural communication, diversity management, anti-discrimination, affirmative action and best practices from other EU countries was compiled. These activities will be continued in 2011, with some new target audiences like trade unions who need training in anti-discrimination and diversity management. A material for journalism students on how to cover diverse groups will also be published.
2. Shelter “Safe House” – in 2009 the project focused on training for professionals who work/ will work with third country nationals, with study visits to learn from the experience of Italy and Sweden. In the end phase of the project approximately 80 third country nationals got in touch with the NGO via e-mail, phone, or meetings asking for a wide range of assistance (questions of housing, employment, health care, etc). The NGO will continue to work with the EIF in 2011 with two projects. One will provide more training to professionals focusing on social workers. The other project deals with Latvian language teaching and language clubs, including integration via cultural events (showing what Latvia has to offer).
3. Workshop of Solutions – in 2009 the project identified the needs of students – third country nationals. This information was then forwarded to the involved parties – universities, non-governmental organizations as well as policy makers and implementers.⁵⁰ The project also enhanced the social inclusion of students as focus groups with students and university representatives discussed the use of student organizations, the services and the experience of the foreign student departments of universities, and cooperation possibilities. A friends' group was established on Facebook where 53 participants actively take part in discussions and exchange of information about living in Latvia. The project also provided information for students – third country nationals about their specific needs, rights and duties while living in

⁵⁰ The report (in Latvian) is available online http://workshopofsolutions.com/index.php/lv/lejupldes/cat_view/12-ziojums

Latvia. 38 students – third country nationals took part in the creation of the compass for living in Latvia (in Latvian, Russian and English), which is published in several websites of universities and non-governmental organizations.⁵¹ These activities will be continued in 2011.

4. Dialogi.lv - the project enhanced immigrant integration via providing Latvian language courses, qualification courses and information about life and work in Latvia, including tax and legal advice. A club for cultural activities (singing, excursions) was established to gather local Ukrainians (Latvian citizens and non-citizens) and Ukrainians – third country nationals. As a result, approximately 40 people received certificates from language courses, 6-7 people received internationally recognized ship-building certificates, 10 received tax and legal advice. A holiday club (singing and excursions) was also created, uniting local Ukrainians (Latvian citizens and non-citizens) with Ukrainians third country nationals.

Only one NGO directly worked with advocacy and promotion of political participation of immigrants. Workshop of Solutions realized that students – third country nationals can't be involved in existing student bodies because it is not permitted by their statutes, which is why the organization planned to enhance the involvement of these students in the existing student bodies and to increase the understanding of student organizations about the needs of students - third country nationals.

But another NGO stressed their indirect work in promoting political participation of third country nationals: *"We're not engaged in directly representing the rights of third country nationals in the policy process. But we help them to represent their rights by helping them to understand the local situation, e.g. the Refugee law conditions, their rights and duties. We work with third country nationals only from 2008. Based on this, we know that we need to start with basic information."* (Shelter "Safe House")

Most NGOs use personal meetings e-mails and phone conversations both for the assessment of the needs and interests of third country nationals, and for providing feedback. One NGO has used focus groups to assess their needs.

"This group is very difficult to reach. They are invisible and live in closed environments. Best way to reach them is word of mouth – people who have already been in contact with us, tell others of us. In the first project it was on our initiative (brochures, etc). In the current activities we already see more their initiative." (Shelter "Safe House")

"When there is urgency, then they call us and then we meet." (Afrolat)

"We organized focus groups with students about their interests and needs – they talked, we took notes; they asked, we answered. In some cases we used written communication, as in some cultures it is not acceptable to complain, or in verbal communication aggression comes out – we solved this with written

⁵¹ The compass (in English) is available online http://workshopofsolutions.com/index.php/lv/lejupldes/cat_view/9-compasslivinginlatvia

communication so they formulate their thoughts better. Based on these meetings, the material for students was published.” (Workshop of Solutions)

Most NGOs also use meetings or official letters to communicate the views and needs of third country nationals to state and municipality politicians. One NGO compiled a report to state institutions on the needs of students – third country nationals, describing the problems they face in Latvia and providing recommendations on possible solutions. To reach the society at large, NGOs work with media. For example, Shelter “Safe House” involved media when their acquaintances – asylum seekers were tricked in Riga public transport and taken to the police for allegedly not paying for the ticket. Another case involved an asylum seeker who was pregnant and was requested to pay for childbirth although it is first aid and thus – free of charge. However, involving media may not be appropriate in all cases as working with certain groups requires confidentiality.

“Easiest way is to go to media to solve a problem, but in many cases it’s individual and the person may not want to be disposed, so we usually try first with contacts to institutions, and only then – if solutions are not found – we go to media.” (LCHR)

All NGOs work with mostly EU funding (EIF, European Refugee Fund), European Economic Area and Norwegian grants, support from foreign embassies, Open Society Institute and the Soros Foundation Latvia. But they acknowledge the impact of EIF on their NGO capacity. Several said they would not be able to work with third country nationals without this fund, while others appreciated the opportunity to gain additional experience with this specific target group.

“Without that funding we would not have worked with third country nationals, but our future is unsure – we may have to close down due to financial problems.” (Dialogi.lv)

“It has given us an opportunity to deepen our knowledge about diversity management and its importance in providing qualitative services to different social groups. It has also given an opportunity to reach out to and address target groups that we have not worked with before – medical staff, social workers, and strengthen our cooperation with police and state and municipality institutions. The fact that we can continue this work (in future projects of EIF) means that we can systematically work on this issue and effectively use resources already invested.” (LCHR)

This goes in line with the evaluation of the fund’s impact provided by the ministry’s representative, who stressed that several organizations⁵² have developed capacities and competencies in this area. *“They also engage in international networks and follow developments in this area outside of Latvia, we also see the quality of their project proposals improving, and also appreciate their competence when they make recommendations with regard to immigrant integration, e.g. they were actively involved in drafting the basic principles on social integration.” (Ministry representative)*

⁵² Risinājumu Darbnīca, Drošā Māja, Dialogi.lv, PROVIDUS, LCC, BSZI

At the same time, several NGOs criticised the administration of the fund - the calls for proposals were issued later than planned, but due to the limited eligibility period of activities for funds' annual programs, the NGOs had to rush their work in a couple of months.

"In 2011 activities will have to be squeezed into 3 months (ending in June), so we're not talking about quality, but quantity here. This is state policy on these issues – this is state attitude because the necessary regulation was not ready in time." (LCHR)

This has been the decisive factor why one of the NGOs has decided to not work with the fund again: *"The fact that the activities had to be squeezed into a few months is not normal – it is not realistic to involve immigrants in a project where you can work with them for only 4 months. The planning and the reporting are really challenging. I am very disappointed about the management of the fund in Latvia and do not want to work with the fund again." (Dialogi.lv)*

One NGO representative stressed that this has negative consequences on the target group: *"Some of the persons who were involved in the project made impressive progress, and we are still in touch with them, e.g. one of the third country nationals is planning to start own business, others want to start a charity. If these persons would be able to receive assistance on a regular basis, we would know about their needs much more, they would feel stronger ties with Latvia (belonging here). But the projects were very short (6 months of activity), and there are breaks between activities which hinders personal development - people get involved for a couple of months, and then they have to wait until the approval of a new project. Moreover, our activities in this field are only in the form of projects. There is no state perspective on integration policy – are we more supportive of this group [immigrants] or are we rather furious about their existence? NGOs can't do something just for the sake of doing. If there would be a state policy in this area, then our work would be much easier." (Shelter "Safe House")*

Views regarding the desired directions and main challenges

NGO representatives named five challenges to immigrant integration and their political participation in Latvia - positions of the political elite, negative public opinion, negative coverage of immigrants in media, the weak capacity of immigrant NGOs and language barrier.

As to the political elite, according to the NGOs, it is either "closed" or "deeply indifferent" towards political participation of third country nationals. Some mentioned individual politicians that are more favourable and have helped the NGO in the past, however, they were described as exceptions.

"The elite give the signal that immigrants bring only negative consequences. The discourse "they will pay for our pensions" is a discourse of exploitation. I'm ashamed of it. The message is as if a migrant is an enemy, as if they're not humans with their human rights, creativity, willingness to fulfil their personal goals, etc, not only "workers" or people who are looking for better life conditions. That's nothing to be ashamed of – many Latvians have done that and do that, too!" (Dialogi.lv)

"In general, the society thinks of political participation as only voting rights, and the general attitude is not supportive of granting voting rights in municipality elections. Their argumentation – people have

the right to naturalize; and fear of consequences for large municipalities with non-citizens. Nobody even talks about these rights for third country nationals.” (LCHR)

Most NGOs named the nationalistic party All for Latvia – For Fatherland and Freedom/ LNNK as the least supportive of political participation of third country nationals. On the other side of the spectrum they named the opposition Harmony Centre. Some stressed that they represent the Russian-speaking minority, others said that they “at least talked about multiculturalism”. However, one interviewee expressed doubts whether supporting more political rights to Latvia’s non-citizens automatically meant support for more political rights for third country nationals. In addition, several NGOs mentioned the case of Hossam Abu Meri, a doctor of Lebanese origin who ran for election in the parliament in October 2010.⁵³ *“The fact that he was not elected revealed the fears of the society – he was crossed out in many of Unity lists. But the fact that Hossam Abu Meri is now a pro bono advisor to the Minister of Interior on migration shows that possibilities are linked to having contacts with politicians, and finding acceptance among them, being the positive example who is also naturalized! If you don’t have these contacts and you’re not accepted, or you’re not seen as a positive example, then cooperation is not that positive.” (LCHR)*

Other studies have also highlighted problematic positions of the political elite – negative or unclear positions towards minorities⁵⁴ and excluding rhetoric in the parliament about persons who are not ethnic Latvians and non-citizens.⁵⁵

All NGOs agreed that media coverage of immigrants was not helpful – they were either mostly writing about the negative consequences of immigration or covering incidents. One NGO representative said that media write about migrants from the “exploitation discourse” (that migrants are workers who will pay for our pensions). Another said that the coverage was dramatic – as if immigration is “the end of the world”, as if there are “floods of Chinese arriving in Latvia”. The positive contributions of immigrants to the societies, or human stories on immigrants in Latvia were missing.

“Media do not provide an adequate picture on how these people live here, what they do, how they feel in this country. I think this is because they think – immigrants come to work here and they will leave soon. Media are not interested in this.” (LCHR)

“Migration is a sensitive topic in Latvia – Latvians think that immigrants will take something away from them. We lack positive examples of immigrants, i.e. immigrants providing jobs for Latvians, immigrants paying taxes, representing Latvia in sport competitions, etc. A large part of the society sees them as service-consumers. (Shelter “Safe House”)

⁵³ Latvian doctor of Lebanese origin Hossam Abu Meri run for election in Latvian Parliament in the elections in October 2010 from the political alliance Unity. He was not elected, but since early 2011 he is the freelance advisor on migration for the Minister of Interior. In November 2007 Abu Meri received Latvian citizenship for special merits.

⁵⁴ Šūlmane I., Kruks S. (2006) „Neiecietības izpausmes un iecietības veicināšana Latvijā” (Manifestation of intolerance and enhancement of tolerance in Latvia), page 82.

⁵⁵ Golubeva M., Rožkalne A., Kažoka I. (2007) “Izaicinājums pilsoniskajai līdzdalībai. Analītiskais ziņojums par Saeimas un mediju monitoringu” (A challenge for civic participation. Analytical report on the monitoring results of Saeima and media). Centre for Public Policy PROVIDUS

This echoes conclusions of media studies stressing that the worries and needs of minorities are covered in media with regard to some events (e.g. cultural events or seminars) but they do not become the focus of in-depth analysis or discussions.⁵⁶ As positive examples this study mentioned some interviews and feature stories about personalities having achieved something without stressing their differences (their origin).

Several NGOs said that the state should support the teaching of Latvian language as language barrier was a significant obstacle for the political participation of third country nationals. *“Without Latvian language these doors are closed. All communication in state institutions is in Latvian, with the exception of more Russian cities where it’s possible to communicate in Russian.”* (Shelter “Safe House”)

One NGO also mentioned the readiness of state institutions to work with a different target group. *“One problem may be language barrier, but more significant is the attitude barrier – people think ‘you’re different, you don’t know anything about the local situation, you don’t know how to fill in these forms, etc. Our system does not want to include them, and bureaucrats don’t want ‘extra work’ with a diverse client – because they require special approach, how will you explain the legislation without quoting the law, etc”* (Shelter “Safe House”)

Another important aspect is the lack of active immigrant NGOs – not organizations that work with immigrants but NGOs that are established by third country nationals. *“It is not only the willingness to engage in a dialogue of state and municipality representatives that is important. Also the capacity and self-organization of immigrant NGOs is important – they need to define their interests, their goals and know how to reach them.”* (LCHR)

As to the most effective ways of ensuring the political participation of third-country nationals, NGOs mention voting rights, more effective consultative bodies and the involvement in NGOs.

“Elections give an opportunity to express your opinion – you can meet with candidates, put your questions on the agenda, NGOs can formulate their questions to politicians. As to meetings with MPs, I don’t think that it’s enough to meet individual MPs if you don’t have the support of a larger group – which is why for immigrant NGOs it is important to receive the support of other larger NGOs. This would mean wider support and increased abilities to formulate goals.” (LCHR)

“Providing voting rights in local elections would be a first step, other things could follow later. As Latvia is a member of the EU, we hope that Latvia could implement the practices of other EU countries, like giving election rights to immigrants. But we also understand that we have to be more engaged in political process.” (Afrolat)

⁵⁶ Šūlmane I., Kruks S. (2006) „Neiecietības izpausmes un iecietības veicināšana Latvijā” (Manifestation of intolerance and enhancement of tolerance in Latvia), page 73.

Conclusions

There are several legislative obstacles to participation of third country nationals in Latvia. They don't have voting rights in local elections and cannot be members of political associations. Third country nationals with temporary residence permit cannot organize protests and marches.

Legislation allows civic activism in the form of participation in non-governmental organizations and trade unions. Third country nationals are also free to establish new civic society organizations. But currently there are no effective consultative mechanisms that would engage NGOs representing migrant's voice and NGOs working with migrants in decision making on issues that directly affect them. Moreover, currently there is a lack of strong NGOs representing migrants (via third country nationals among their members and leadership). As a result, non-governmental organizations working with migrants speak for them (instead of migrants speaking for themselves).

Although until spring 2011 Latvian government had failed to adopt a policy document outlining immigrant integration policy of the country, regular activities in the field have taken place since 2009 via the European Fund for the Integration of Third Country Nationals. This is the main public funding for immigrant integration in Latvia, and it has put immigrant integration on the national agenda.

However, until now political participation of third country nationals has not been among the priorities of the fund. The majority of the funding has been dedicated either to provide services to migrants or to help building the capacity of the country (institutions, service providers, non-governmental organizations) to work with migrants. Only some projects have addressed civic and political participation of migrants, and most of them have aimed to inform third country nationals about the existing opportunities. The only exception to this rule is a project implemented by the non-governmental organization Workshop of Solutions, where – based on migrant students' needs – recommendations were made to state institutions to enhance the establishment of an association for foreign students and to enhance the involvement of migrant students in the existing NGOs.

Interviews with representatives of governing political parties show that they are not open to broadening political participation opportunities for third country nationals, as they consider the current routes – consultative bodies, meetings with authorities and participation in NGOs – as sufficient. Governing parties also stressed naturalization as the way to receive all political participation rights, assuming that providing more political rights would decrease the motivation to naturalize. This is not confirmed by a recent study indicating that only 45% citizenship applicants (Latvia's non-citizens) noted voting rights as a very significant reason for naturalization.

A serious obstacle to naturalization is the ban on dual citizenship, i.e. third country national needs to renounce his/ her original citizenship to become a Latvian citizen. In addition, the requirement to pass tests and language requirements at a higher level than in several other EU member states is not balanced by effective public support for naturalization applicants to learn Latvian.

According to the interviewed NGO representatives, the main challenges to political participation of third country nationals are positions of the political elite, negative public opinion, negative coverage of immigrants in media, the weak capacity of immigrant NGOs and language barrier. NGOs recommended granting voting rights in local elections, more effective consultative bodies and the involvement of NGOs as the most effective ways of ensuring political participation of third-country nationals in Latvia.

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Annex

List of interviewees

1. Anita Kleinberga, Ministry of Justice, Project department, Planning and control department, senior desk officer
2. Maira Roze, Office of Citizenship and Migration Affairs, Deputy chief
3. Sarmīte Ēlerte, Minister of Culture, political alliance Unity
4. Iveta Grigule, Parliamentarian, political alliance Greens' and Farmers' Union
5. Anna Stroja, Dialogi.lv
6. Sigita Zankovska-Odiņa, Latvian Centre of Human Rights
7. Sandra Zalcmane, Patvērums "Drošā māja" / Shelter "Safe House"
8. Andra Damberga, Risinājumu darbnīca / Workshop of solutions
9. Peter Mensah, Afrolat