

Country analysis “Civic engagement of immigrants” Latvia *Latvian Centre for Human Rights*

Legal background and policy documents

Civic participation through NGOs, including the right to establish such organizations, is open to all residents living in Latvia regardless of their citizenship and residence status. According to the *Associations and Foundations Law*¹ and to the *Law on Public Organisations and their Associations*² any person has the right to establish and be a member of non-governmental organizations and associations. The leaders of non-governmental organizations should be at least 18 years old and have a declared residence in Latvia, while there are no restrictions as to the members of these organizations.

*Law on Religious Organizations*³ determines that at least 20 Latvian citizens or persons who are registered in the Population Register aged 18 or above must be among the founders of religious organizations, but any resident of Latvia can be a member of such an organization.

According to the *Law on Trade Unions*,⁴ every person has the right to form trade unions without any discrimination. Thus, membership in trade unions is opened not only to citizens, but also non-citizens, EU citizens and third country nationals.

Freedom of assembly is guaranteed to every person in the Constitution of Latvia. Although the *Law on Meetings, Marches and Pickets*⁵ also reiterates this right, the law specifies that the organizers, leaders, leader assistants and guardians of meetings, marches and protests may not be a person who is not either citizen or non-citizen of Latvia or a person with a permanent residency permit.

Civic society and integration are among the main directions of *the Guidelines on National Identity, Civil Society and Integration Policy (2012-2018)*.⁶ The Guidelines

¹ Law on public organisations and their associations, adopted on 15 December 1992, available at <http://likumi.lv/doc.php?id=62836>

² Associations and Foundations Law, adopted on 30 October 2003, available at <http://www.likumi.lv/doc.php?id=81050>

³ Law on Religious Organizations, adopted on 7 September 1995, available at <http://likumi.lv/doc.php?id=36874>

⁴ Law on Trade Unions, adopted on 6 March 2014, available on: <http://likumi.lv/doc.php?id=265207>

⁵ Law on meetings, Marches and Pickets, adopted on 16 January 1997, available at: <http://likumi.lv/doc.php?id=42090>

⁶ Ministry of Culture, Guidelines on National Identity, Civil Society and Integration Policy (2012-2018), adopted 20 October 2011. Available at: http://www.km.gov.lv/lv/doc/ministrija/saliedeta_sabiedriba/KM_bklts_A5_3mm_bleed_02_2012_EN_PRINT.pdf

provide for strengthening traditional and non-traditional forms of civic involvement and improving operational conditions of NGO. The Guidelines envisage the establishment of a national-level coordinating system in order to support immigrant participation - the National Integration Centre and national level Advisory Council, with participation of immigrants and representatives of their organizations. No direct activities to promote the establishment of migrant NGOs or to strengthen capacity of existing migrant NGO's are foreseen in the Guidelines. However, some minor activities in this field are financed through the European Fund for the Integration of Third Country Nationals (EIF).

To encourage integration and public participation of immigrants, the *Riga city programme for the integration of the society for 2012 – 2017*⁷ includes measures to provide information to immigrants on the operating principles of NGOs in Latvia and on NGOs working with migration issues and immigrants. It is also intended to provide support to NGOs engaging and supporting immigrants. None of the envisaged activities to ensure inclusion of immigrants were implemented in 2012-2014, allegedly due to the lack of financial resources or qualitative project proposals submitted by NGOs.⁸

Immigrant participation in NGOs and trade unions

A public opinion survey shows that the rate of participation in civil society organizations is not high in general in Latvia, and participation mainly concern membership in interest groups (sport and cultural, 16.1%), religious organizations (8.7%), trade unions (6.6%) and associations (4.4%).⁹ Although there were more than 19 thousand civil society organizations registered in Latvia in 2015,¹⁰ almost two-thirds of Latvian residents have not been involved in any kind of civil society organization. Rate of participation is higher among ethnic Latvians (37.9%) than non-Latvians (24.3%). A public opinion survey conducted in Riga also reveals that only 7.1% of Riga city residents have been involved in NGOs – mostly in religious organizations (27.6%) or trade unions (20.2) and only 1.5% in national minority organizations.¹¹ Surveys also show that the large part of the Latvian population does not believe in its ability to influence social and political processes, including through the NGOs.

There are no representative statistics or survey data on the members of NGOs, participation rates of third country nationals in civil society organizations and number of civil society organizations established by migrants in Latvia. Neither the Ministry

⁷ Riga City Council, Riga city programme for the integration of the society for 2012 – 2017, adopted on 25 September 2012. Available at: <http://www.iksd.riga.lv/public/index.html>

⁸ Riga City Council, Action plan of the Riga city programme for the integration of the society for 2012 – 2014: implementation report for 2012-2013; unpublished document. Information provided by the Riga City Council by e-mail on 08.01.2015.

⁹ Latvijas Fakti (2013), Sabiedrības viedoklis par NVO sektoru Latvijā, available at http://nvo.lv/site/attachments/03/11/2014/Iedzivotaju_aptauja.pdf

¹⁰ Lursoft statistika: Biedrības un nodibinājumi, sabiedriskās organizācijas, available at: <http://www.lursoft.lv/lursoft-statistika/Biedribas-un-nodibinajumi-sabiedriskas-organizacijas>

¹¹ SKDS (2014), Sabiedrības integrācija Rīgā. Rīgas iedzīvotāju aptauja, available in Latvian at http://www.iksd.riga.lv/upload_file/Sports_pievienotie/0_2014/09_2014/Atskaite_Riga_IKSD_052014.pdf

of Culture, nor the National Integration Centre¹² collects such a data. According to the Ministry of Culture, an in-depth research on national minority and migrant participation, including the establishment and work of NGOs, will be held in 2015 and results will be available at the end of the year.¹³ The Free Trade Union Confederation of Latvia (LBAS) also doesn't have any data on the membership of the third country nationals in trade unions. There are also no data on the number of consultations provided to migrants.

Although around 1% of civil society organizations in Latvia are established by foreign residents (most of them business organizations, like chambers of commerce, business councils or trade institutes),¹⁴ there are only a few organizations directly representing the interests of migrants, stand for their social, economic and political rights or provide permanent services to third country nationals living in Latvia. Publicly available information indicates that there are seven NGOs set up by third country nationals with the aim to facilitate social integration of relevant community and promote development of intercultural dialogue in Latvia: Afro-Latvian association, Arabic Cultural Centre, Latvian Lebanese Cultural Association, Chairman of the Latvian Association of Oversea Chinese Compatriots, European Union Syrians Association, Nigerian European Business Network and the Iraqi society in Latvia "IBL". Taking into account that there are more than 250 NGOs (mostly cultural associations) established by national minorities traditionally living in Latvia,¹⁵ newcomers from such countries as Russia, Ukraine, Belarus, etc. either do not join any association or join various national cultural societies and diaspora organizations.¹⁶ There are also some organizations, e.g. society "Shelter "Safe House"" and Creative association for youth TREPES, where migrants (mainly youth) are involved as volunteers.

Activities to promote migrant political participation and integration

The projects related to the integration of migrants have been implemented above all in the framework of the EIF, which is administrated by the Ministry of Culture; 108 projects for the total amount of LVL 6,782,032.2 EUR have been implemented within the 2007-2012 programmes.¹⁷ Implemented projects concerned the language, integration and adaptation programs for migrants (third country nationals and non-citizens), inter-cultural communication training courses for state authorities, municipalities and NGOs, exchange of good practices and public awareness activities. None of the projects have been implemented by NGOs established by migrants. However, some of the projects involved migrants as lecturers or discussion facilitators. The largest funding was allocated to the project 'National Integration centre' (NIC), implemented by the Ministry of Culture (until 2013) and Society Integration Fund (from 2013). The NIC provides integration and adaption programmes, consultation services for third-country nationals on social and legal

¹² Information provided by the National Integration Centre by e-mail on 05.01.2015.

¹³ Information provided by the Ministry of Culture by e-mail on 6 January 2015.

¹⁴ Lursoft statistika: sabiedrisko organizāciju, biedrību un nodibinājumu dimiņbātāju valstis, available at: https://www.lursoft.lv/lursoft_statistika/?&id=40

¹⁵ Information provided by the Ministry of Culture by e-mail on 6 January 2015.

¹⁶ Golubeva M. (

¹⁷ Ministry of Culture, the European Fund for the Integration of Third Country nationals <http://www.km.gov.lv/lv/es/finans/etvvif.html>

issues, free information phone services, as well as database on NGOs working in Latvia. The Centre acts also as an intermediary between service providers and third-country nationals and provide intercultural and diversity trainings for service providers.¹⁸

Given the limited nature of immigrant political rights and participation opportunities, no systematic activities towards raising immigrant capacity and promoting political participation are taking place. Immigrant organizations can apply for project funding to the Society Integration Foundation, the Ministry of Culture and local authorities. However, the projects supported have been primarily aimed at promoting cultural identity and tolerance so far. Civic and political participation has also not been a funding priority.¹⁹ Although some of the immigrant NGOs (e.g. Afrolat, Arab Cultural Centre and the Latvian-Lebanese society) have been engaged in consultative political discussions, which indirectly affect the issues of immigration and migrant integration, the overall self-organization of the non-governmental organizations dealing with immigration is rather weak and their political and social participation is insignificant.²⁰

To increase capacity of NGOs acting in the area of immigrant integration and encourage their cooperation, the Dialogue platform was established in 2013 within the project “Diverse solutions for Public Education and Integration” financed by the EIF.²¹ The Platform’s aim is to share the latest developments of the relevant area and the needs of third-country nationals as well as to discuss the planning activities of the EU Foundation for Shelter and Support to Migrants in Latvia, the laws and action policy affecting immigrant integration. Meetings also ensure engagement in discussions on matters discussed at the Consultative Board for the Integration of Third-Country Nationals and Supervisory Board for the Implementation of Guidelines on National Identity, Civic Society, and Integration Policy. Until now, less than 10 organizations, mostly those who implement projects of EIF, have been involved in the Platform; none of them have been established by migrants. To ensure the sustainability of co-operation, the Dialogue platform will continue its work also in 2015.

Two new initiatives to encourage migrant’s participation through civic activities and voluntary work will be launched in 2015. In February 2015, the Centre for Public Policy PROVIDUS will start a mentor programme to facilitate engagement of immigrants aimed at involving third-country nationals, recently naturalized Latvian citizens from immigrant families as well as non-citizens in civic activities, forming initiative groups and societies to explore and represent immigrant interests. The programme also foresees an opportunity for participants to receive some funding to

¹⁸ Integration in Latvia, available at: <http://www.integration.lv/en/index.php>

¹⁹ British Council and Migration Policy Group (2011), Migrant Integration policy index, Latvia, Areas of Integration: Political Participation. Available at: <http://www.mipex.eu/latvia>

²⁰ Golubeva M. (2012), Consultative bodies and dialogue platforms for immigrant communities: lessons from three EU countries. Available at: http://providus.lv/upload_file/Projekti/Eiropas%20politika/2012/konsultativas%20institucijas_angl.pdf

²¹ Providus (2013), Notiks imigrantu integrācijas jomā aktīvo NVO dialoga platformas pirmā tikšanās. Available at <http://providus.lv/article/notiks-imigrantu-integracijas-joma-aktivo-nvo-dialoga-platformas-pirma-tiksanas>

implement their participation project.²² The mentor programme will continue activities implemented by the PROVIDUS in 2012, when the training and mentorship programme to develop the civic participation skills and strengthen the capacity to engage in policy process among migrant NGOs was implemented.²³ Another project which envisages for the establishment of volunteers (including third country nationals and non-citizens) movement is implemented by the Education, Culture and Sports Department of Riga City Council. Volunteers of the project will have opportunity to participate in all events of the project and to help in their realization. Additional educational activities for volunteers will take place.²⁴

Main conclusions from the interviews with leaders of migrant organizations

The in-depth interviews with leaders of seven migrant NGOs²⁵ reveal that most of the organizations were established rather recently and their membership is rather limited.

Name of the organisation	Year of foundation	Number of members
Afro-Latvian Association (AFROLAT)	2003	20
Latvian Lebanese Cultural Association	2003	30
Arabic Cultural Centre	2005	64
Latvian Association of Oversea Chinese Compatriots	2011	200
European Union Syrians Association	2013	18
Nigerian European Business Network	2014	20
Iraqi society in Latvia "IBL"	2014	2

All migrant organizations were established:

- to bring together community members living in Latvia and strengthen their sense of national identity and belonging;
- to provide practical and legal assistance to community members in such areas as employment and entrepreneurship, education and health, communication with public authorities, rights violations, etc.;
- to promote development of intercultural dialogue and interaction of different cultures in Latvia thus contributing to the integration of Latvian society;

²² Providus (2015), Iespēja: Piesakies PROVIDUS mentorū programmai. Available at:

<http://providus.lv/article/iespeja-piesakies-providus-mentor-programmai>

²³ Providus (2012), Capacity building of NGOs representing third country nationals. Available at:

<http://providus.lv/article/capacity-building-of-ngos-representing-third-country-nationals>

²⁴ RD izglītības, kultūras un sporta departaments (2014), Aicinām iesaistīties brīvprātīgos. Available at:

<http://www.iksd.riga.lv/public/64976.html>

²⁵ Interviews were conducted with Zhang Zhong Lin, Chairman of the Latvian Association of Oversea Chinese Compatriots (12.01.2015.); Bashar Yousef, General Director of the EU Syrian Association (16.01.2015.); Shon Ani, Chairman of the Nigerian European Business Network (16.01.2015.); Hiva Abdallah, Iraqi society in Latvia "IBL" (19.01.2015.) and Hosam Abu Meri, Chairman of the Latvian Lebanese Cultural Association and the Arabic Cultural centre (21.01.2015.), Alen Zodeugan, Chairmen of the Afro-Latvian Association (AFROLAT) (29.01.2015.)

- to encourage and strengthen cultural, social and economic ties between a particular kin state and Latvia.

As to the constituency of the NGOs, organizations are mostly focused on the third country nationals from one country of origin or one ethnic/ linguistic group. For example, AFROLAT and Nigerian European Business Network mainly work with migrants from African countries, while Arabic Cultural Centre works with Arabs from Egypt, Lebanon, Syria, Jordan and other Arabic countries. The European Union Syrians Association and recently established Iraqi society in Latvia consolidate mainly persons with refugee and alternative status, and their main activities are related to provision of assistance to asylum seekers and refugee or alternative status holders from Syria and Iraq.

All organizations have neither permanent office and staff, nor permanent funding provided by state/ local authorities or membership fees. Some of them, e.g. Latvian Association of Oversea Chinese Compatriots and Latvian Lebanese Cultural Association, have contacts with kin state embassies and community organizations in other countries, which provide practical (not financial) support. Three of seven migrant organizations had applied for funding once or several times (through project competitions organized at national or local level), but none of submitted project proposals have been approved so far. It was emphasized that the lack of permanent staff, complicated procedure for submitting applications and previous failures of applications have discouraged the NGOs to submit new project proposals. Thus, the activities of all organizations are rather limited, implemented on voluntary basis and sometimes funded by the organizations' members.

Most of the interviewed organizations have very limited cooperation with other civil society organizations (mostly within the framework of cultural events or seminars, conferences) and almost no cooperation with state and local institutions. Only the Arabic Cultural Centre has permanent cooperation with state institutions (Ministry of Culture, Ministry of Education and Science, Ministry of Foreign Affairs). The Centre is also represented in the Consulting Committee of National Minority Non-governmental Organisation Representatives established under the Ministry of Culture.

Although the Advisory Council for Integration of Third Country Nationals was established in 2013 to develop proposals for resolving legal, social economic, political, educational and cultural problems of immigrants as well as to analyse draft legislation proposals and legislation currently in force and to propose necessary amendments, none of migrant associations are represented in the Council. The interviews also reveal that only three of seven interviewed organizations heard about the existence of the Council; none of the interviewees knew about the current work of the Council. Although an open call for immigrant organizations has been organized to apply for the participation in the Council, none of the organizations used this opportunity, allegedly due to the lack of information. However all respondents expressed willingness to participate in the Council's work if such opportunity would be given to them.

Most of the immigrant associations don't have any information on integration activities, e.g. language training and adaption programmes, provided by the National Integration Centre (NIC) and various organizations. It was noted by some

interviewees that they didn't know about the existence of the NIC and services it provides. And vice versa, the NIC had no information about existence of some migrant organizations.²⁶

Conclusions

Participation in NGOs and trade unions is open to all residents, including third country nationals and non-citizens. Third country nationals can also establish new civic society organizations.

However, there is a lack of strong NGOs representing migrants (via third country nationals among their members and leadership). The administrative and policy capacity of the few existing immigrant associations is limited. As a result, NGOs working with migrants within the framework of various projects represent them (instead of migrants representing themselves). It is well illustrated by the Advisory Council for Integration of Third Country Nationals, where no immigrant associations are represented. Immigrant organizations still can better ensure a support system for new arrivals and ties between the immigrant groups and state or local institutions, due to their close contacts with the community, awareness on their needs and language knowledge. Therefore, Latvia should promote the creation of such organizations and support their social and political participation. It could be done through capacity building programmes. At the same time, it is necessary to take steps so that the representation of immigrant interests would be better included in the work of other NGOs.

Until now, political participation of the third country nationals has not been among the priorities of the EIF. The majority of the funding has been assigned either to providing services to migrants or to capacity building of the institutions, service providers and NGOs to support migrants. Only some projects have addressed civic and political participation of migrants so far. Raising awareness and training on policy process and participation as well as facilitation of networking between experts in integration policies and immigrants' associations are needed in order to build capacity of immigrant associations..

Due to the limited access of immigrant organizations to financial resources and social networks, state practice in distributing funds should be reviewed. Immigrants should be provided with easily accessible information and less complicated administrative procedure for submitting project applications in the framework of various project calls.



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²⁶ Information provided by the National Integration Centre by e-mail on 05.01.2015.