

ENHANCING ACCESS TO CULTURAL SERVICES FOR VULNERABLE GROUPS IN MUNICIPAL CULTURAL CENTRES

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Abstract

In recent decades, the concept of access to culture has been increasingly highlighted on the international political agenda, gradually coming to the attention of Latvian policymakers, to state cultural policy documents, funding programmes, municipal cultural development planning documents and the daily work of cultural organizations. In the article, the issue of access to culture is analysed both in the context of cultural policy of Latvia and the legal regulation of cultural centres, and in the context of international cultural policy and cultural rights, which are represented by the documents developed by the UN, UNESCO and the European Union in the field of cultural rights, cultural protection and development.

The aim of the article is to evaluate to what extent the internationally and nationally determined political and legal framework regarding the promotion of access to culture for vulnerable groups is implemented in Latvian municipal cultural centres.

The research methodology: mixed research strategy, which involves both quantitative and qualitative data collection. The qualitative research methods are content analysis, including analysis of relevant literature, official reports and documents of state institutions, as well as secondary data analysis. An electronic survey of municipal cultural centres and cultural organizers was conducted to obtain quantitative data.

Findings: the outcome of the study shows that a number of specific issues must be addressed to improve access to culture for vulnerable groups in Latvia. Analysis

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of survey data shows, that cultural centres pay special attention to ensuring the availability of cultural services for the following vulnerable groups, which are the focus of this study: older persons, children and people with limited financial means. Whereas, minorities, persons with disabilities and migrants are involved much less in the activities of cultural centres. One of the most significant obstacles affecting the accessibility of cultural services in cultural centres is the accessibility of the environment, which is primarily important for people with disabilities; moreover, people with disabilities have very limited opportunities to access the content of events.

Keywords: *access to culture, cultural centres, vulnerable groups, cultural policy, cultural rights.*

Introduction

Although the promotion of access to culture for vulnerable groups of society in Latvia has been specifically highlighted in various contexts in recent decades, internationally this issue has been discussed for a much longer period of time. The basic principles of equal access to culture for all members of society were defined already in 1948, in the UN Universal Declaration of Human Rights [United Nations 1948], marking an important vector for the future both in the creation of national cultural policies and in the research of the problems of access to culture. According to cultural policy researcher Carole Rosenstein, cultural rights, along with such a field of cultural policy as copyright, have always been a widely discussed issue of international cultural policy [Rosenstein 2018: 267], accordingly gradually coming to the attention of national policy makers. General access to and participation in culture for everyone, including in decision-making, is one of the key components of rights-based approaches to cultural policy within the international discourse of contemporary cultural policy [Baltà Portolés, Dragičević Šešić 2017].

The issue of access to culture in various contexts has also been discussed in the approaches to cultural democratization, cultural democracy and cultural decentralization, and related academic studies [Malraux 1966; Ahearne 2002; Duelund 2001; Morel 2003; Kawashima 2004; McKenzie 2018]. It is essential to note that the study of access issues covers a wide field of interdisciplinary research – the concept of access plays an important role not only in culture, but also in other areas related to basic human rights, including education, healthcare, social protection, etc. The article “The Concept of Access: Definition and Relationship to Consumer Satisfaction” [Penchansky, Thomas 1981] by US scientists Roy Penchansky and John William Thomas, published in 1981, is considered one of the first important theoretical

studies of access issues, in which, by developing studies initiated by several other scientists in the 1970s [Fox 1972; Aday, Anderson 1975 etc.], they offer comprehensive theoretical framework for the concept of access. It is important to note that although both scientists developed their theory of access by applying it to the specifics of the health-care sector, however, over time it has been adapted to other sectors as well, guided by the research results by modifying it accordingly and applying the particularities of the specific sectors.

According to the definition of access proposed by Penchansky and Thomas, “*access is viewed as the general concept which summarizes a set of more specific areas of fit between the patient and the health care system*” [Penchansky, Thomas 1981: 128]. The specific areas, the dimensions of access, are as follows: availability, accessibility, accommodation, affordability and acceptability [Penchansky, Thomas 1981: 128–129]. Katarina Tomasevski, a researcher of international law and international relations, has also made a significant contribution to the study of access issues, specifically focusing on the aspect of social equality issues of access to education. In her publications she emphasizes that access to education should be provided to all school-aged children without discrimination based on gender, language, religion, health status, citizenship, family income level and other factors [Tomasevski 1999, Tomasevski 2001]. According to the researchers of The Danish Institute for Human Rights, she proposed a 4-A scheme for education, denoting the four essential features that primary schools should exhibit, namely *Availability, Accessibility, Acceptability, and Adaptability*. This framework was then applied in the CESCR General Comment No. 13: *The Right to Education* [United Nations 1999] and has been adopted and adapted in later the CESCR General Comments No. 14 and 15 on health and water, changing the Adaptability criteria to one of Quality [Jensen, Villumsen, Petersen 2014: 41]. This has also been taken into account in the preparation of other UN documents, including the CESR General Comment No. 21: *The Right of everyone to take part in cultural life*, defining the basic principles of cultural availability and accessibility, which will be analysed in detail further in the article.

The aim of the article is to evaluate to what extent the internationally and nationally determined political and legal framework regarding the promotion of access to culture for vulnerable groups is implemented in Latvian municipal cultural centres.

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Access to Culture in Context of Cultural Rights

The understanding of the problems of cultural availability and accessibility today is closely related to the concept of international human rights and cultural rights. The main principles of cultural rights are defined in the UN Universal Declaration of Human Rights [United Nations 1948], stating that “*everyone, as a member of society, has the right to social security and is entitled to realization, through national effort and international co-operation and in accordance with the organization and resources of each State, of the economic, social and cultural rights indispensable for his dignity and the free development of his personality*” (Art. 22) and “*everyone has the right freely to participate in the cultural life of the community, to enjoy the arts and to share in scientific advancement and its benefits*” (Art. 27) [United Nations 1948]. These norms of cultural rights contained in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights were concretized in the UN International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights of 1966, stipulating that member states recognize the rights of every person (Art. 15, Para. 1): “*(a) to take part in cultural life; (b) to enjoy the benefits of scientific progress and its applications; (c) to benefit from the protection of the moral and material interests resulting from any scientific, literary or artistic production of which he is the author*” [United Nations 1966].

A detailed explanation of the main principles and concepts of cultural rights is provided in the General Comments No. 21 of the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights. The document states that “*the following are necessary conditions for the full realisation of the right of everyone to take part in cultural life on the basis of equality and non-discrimination: availability, accessibility, acceptability, adaptability and appropriateness*” [United Nations 2009]. From the definitions of these main terms given in the document, it follows that cultural availability means the provision/existence of cultural opportunities in general, while “*accessibility consists of effective and concrete opportunities for individuals and communities to enjoy culture fully, within physical and financial reach for all in both urban and rural areas, without discrimination. It is essential, in this regard, that access for older persons and persons with disabilities, as well as for those who live in poverty, is provided and facilitated. Accessibility also includes the right of everyone to seek, receive and share information on all manifestations of culture in the language of the person’s choice, and the access of communities to means of expressions and dissemination*” [United Nations 2009].

The document explains in detail the obligation of member states to promote the availability and accessibility of culture to every member of society (individually or as a member of a specific group of society), emphasizing that the norms included in the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights “*prohibit any discrimination in the exercise of the right of everyone to take part in cultural life*

on the grounds of race, colour, sex, language, religion, political or other opinion, national or social origin, property, birth or other status” [United Nations 2009]. It is also emphasized that “no one shall be excluded from access to cultural practices, goods and services” [United Nations 2009]. In this context, the document singles out several groups of society that require special attention (*Persons and communities requiring special protection*), to ensure access to culture and equal participation in cultural life, those include women, children, older persons, persons with disabilities, persons living in poverty, minorities, migrants, indigenous peoples [United Nations 2009].

Access to Culture in Context of International Cultural Policy

The importance of the availability and accessibility of culture is emphasized not only in the field of cultural rights but also in the international arena of cultural policy – both in the international documents adopted by UNESCO in the field of culture and in the documents related to cultural policy of the European Union. In the UNESCO Convention on the Protection and Promotion of the Diversity of Cultural Expressions, one of the eight main principles is the *Principle of equitable access*, stipulating, that “equitable access to a rich and diversified range of cultural expressions from all over the world and access of cultures to the means of expressions and dissemination constitute important elements for enhancing cultural diversity and encouraging mutual understanding” [UNESCO 2005].

According to European researchers on cultural policy, the goals of the European Union’s cultural policy are in line with the cultural vision and main principles set forth in the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights of the UN Committee on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights [Pasikowska-Schnass 2017: 8], including the dimension of promoting cultural availability and accessibility. The European Commission’s statement of 2007 *A European Agenda for Culture in a Globalising World* [European Union 2007] emphasizes the need to promote the availability and accessibility of culture in the context of cultural diversity and intercultural dialogue. In the *Work Plan for Culture (2015–2018)* of the European Union *accessible and inclusive culture* was identified as the first operational priority [European Union 2014].

In international cultural law and cultural policy documents, various groups of society can be identified that are defined as ones that should be given special attention and the inclusion of these groups should be promoted – inter alia, migrants, people belonging to national ethnic or linguistic minorities, indigenous peoples, persons with disabilities, women, children, older people, Roma, travellers, the LGBTI community and others. It should be noted that there is no single conventional designation for these groups of society, terms such as *persons and communities requiring special*

protection, vulnerable groups, groups at risk of poverty and social exclusion, etc. are used. This article uses the concept *vulnerable groups* as a unifying designation for these groups of society, which “has become widely used in academic literature as a theoretical framework for the discussion and analysis of inequalities, economic or social disadvantage, violations of human rights and unmet basic needs” [Schroder, Gefenas 2009]. According to the researchers, although this concept is widely discussed in the academic environment and is not unambiguously perceived [Higgins et al. 2022], however, it is recognised and widely used in the field of human rights.

Access to Culture in Context of Cultural Policy in Latvia

Availability and accessibility of culture and broader public participation in cultural processes are important cultural policy issues that are regularly brought up both on the international and Latvian agendas of cultural policy and mark the progress towards the development of a democratic and inclusive cultural model. Ensuring cultural availability and accessibility has historically been and still is one of the most important tasks set forth in the cultural policy of Latvia.

In the medium-term policy planning document Cultural Policy Guidelines 2022–2027 *Kultūrvalsts* (Cultural State) (hereinafter referred to as the guidelines), a sustainable and accessible culture is defined as the main strategic goal of the planning period, emphasizing that cultural offer in Latvia must be accessible to every member of society, and guaranteeing equal opportunities for every Latvian citizen and resident to use a diverse cultural offer and to actively engage in cultural processes, regardless of a person’s place of residence, age, gender, nationality, education or income level [Ministry of Culture 2022]. The document emphasizes that in the provision of cultural services special attention should be paid to regional and economic accessibility, including people with low incomes, digital accessibility, accessibility to groups at risk of social exclusion, including the accessibility of cultural offers to people with functional disabilities, minorities and immigrants, accessibility to people living in the diaspora, development of cultural services for a specific audience, especially children and young people, as well as for the marketing and design of cultural services [Ministry of Culture 2022].

However, the target groups of this study were not defined on the basis of the Latvian cultural policy guidelines, but on the basis of the groups of society defined in General comment No. 21 of the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights to which special attention should be paid to ensure access to culture. Two methods were used to collect data: 1) content analysis of official reports and documents of state institutions, as well as content analysis of secondary data, were performed to obtain qualitative data; 2) to obtain quantitative data, an electronic survey of heads of municipal cultural centres was conducted.

Functions of Municipal Cultural Centres in the Context of Cultural Availability and Accessibility

In the sense of the regulations, cultural centres in Latvia operate as multi-functional cross-sectoral cultural institutions, which can be established by State, local government entities or bodies governed by private law [Saeima 1998]. Historically cultural centres in Latvia started to form in the second half of the 19th century, as gathering places of local society (society houses, community houses), and in various periods of historical development, in response to the needs of society, as well as the political and ideological background, they have performed not only cultural functions, but also educational, leisure, scientific development, charitable and other social functions, but in certain periods also political functions [Pfeifere 2022]. According to the data of the Central Statistical Bureau (hereinafter – CSB), at the end of 2021, 558 cultural centres were operating in Latvia [CSB 2022: KUN010], whereas on the official Latvian Cultural Data Portal, in the section Cultural Centres, information on 564 cultural institutions can be found, of which 99% are cultural centres founded by municipalities or structural units thereof [Latvian Cultural Data Portal 2023].

The operation of municipal cultural centres in Latvia is regulated by several regulatory acts, the most important of which is the Law on Cultural Centres, which determines the legal status, functions, operation of cultural centres established by municipalities and other issues related to the operation of cultural centres [Saeima 2022]. The purpose of the Law on Cultural Centres highlights the role of municipal cultural centres *in promoting the availability of quality cultural services for the entire Latvian society, in the preservation and sustainable development of Latvia's cultural and historical environment, cultural spaces and intangible cultural heritage, in strengthening national identity, in the availability of lifelong learning, in the creation of new cultural products and services, and the participation of the society in the promotion of cultural processes* [Saeima 2022]. The National cultural policy document Cultural Policy Guidelines for 2022–2027 *Kultūrvalsts* also repeatedly emphasizes the role of cultural centres in ensuring access to culture and promoting public participation in cultural processes in regions of Latvia. In the context of this study, it is important to note that the guidelines state that to improve the availability and accessibility of culture, a series of specific issues must be addressed regarding the economic and regional availability of the cultural offer, as well as the physical and digital accessibility, both for society as a whole and for vulnerable groups. Improving the use of cultural infrastructure for persons with various functional disabilities is highlighted as one of the priority issues, indicating that a significant number of cultural institutions, including cultural centres, are only partially accessible to people with functional disabilities [Ministry of Culture 2022].

To explore whether municipal cultural centres have the necessary operational conditions to be able to qualitatively implement the tasks set forth in regulatory acts and state cultural policy documents and to find out the opinion of the heads of cultural centres about what should be done to improve the accessibility of cultural services to vulnerable groups, an electronic survey of municipal cultural centres was carried out. Both closed and open-ended questions were included in the survey questionnaire. The general population of the survey ($n = 551$) was determined based on the information on cultural centres available in the section on Cultural Centres of the official Latvian Portal of Cultural Data, including only cultural centres founded by municipalities. Answers from 398 respondents were received, which covers 72% of the general population and allows to consider these data as representative.

Limitations of the study:

Two of the aforementioned vulnerable groups – women and indigenous people – were not included in the survey questionnaire as separate research target groups, based on the fact that studies of cultural consumption and access to culture conducted so far in Latvia show that mostly women participate more in the consumption of all cultural activities, with the exception of certain types of events, where men are more active consumers [Ministry of Culture 2023], whereas, Līvi, who in the sense of this study should be considered indigenous to Latvia, are a numerically small population (according to the data of the Office of Citizenship and Migration Affairs from July 1, 2017 – less than 170), which has been fully integrated into Latvian society, and a specific cultural offer for this target group is created only within the framework of the Līvõa abunõõ community [The Livonian Culture Centre 2023].

Assessment of the Accessibility of Cultural Services to Vulnerable Groups

To find out to which of the vulnerable groups of society cultural centres pay special attention to when creating their offer of cultural services, the respondents had to answer the closed-form question, ticking all the appropriate groups from the sixteen target groups, among which were also the six groups that are in the focus of this study – *children, older persons, persons with disabilities, persons living in poverty, minorities, migrants*. 91.4% of respondents marked the local community/locals of the city parish as the main target group which is widely and very widely involved. Older persons (83.8%), families with children (82.8%), children aged up to 12 years (67.2%), young people aged 18 to 25 (56.9%), young people aged 13 to 17 (52.9%), people with limited financial means (53.6%), residents from remote settlements in the given municipality (52%) and residents from other municipalities in the given region (50.7%) were indicated as the subsequent most important target groups. From the answers of the respondents, it can be concluded that more than half of

the respondents pay attention to ensuring the availability of cultural services for the following vulnerable groups in the focus of the study: older persons, children and people with limited financial means. Whereas answers of the respondents regarding the other vulnerable groups in the focus of this study – minorities, persons with disabilities and migrants allow concluding that these target groups are involved to a much smaller extent in the activities of municipal cultural centres.

To explore respondents' views on the economic accessibility of cultural centres services respondents were asked which groups of the population have discounts to tickets price available in the cultural centres of the municipalities represented by the respondents. The answers of respondents show that discounts are most often offered to children (54.5%), older persons (36.6%) and students (31%). Relatively less often, ticket discounts are applied to other vulnerable groups – persons with disabilities (persons with group I disability 17.5%, persons with group II disability 14.6%, persons with group III disability 11.6%), persons living in poverty (4%). 16% of respondents indicated that discounts for tickets are offered to companions of persons with disabilities. Several respondents indicated in their comments that discounts are not applied to paid events for the following reasons: *“Entrance fees to events are so low that there are no discounts, free events are also available”*; *“There is no discount because mostly there are free events”*; *“There are no ticket discounts. Ticket prices are very friendly, starting from 1.00 EUR, depending on the target audience of the event and the actual costs. There are many free events. The most expensive tickets are for 7.50 EUR for balls/entertainment events”*.

In the context of these answers, the data obtained in the survey about the proportional ratio of paid and free events in cultural centres are important. In the questionnaire, the respondents were asked to indicate the data on the number of paid and free events in 2022, because on the official Latvian Portal of Cultural Data, these data are partially available only for 2021. The analysis of the obtained data shows that in 2022 in the cultural centres surveyed, 71% of the events were free of charge, which allows concluding that even though ticket discounts for paid events were not available for all vulnerable groups, the opportunity to visit a relatively large number of events without entrance fees was ensured.

One of the most significant barriers affecting the accessibility of cultural services in cultural centres is the accessibility of the environment, which is primarily important for persons with disabilities. However, it is important to note that by reducing or eliminating accessibility obstacles for persons with disabilities, other groups of society also become beneficiaries, including seniors, people with temporary mobility or functional impairment, families with small children, etc. When analysing the accessibility of cultural services for people with disabilities, the following aspects of accessibility should be considered:

- 1) Accessibility of the physical environment (important for people with mobility impairments);
- 2) Accessibility of the sensory environment (important for people with visual and hearing impairments);
- 3) Perceptual accessibility (important for people with mental health disorders).

Based on the above, the respondents were asked several questions regarding the accessibility of the environment and services in the cultural centre. First, the respondents were asked to rate on a 10-point scale how accessible the premises of the cultural centre are for people with disabilities (the respondents were explained that this means the ability of people with disabilities to independently enter the building, to find their bearings in the building, move around the premises, between floors, visit the facilities, etc.). The accessibility of cultural centres was assessed as fully adequate (9–10 points) for people with mobility impairments by only 35.3% of respondents, for people with mental health disorders – 35.2% of respondents, for people with hearing impairments – 27.3% of respondents, for people with visual impairments – 18.1% of respondents. Respondents also had the opportunity to freely comment on the issue of environmental accessibility. Several respondents indicated that the staff of the cultural centre do not have sufficient knowledge about aspects of cultural accessibility for people with disabilities: *“Employees of the cultural centre do not have the necessary skills to deal with people with special needs. Usually, people come to the cultural centre with an assistant.”*; *“I am not aware of special adaptations for people with visual and hearing impairments”*; *“The staff of the cultural centre is not trained to work with people with visual, hearing impairments and mental disorders. In case of mental disorders, the visitor needs the help of a specialist”*, *“There is a lack of knowledge that could improve/facilitate the accessibility of premises for people with mental disorders”*, *“In order to accurately assess accessibility, a specialist’s assessment would be necessary because I admit that there are situations which are not fully considered”*. Most of the respondents indicated that the premises of the cultural centre are only partially accessible for people with disabilities.

Further, the respondents were asked to assess on a 10-point scale how accessible the content offered in the cultural centre is to people with disabilities and whether the adaptation of appropriate technical solutions to the specific needs of people with disabilities for content access is ensured (for example, the availability of subtitles/sign language for people with hearing impairments, audio translation for people with visual impairments, adapted seats for people with mobility impairments, etc.). 59.8% of respondents indicated that it is not possible to ensure full accessibility of event content in the cultural centre (marked respondent rating: 1–2 points) for people with visual impairments, 60.6% of respondents indicated that it is not possible to ensure accessibility of event content to people with hearing impairments, 30.8%

of respondents indicated that it is not possible to ensure the accessibility of event content for people with mental disabilities and 23.7% of respondents indicated that the cultural centre cannot ensure full accessibility of event content for people with mobility impairments. From these data, it can be concluded that persons with disabilities have very limited opportunities to access the content of events offered in cultural centres because even if they manage to overcome physical obstacles with the help of an assistant and get to the venue, the opportunities to enjoy and perceive the content of the events are very limited.

Recommendations for Improving Cultural Accessibility in Municipal Cultural Centres

At the end of the survey, respondents were asked a closed-ended question, in which they were offered to choose the most appropriate of the given answer options regarding what specific actions should be taken to improve the availability and accessibility of cultural services in cultural centres. The table reflects the most important actions in the opinion of the respondents that would help to improve cultural accessibility in cultural centres:

Table 1. Recommendations of respondents (Source: author's compilation)

Recommendations of respondents	% of respondents' answers
Adequate technological equipment	67.7%
Larger municipal subsidy for core activities	66.2%
Experience exchange events in Latvia	64.7%
Training, courses, seminars for employees of the cultural centre	63.8%
Target programme of state support for cultural centres	63.5%
Enhanced opportunities to attract additional funding in project tenders	62.0%
Additional human resources (employees) in the cultural centre	54.9%
More active involvement and participation of volunteers	50.1%

The need for better cooperation with state institutions (19.9%), municipal institutions (28.5%) and the non-governmental sector (25.2%) was indicated as an important factor in improving cultural accessibility. Respondents also believe that greater tolerance and understanding of residents towards different target groups of society (28.8%), as well as greater interest of people with disabilities to participate (30.6%), would help to improve cultural accessibility.

Conclusions

In the cultural policy of Latvia, the availability and accessibility of culture are put forward as one of the priorities of the national cultural policy. Both the Law on Culture Centres and the National Cultural Policy Guidelines emphasize the role of cultural centres in ensuring access to culture and promoting public participation in cultural processes in the regions of Latvia while recognizing that in order to improve the availability and accessibility to culture in Latvia, a series of specific issues regarding the economic and regional availability of cultural offer must be addressed, as well as physical and digital accessibility, both for the general public and for vulnerable groups.

From the data obtained in the survey of cultural centres, it can be concluded that cultural centres pay special attention to ensuring the availability and accessibility of cultural services for the following vulnerable groups, which are the focus of this study: older persons, children and people with limited financial means. Whereas, minorities, persons with disabilities and migrants are involved much less in the activities of cultural centres.

Data from survey allow to conclude that persons with disabilities have very limited opportunities to access the content of events offered in cultural centres because even if they manage to overcome physical obstacles with the help of an assistant and get to the venue, the possibilities to enjoy and perceive the content of the events are very limited. In the open questions, some respondents admit that cultural centre employees lack knowledge about working with persons with disabilities.

As the main actions that should be taken to improve the availability and accessibility of cultural services in cultural centres, the respondents pointed out: the need for appropriate technological equipment, the need for more municipal subsidies for core activities, the need for experience exchange events in Latvia, the need for training, courses, seminars for employees of cultural centres, the need of the target programme of state support for cultural centres, greater opportunities to attract additional funding in project tenders, the need for additional human resources (employees) in cultural centres and the need for more active involvement and participation of volunteers.

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