

Changes in Latvia's Museums

There have been significant changes in the Latvian museum sector in 2009. The cause of these was the reduction of public finance due to the global economic crisis. The Latvian government decided that the way to escape the crisis was through structural reform, as well as savings measures.

The structural reform of the Latvian museum sector took place both through museum centralization and also through decentralization – some state museums were handed over to the jurisdiction of local councils or independent institutions, that is, universities or companies. With the centralization of museums, larger institutions were created, in the hope to gain an economy of resources in the unification of supporting functions, that is, administration, accounting, housekeeping, public relations and others.

The decentralization of state museums by handing them over to the jurisdiction of other sectors was justified on one hand, due to the lack of state finances, while it also provided an opportunity to draw museum activities closer to their direct target audiences, in this way using museum resources more effectively, as well as providing a greater opportunity to secure the maintenance of museums, by attracting new funding sources.

Up until now structural reforms have allowed museums to maintain their range of visitor services – the number of permanent and temporary exhibitions. It is too early to comment whether reforms have given other awaited results, such as improving museum management and the quality of services. Similarly, only a year of work results will demonstrate if all Latvia's museums will be capable of maintaining their activities within the available budget. State subsidies for museums in 2010 were reduced by an average of 50%. Museums drastically reduced staff wages and reduced basic functions to a minimum. However, infrastructure maintenance expenses (building, collection etc) have not changed. Paid museum services are expected to provide a significant amount of finance for securing museum activities. The spending capacity of the local community has also been reduced, and the intensity of foreign tourism has dropped in comparison to earlier years. On the whole structural changes of the field, as well as the financial conditions present a challenge to Latvia's museums to improve on their activity up until now, to find new approaches – to use the crisis as an opportunity to develop more qualitative museum activities.

Change has also affected the management of the Latvian museum sector. According to that which is set out in the Law on Museums, the management of the museum sector is to be undertaken by the State Authority on Museums. In order to economize resources, the government made the decision to abolish the State Authority on Museums from 1 January 2010, and its duties to be taken over by the Ministry of Culture. A Museums and Visual Art Section now functions in the Cultural Policy

Department of the Ministry of Culture, with the task of continuing the role of the State Authority of Museums.

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