



Peer Review on “Furthering quality and accessibility of Foster Care service”

Peer Country Comments Paper – Latvia

Foster Care in Croatia and Latvia: lessons for mutual learning

Online, 20-21 May 2021

DG Employment, Social Affairs and Inclusion

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June, 2021



EUROPEAN COMMISSION

Directorate-General for Employment, Social Affairs and Inclusion

Unit C1

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European Commission

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1 Introduction

This paper has been prepared for the Peer Review on "Furthering quality and accessibility of foster care service". It provides a comparative assessment of the policy example of the Host Country (Croatia) and the situation in Latvia. For information on the host country policy example, please refer to the Host Country discussion paper.

2 Situation in Latvia

In Latvia, the term "out-of-family care" (*ārpusģimenes aprūpe*) is traditionally used when analysing the protection system for children without adequate parental care. The Law on Protection of Children's rights (1998) defines out-of-family care as "care provided by a guardian, or foster family, or child care institution for orphans and children who have been left without parental care"¹. Out-of-family care is divided into custody care (kinship foster care in Croatia), care in foster families (general foster family, crises foster family and specialised foster family) and institutional care.

The Law on Protection of Children's rights states that the purpose of out-of-family care is to create a feeling of protection for children, ensure an environment fostering their development and welfare, and support their efforts to be independent².

The same law defines institutional child care as an institution that ensures social care and social rehabilitation for orphans and children left without parental care. It also provides care to children for whom social rehabilitation is necessary or special care due to their state of health³.

A foster family is defined as "a family or a person who provides care for a child who has been temporarily or permanently removed from his or her family environment until the moment the child may return to his or her family. If the return is not possible, the child can be adopted, receive guardianship or be placed in a child care institution⁴.

Since the end of the 20th century, institutional child care has been a rather widespread type of out-of-family care, although custody care was the most prevalent type of out-of-family care. For example, in 2012, 8,095 children were in out-of-family care, out of which 5,051 were in custody care, 1889 children were in institutional care and 1,555 lived with foster families⁵.

In 2020, the total number of children in out-of-family care decreased to 6,004; out of which 4,059 children were in custody care, 1,337 children were in foster families and 568 children were in institutional child care⁶.

This improvement came from the new policy developments introduced with the Family policy Guidelines (2011-2017), which defined the new development perspectives and emphasised the importance of family-type care for children in out-of-family care⁷.

In Croatia, the deinstitutionalisation process started in 2010, whereas in Latvia, the process started in 2015. Precisely, in 2015 the government adopted an important policy document, "On the Concept "Development of adoptions and out-of-family care

¹ (1998), Law on the Protection of the Children's Rights, Ch.1, Section1, part 7. Enforced in 1998, with amendments, 1998- 2021.

² Ibid, Ch.6, section 32.

³ Ibid, Ch.1, Section 1, part 8.

⁴ Ibid, Ch.1, Section 1, part 3.

⁵ State Inspectorate for Protection of Children's Rights (2016), Annual statistical report submitted by Orphan's and Custody Courts "Analysis of the Work of Orphan's and Custody Courts in 2015" (in Latvian), p.22.

⁶ State Inspectorate for Protection of Children's Rights (2021), Summary of the Annual statistical report submitted by Custody Courts.

⁷ Republic of Latvia, Cabinet of Ministers Order No 65, (2011), National Family Policy Guidelines, 2011-2017 (in Latvian), p.86.

systems"⁸, which set a new clear and sound policy towards deinstitutionalisation or "family-like" out-of-family care. The programme is co-funded by the EU and will last until 2023. The main objective of the programme is to develop "services close to the family environment" in different municipalities across the country⁹. Additionally, the programme aims at making institutional the last resort when no foster parents can be found for a child. The deinstitutionalisation process supports municipalities to create "family-like environment" care, where no more than eight children will live in one house.

In some municipalities, young people who are close to legal age and are not placed into a foster family, can be placed in homes for youth¹⁰. These homes are for up to 12 children who are at least 15 years old. These young people are accompanied by professionals who support them in acquiring all the necessary skills to enable them to live independently (incl. soft skills like buying food, cooking, cleaning, managing their own finances etc). At present, there are few homes for youth established by municipalities (one of them was established by SOS villages¹¹).

Also, the DI Programme (2015-2023) has planned to establish four new Homes for youth for children 16+ where young people from SOS village or institutional care can live a more independent life, develop the skills necessary for the independent life (altogether 4 youth houses in 4 regions, providing places for 36 youth who continue their studies after age 16) and services for 142 persons in a family-like environment; and improving the quality of foster families, custody families and adoption.

In 2006, after the adoption of the Cabinet Regulations No 1034¹², the foster families' approach started to develop rapidly. The number of children in foster families has increased from 391 (2006) to 636 (2018). The new Regulations on Foster families (2018)¹³ regulated further the status of foster families, their role, duties and financial allowances.

The development of foster care is also characterised by new researches on out-of-family care, in particular on the experience of foster families (2 studies conducted in 2017¹⁴, 1 study in 2020). Significant research on specialised foster families was also done by SOS Villages¹⁵.

The Croatian Host country paper clearly demonstrates the importance of regular research on foster care and the development of research-based policy.

The leading public administration in the field of child and family rights is the Ministry of Welfare. Ministry of Welfare cooperates with the Custody Courts, State Inspectorate on Protection of Children's Rights, Social Services. In the field of out-of-family care, a

⁸ Republic of Latvia, Cabinet Order No 114, (2015) "On the concept 'Development of adoption and out-of-family care systems'" (in Latvian). Available at: <https://likumi.lv/ta/id/272710-par-koncepciju-par-adopcijas-un-arpusgimenes-aprupes-sistemu-pilnveidosanu>

⁹ Ministry of Welfare, (2015) Social services planned by municipalities for children in out-of-family care in DI ERDF projects (in accordance to the amendments to the DI plans of the planning regions, by 01.01.2021.) (in Latvian). Available at: <https://www.lm.gov.lv/lv/informacija-par-projektu>

¹⁰ based on Cabinet Regulations No 338 (2017) Requirements for social service providers, ch.5. Requirements for Service Providers of a Long-term Social Care and Social Rehabilitation Institution for Children. Available at <https://likumi.lv/ta/en/en/id/291788>

¹¹ Jelgava SOS Home for youth (in Latvian). Available at <https://www.sosbernuciemati.lv/lv/par-mums/jelgavas-sos-jauniesu-maja>

¹² Republic of Latvia, Cabinet Regulations No 1034 (2006), Regulations for Foster Families. No longer in force since 2018. Available at: <https://likumi.lv/ta/en/en/id/150734>

¹³ Republic of Latvia, Cabinet Regulations No 354 (2018), Regulations for Foster Families. Available at: <https://likumi.lv/ta/id/300005-audzugimenes-noteikumi>

¹⁴ NGO Association of professional foster parents "Tereze" (2020), "Participation of the foster family community in the development and strengthening of the out-of-family care system". Summary of research results; 39p. (in Latvian); Social Services Agency (2017), Development of the specialized foster family care model in Latvia (in Latvian), 22 p., Available at: https://www.lps.lv/uploads/docs_module/Petijums%20par%20Latvijas%20ag%20kustibas%20tendencem.pdf

¹⁵ SOS villages' Association (2017), Proposals for the development of the specialised Foster families, 97p. Available at: <https://www.sosbernuciemati.lv/storage/770bffb117445da0e732bd6fd93e892c92facaf7.pdf>

strong collaboration is needed with the local municipalities and regional/local out-of-family care support centres.

3 Assessment of the policy measure

3.1 Legal framework

There are major similarities between foster care development in Croatia and out-of-family care (foster care) in Latvia, due to their long socialist tradition that had a strong emphasis on long-term institutional care. The main principles of institutional care were developed in the 1990-s. Traditionally those were large institutions with a high number of children.

In Latvia, the national legal framework for foster care is based on the UN Convention of Child's Rights (1990) and other international documents. The framework includes the law on Protection of Children's Rights (1998), the policy framework document (Family Policy Guidelines, 2011-2017), and several regulations on out-family care adopted by the Cabinet of Ministers¹⁶.

The law defines the general framework of children's rights, including the right to a family. The law defines the cases when a child can be separated from the family (Art.27), custody care and termination of custody, adoption issues, etc.

In Latvia, the first regulations on foster families were adopted in 2004¹⁷, then in 2006¹⁸ and were replaced by the new Regulations No 354 in 2018. The new regulations on foster families reinforced the placement of a child in a family environment in line with an individual development plan prepared for each child.

The government Regulations¹⁹ also define the length of the stay of children in family foster care. In particular, children can stay in a foster family until they can return to their biological family. If that is not possible, children can stay in a foster family until their adoption or when they receive a legal guardian. Upon deciding to place a child into a foster family or a specialised foster family, a Custody Court indicates the length of the foster care.

3.2 Types of foster families

There are two major types of foster families in Latvia:

1. **Foster family** (traditional foster family). This type of family can accept no more than three foster children, except if they are siblings/half-siblings. No more than six children altogether (adopted, foster, biological, etc.) can live in a foster family, except in the case of siblings/half-siblings.
2. **Specialised foster** care is divided into two categories - emergency (crisis) foster family and a specialised foster family for a child with severe functional disorders.
 - a) **Crisis foster family** needs specific qualities such as at least three years of experience in foster care. The family should be willing to accept a child at any time of the day. The number of children who can be placed in an individual family is similar to the general type of foster family²⁰. A child can

¹⁶ for example, Republic of Latvia, Cabinet Regulations No 174 (2004 not in force) on Foster families, No 1036 (2006, not in force) on Foster families, Regulations No 354 (2018) on Foster families; Regulations No 338 (2017) on Requirements to social service providers, etc.

¹⁷ Republic of Latvia, Cabinet Regulations No 174 (2004 not in force) on Foster families

¹⁸ Cabinet of Ministers Regulations No 1034 (2006), Regulations for Foster Families. No longer in force since 2018. Available at: <https://likumi.lv/ta/en/en/id/150734>

¹⁹ Republic of Latvia, Cabinet Regulations No 354 (2018) Regulations for Foster Families. Available at: <https://likumi.lv/ta/id/300005-audzugimenes-noteikumi>

²⁰ Republic of Latvia, Cabinet Regulations No 354 (2018), Regulations for Foster Families. Art. 9.1. Available at: <https://likumi.lv/ta/id/300005-audzugimenes-noteikumi>

be placed into a crisis foster family for a period of up to 30 days. If it is in the best interests of the child, a Custody Court may extend the period, but for no more than 12 months.

- b) **Specialised foster family for a child with severe functional disorders.** In this type of care, the foster carer (or at least one of the spouses) must have at least 12 months of personal or professional experience working with children with severe functional disorders²¹. The State Commission on Health and employability (VDEAK) states whether special care is needed. Before placing a child with severe functional disorders in a (specialised) foster family, the Custody Court provides a written report about the emotional state of the child to the foster family and the foster family support centre. The report includes the contact procedures with the parents, siblings, close relatives of the child; and other relevant information.

3.3 Foster care requirements and support provided

Regulation No 354 on foster families defines the eligibility criteria and the standard procedures to become a foster parent/family. All potential foster parents should submit a written application and participate in the initial assessment conducted by the Custody Court. After the Custody Court has decided on the suitability of the foster family, the foster parent(s) should complete a training course. The length of the training programme is 50 hours of classes and 16 hours of practice. After successful completion of the training programme, the foster family receives a certificate. Moreover, all foster families have to attend annual training sessions (8 academic hours). Foster families contribute to the development of the individual development plan of the child placed into their family. Other eligibility criteria include specific age limits (age 25-60 for the first-time foster parents) and an inspection of their living conditions and accommodation. However, there are no specific requirements on the family status (married/single) of the foster parents.

There are certain extra preconditions for becoming a specialised foster family. Those preconditions include knowledge and skills in the area of foster parent specialisation. Besides, the future specialised foster parent must participate in a special training course (24 academic hours). After the completion of the training programme, the specialised foster parent(s) receive a certificate.

3.4 Out-of-family Care Support Centres

Regulations on out-of-family care support centres were adopted in 2018²². They determine the role, criteria and requirements of out-of-family care support centres, including funding rules of out-of-family care support centres. Regulations emphasise that out-of-family care support centres should work to increase the number of foster families, including specialised foster families, adopting families and guardians. Out-of-family Care Support Centres should set in place measures to ensure the well being and safety of children left without parental care²³. Foster care support centres should have an agreement with the Ministry of Welfare and are funded by the Ministry of Welfare.

The out-of-family care support centres provide a variety of services, including:

- offering training to foster families, including specialised foster families (including follow-up training);
- assessing the suitability of a person/couple to become a foster family;

²¹ Ibid, Art. 9.2. Available at: <https://likumi.lv/ta/id/300005-audzugimenes-noteikumi>

²² Republic of Latvia, Cabinet Regulations No. 355 "Regulations Regarding the Out-of-family Care Support Centre", available at: <https://likumi.lv/ta/en/en/id/299998>

²³ Republic of Latvia, Cabinet Regulations No. 355 "Regulations Regarding the Out-of-family Care Support Centre", Art.1.2. available at: <https://likumi.lv/ta/en/en/id/299998>

- ensuring psychosocial support and support from a social worker throughout the process;
- developing and overseeing the support plan for the foster family and an individual development plan for the child;
- paying the monthly allowances (and one-time compensation) of specialised foster families
- monitoring the availability of crisis foster families at liaising with the Custody Court or police in case of need.

3.5 Funding of foster care

Foster families and specialised foster families are entitled to allowance to cover the child's needs, for example, to purchase clothing and soft furnishing (such as bed linen, blanket, pillow, mattress), and remuneration for their work²⁴.

These allowances are paid by the local government, in line with a contract signed with the foster family.

The local government determines the allowance for a child's nutrition. It should not be lower than EUR 215 per child up to the age of seven. The allowance for children from 7 to 18 years old is at least EUR 258.

Moreover, specialised foster families receive one-time compensation to cover the expenses to buy furniture and equipment for a child with disabilities.

4 Conclusions

4.1.1 Similarities between countries

There are several similarities between Croatian and Latvian systems of foster care.

First, there are similarities in preconditions to become a foster parent. The first requirement is having the country's citizenship or permanent residence permit and residing in the country. In both countries, marital status does not play a role and there are age limits to become a foster parent (in Croatia – the age limits are rather generic "adult Croatian citizen"; in Latvia, there are age limits 25-60 for the first-time foster parent).

In both countries, a maximum number of three children at the same time can be placed in a foster family (but more than three children can be placed together if they are siblings). Both countries require a written application and a motivation letter explaining willingness to become a foster parent.

When a parent has qualified to become a foster parent, both countries must complete some training sessions. However, in Latvia, the training structure is stricter, requiring both classes and practical work. Moreover, it also includes an annual follow-up training.

Additionally, similar funding principles for foster families are applied in both countries, including remuneration to foster parents and allowances to cover child expenses. In both countries, there is an additional allowance and remuneration for specialised foster parents.

Both countries employ individual planning in the field of child foster family care and institutional care. It is important to mention that Latvia requests foster parents to participate in the development of the individual plans for children.

²⁴ Cabinet Regulations No. 1549 "Procedures for the Granting and Disbursement of the Remuneration for the Fulfilment of Foster Family Duties" (enforced 01.01.2010). Available at: <https://likumi.lv/ta/en/en/id/202717>

Both countries emphasise the importance of foster parents' NGOs and provide assistance to the development of foster parents' NGOs and their networking.

There are similar steps in the development of foster care in both countries based on national legal regulations. Both countries are deinstitutionalising child care, promoting foster care as the preferable option. Besides, both countries have started developing youth centres for those youngsters who are 16 years old and give them an opportunity to live more independent lives in small community youth centres. This experience can be seen as a model of positive practice.

4.1.1.1 Differences

The main differences are related to the typology of foster care. Croatian legislation clearly differentiates traditional foster care, professional foster care (standard and specialised) and kinship foster care.

5 Assessment of success factors and transferability

The successful aspects of the Croatian good practice could be implemented into the Latvian foster family system.

- Latvia can learn from the Croatian initiative "For a Stronger Family" which started in 2017 as a partnership between the Ministry for Demographics, Family, Youth and Social Policy and UNICEF Croatia, in cooperation with the Croatian Association of Social Workers. The Croatian initiative is an excellent example of a successful multisectoral and interdisciplinary collaboration. In Latvia, the collaboration between the Ministry of Welfare, Custody Courts, Child Protection Inspectorate, foster family Associations (NGOs), and the Foster care support centres has been encouraged.
- For Latvia, it would be useful to explore further the system of social guarantees for professional foster parents. The Latvian system of social security for foster parents could be improved by drawing from good practice examples of Croatia.
- Analyses of the host country paper does not show essential differences between the developments of foster care in Latvia and Croatia. Therefore there are few factors that limit the transferability of Croatian good practices to Latvia.

6 Questions

- Could you characterise the work with the biological family during the child's stay in the foster family? (The Report states that 19% of children return to "their primary families" (p.7).
- The host country paper mentions that 19% of children return to primary families, 16% have been adopted and 4% of children have been placed in an institution (p.7). What happened to the other children (about 60%)?
- The host country paper mentions the main actors of foster care (p.5). One of the actors in foster care in Croatia are NGOs, including religious organisations and other private organisations. What is the prevalence of religious organisations among the NGOs?
- The host country paper describes difficulties in defining the profile of the foster parents. However, it clearly states that 60% of foster parents have been unemployed. Does it mean that foster care is a way to exit from unemployment in Croatia? In such a situation, the profile of foster parents -in terms of education- might be rather significant, especially in relation to the child returning back to the institution. Is there any correlation between

unemployment status, level of education and child placement into an institution?

- What was the reason to stop that crisis parents model?

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Annex 1 Summary table

The main points covered by the paper are summarised below.

Situation in the peer country

- Custody care and institutional care have been the dominating forms of out-of-family care until 2012.
- Policy documents demonstrate that foster care and community-based care in small youth centres are seen as priorities to protect children from placement in large child care institutions.
- Out-of-family care support centres act as coordinators of the work with foster families, custody families and adoptive parents.
- Positive model of transformation of large child care institutions. Large children's homes are transformed into small community youth centres where professionals help youth develop and train independent life skills.
- Systematic research and data monitoring is necessary.

Assessment of the policy measure

- Family-based foster family movement is developing in Latvia; however more rapid progress is expected.
- Deinstitutionalisation process started in 2015; one part of the deinstitutionalisation was focused on the development of family type child care instead of institutional care and closure of large long-term child care institutions.
- Out-of-family care support centres are the main actor supporting foster families, custody families and adopting persons/families.
- National register of foster families exists. Besides, out-of-family care support centres register potential foster families, crisis foster families and specialised foster families on the regional level.
- Allowances to foster children and remuneration for child care services are available in both countries.

Assessment of success factors and transferability

- Development of regulations on foster families, their status, foster family typology, foster parent's roles and funding of foster care.
- Importance of crisis foster families.
- Deinstitutionalisation and the growing numbers of placements in foster families.
- Development of out-of-family care support centres that coordinates foster care development and provide consultations for foster parents.
- Training programme implementation (including both theoretical classes and practice), and further annual training for foster parents, custodians, adopting families.
- Specific training for specialised foster parents. Criteria for the status of specialised foster parents.

Questions

1. Could you describe the work with the biological family of a child during the child's life and close to exit from the foster care? (The Report states that 19% of children return to "their primary families" (p.7)).

2. The host country paper mentions that 19% of children return to primary families, 16% have been adopted and 4% of children have been placed in an institution (p.7). What happens to the other children (about 60%)?
3. The host country paper mentions the main actors of foster care (p.5). Some of the actors in foster care in Croatia are NGOs, including religious organisations and other private organisations. What is the prevalence of religious organisations among the NGOs working in foster care?

Annex 2 Example of relevant practice

Name of the practice:	Sample contents of the Training programme for potential foster parents/families
Year of implementation:	Since 2018
Coordinating authority:	Ministry of Welfare
Objectives:	Provide skills and competencies to potential foster parents
Main activities:	<p>The programme offers offers interactive training, including classes, video materials and films, role-plays and group work. Each class is taught/coordinated by both a teacher and a mentor. The total length of theoretical and practical classes is at least 50 hours. Practice sessions last at least 16 hrs.</p> <p>The training can take place in an institution, crisis centre or daycare centre. The practical sessions are organised individually for each foster family. If the foster family had already experience in providing out-of-family care (custody, guest family, volunteering or professional work in a child care institution, crises centre), the practical work is not necessary.</p>
Results so far:	<p>In 2019 and 2020 (9 months), training was provided for:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - traditional foster families 138/100 - specialised foster families: 44/59 - training for potential adopters 138/100. <p>As a result, the number of foster families has increased.</p>



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