

National Audit Office: Estonian language training for adults is poorly organised

Auditor General Janar Holm: “It’s a question of dignity of the state of Estonia to ensure that nobody who wants to learn Estonian is deprived of the opportunity to do so, because no money has been allocated for this.”

- * The organisation of training is fragmented between five ministries and 32 activities.
- * Funding depends significantly on the money of the Estonian Unemployment Insurance Fund, but some of the money comes from European Union support, which is unstable and project-based.
- * There is no comprehensive overview of the goals, measures, outcomes and cost of language training for adults.
- * In a situation where it’s necessary to teach the language to an estimated 60,000 people at the least, the state has managed to provide training to 2,000 to 6,000 people per year in the last five years, depending on EU funds.
- * There is a serious lack of qualified teachers, different ministries and organisations compete over the same few teachers and poach them from each other. Teachers are overburdened in some regions.

TALLINN, 28 August 2019 – The National Audit Office finds that the organisation of state-funded Estonian language training for adults is fragmented, the number of courses does not meet the need, there is a serious lack of qualified teachers and the funding of training depends largely on the money of the Estonian Unemployment Insurance Fund and European Union support. Finding solutions to the problems is difficult because the organisation of language training has no clear leader, nobody is responsible for the development of the area and there is no systematic coordination of activities between the respective state agencies.

According to the most recent data of Statistics Estonia, around 68% of the entire population of Estonia spoke Estonian as their native language, incl., for example, 16% of the residents of Ida-Viru County and 51% of the residents of Tallinn. According to the study carried out by Tallinn University and CentAR Centre for Applied Research, more than 100,000 of adults living in Estonia should learn more to be able to speak and write in Estonian at the level necessary for coping in daily life.

Fragmentation. The audit of the National Audit Office indicates that the state supports the teaching of Estonian as a second language to adults via 32 activities of five ministries – the Ministry of Education and Research, the Ministry of Culture, the Ministry of Social Affairs, the Ministry of the Interior and the Ministry of Justice – but language training has no clear leader. There is also no comprehensive overview of the measures, outcomes and cost of the language training for adults, as it is still being prepared by the ministries.

Dependence on the funds of the Estonian Unemployment Insurance Fund and EU funds. In the last five years, i.e. from 2014-2018, the state financed language training activities with around 21.1 million euros, 6.6 million of which was covered from revenue in the state budget, mostly tax revenue. However, the majority or two-third of the money came from the budget of the Unemployment Insurance Fund and foreign support. The expenses forecast for 2019 are approximately 14.5 million euros, incl. 4.3 million euros, or less than a third from revenue in the state budget. The primary reason behind the increase in funding in 2019 is the fact that the Unemployment Insurance Fund has increased the funding for the language training activities of unemployed persons, working people and employers, the Ministry of Culture has increased the funding for Estonian Language Houses and the Ministry of the Interior has taken measures aimed at supporting Estonian language learning by people applying for citizenship. Estonian language learning is one of many labour market services for the Unemployment Insurance Fund and may come under threat should the economic situation deteriorate and unemployment increase. The National Audit Office has already drawn attention to the ever-

growing list of labour market services of the Unemployment Insurance Fund and the fact that the Unemployment Insurance Fund's reserves are spent on the various everyday needs of the state.

The partial funding of language training from foreign support has resulted in uneven funding, which has created obstacles to teaching the language – for example, the number of people to whom training can be offered changes considerably in accordance with funding. There is also the risk that the companies that provide language training regard state procurement as a project-based order and don't contribute enough to maintaining and improving the qualifications of language teachers.

The number of people prepared to learn Estonian is considerably greater than the opportunities to learn Estonian with the support of the state and the volume of training. Depending on the year, and whether and how much foreign support can be used, the volume of training has varied from 2,000 to 6,000 participants per year from 2014-2018. The study carried out by Tallinn University and the CentAR Centre for Applied Research indicates that approximately half of adults whose native language is not Estonian, i.e. more than 100,000 people, lack active Estonian language skills, but around two-thirds of them are prepared to learn the language in the next three years. According to the most recent monitoring of the integration of Estonian society, the language skills of people with another native language have improved, but 10% of Estonian residents of other nationalities over 15 years of age speak no Estonian at all in their own opinion (as in 2017).

A representative of a ministry pointed out during the audit that the initial plan upon the launch of training models in 2015 was to have approximately 540 people attending the training, but the number of people who registered for the first language training course was 5,961, i.e. 10 times more than expected. Such significant interest in language training arose from the fact that free language training had not been offered to learners for several years (2013-2014 and the first half of 2015) due to the lack of funding.

Auditor General Janar Holm said that teaching the Estonian language to adults should not be reduced to one of many measures funded via the Unemployment Insurance Fund in order to help people cope better on the labour market. "Estonian language training and Estonian language skills have a considerably broader meaning than coping on the labour market. It is an issue of society's field of information, culture, education and mutual understanding.

According to the present logic, we could teach people to read and write through the Unemployment Insurance Fund as well because these skills are also useful for finding work and working," said the Auditor General about the situation.

Holm added that besides numbers and organisational matters there is also the emotional side for him. "People say that the money comes from the same state budget and money has no nationality, but there are certain areas where it does. And when it comes to this, we should have enough national pride to not let the taxpayers of Germany, France, Italy and other European countries to partly pay for teaching our own state language, especially considering the extreme importance of the Estonian language to the Estonian identity. The present situation really wounds my pride as an Estonian," admitted the auditor general.

Lack of teachers. The National Audit Office found that there are too few qualified language teachers in many areas, and this may also have a negative impact on teaching the Estonian language at general education schools. The issue of the next generation of Estonian language teachers is also a reason for concern. All of the audited ministries found when replying to the National Audit Office that the shortage of qualified language teachers is the second reason in addition to the shortage of money that makes the provision of language training difficult and may put a massive burden on the teachers of general education schools.

The problem is the biggest in Ida-Viru County. According to the Language Inspectorate and the Estonian Education Information System, 10% of general education school teachers on average also teach language to adults and do this as an additional job. However, the National Audit Office did not see any adequate and systematic attempts to find a solution to the problem at the decision-making level.

Auditor General Janar Holm said about the situation: “In Estonia, we love to offer people ‘free’ things, which are actually paid for by everyone jointly. However, if anything at all should be accessible to everyone interested via joint funding, guaranteed to everyone at all levels of study, everywhere in the state at any time and all over the world where there is interest in this, then Estonian language training should be this thing. And this training should be fully guaranteed with qualified and properly paid teachers. It’s a question of the dignity of the state of Estonia to ensure that nobody who wants to learn Estonian is deprived of the opportunity to do so, because no money has been allocated for this.”

Nobody is responsible and there is no leader. In the organisation of Estonian language training for adults, there are omissions and disagreements between the ministries in terms of cooperation, the coordination of activities, management and level of responsibility, which make finding solutions to language training problems difficult.

Auditor General Janar Holm: “If we approach this from the angle of state reform, then a possible solution could be to stop organising Estonian language training in a manner that is fragmented between several ministries and to establish a function-based single and uniform Estonian language centre or state language centre, which would then guarantee language training to everyone according to their specific needs and proficiency levels, and would take care of methodology, teaching aids, etc. This should be done throughout the state and, if necessary, abroad to support global Estonianness and Estonian people living abroad who want to keep their connection with the Estonian language.”

Director of Audit of the Analysis Department Märt Loite conceded that the ministries only agree on the fact that the lack of qualified teachers is seen as the biggest problem in the area. “Unofficial information exchange at the level of officials has improved in the last couple of years, but we still need more clarity about who is responsible for organising Estonian language training for adults. It speaks volumes that the Estonian language development plan prepared by the Ministry of Education and Research, which was in force until 2017, didn’t even include the target group of adults. The preparation of the fundamentals of the new language policy has come to a halt.

The Ministry of Social Affairs, the Ministry of Culture and the Ministry of the Interior see the need for more central and clearer cooperation, management and coordination in this area, and the Ministry of Education and Research sees the need for a bigger role, which the ministry agreed to take in its response to the National Audit Office.”

What can be done? The advice of the National Audit Office is to agree on a management system for the area of Estonian language training for adults and the responsibility of the respective state agencies. Money and training must be aimed where they are needed the most, i.e. it is necessary to ascertain the levels and regions where there is a shortage of teachers, and to offer in-service training, methodological help or new teachers accordingly. The risk of duplication and inefficient use of funds exists for as long as nobody asks these questions and there is no such overview.

The Minister of Education and Research, the Minister of Culture, the Minister of Social Affairs, the Minister of the Interior, the Minister of the Population and the Minister of Justice mostly agreed with the conclusions and recommendations made in the audit, and highlighted

and explained the activities of their area of government in the organisation of Estonian language training for adults.

The Minister of Education and Research, whose duties include planning the language policy and preparing the relevant draft legislation, emphasised the following in its response to the National Audit Office: “We suggest discussing teaching Estonian as a second language to adults in the cabinet. The MER has experience in planning and implementation of comprehensive programmes which consider the needs of different target groups and strategic goals, and are prepared to take the leading role with the relevant funds.”

Background:

Preservation of the Estonian language is one of the fundamental values emphasised in the preamble to the Constitution of the Republic of Estonia. Five ministries organise Estonian language training for adults via several national development plans and 32 activities. Pursuant to the Government of the Republic Act, the broader planning of the language policy and the preparation of the respective draft legislation is a function of the Ministry of Education and Research. For example, the specific activities in the area of responsibility of this ministry are also compensation of language training expenses for people who pass Estonian language proficiency exams, the organisation of proficiency exams, support of language training for educational workers in Ida-Viru County, and supervision.

According to the Statutes, other ministries also organise language training for various target groups. The Ministry of Culture makes it possible for poorly integrated permanent residents and new immigrants to learn the language. Language training is offered to beneficiaries of international protection via the Ministry of Social Affairs, and to the unemployed and people who are at risk of losing their jobs or need Estonian language training to promote their professional development via the Unemployment Insurance Fund. The Ministry of the Interior organises language training at the beginner level within the scope of the adaptation programme for new immigrants and allows foreigners who have lived in Estonia for more than five years to sign language training contracts via the Estonian Academy of Security Sciences in order to apply for Estonian citizenship. The Ministry of Justice organises language training for detainees.

The National Audit Office regarded Estonian language courses, training, language immersion and other activities for people aged 18 and over, the goal of which is to improve Estonian language skills but which are not in the curriculum of an educational institution or offered as an elective subject in a curriculum, as language training for adults.

Please note! The direct focus of the audit of the National Audit Office was not on assessing the outcomes, methods or impact of language training (see more in the chapter “Characteristics of audit”), which have been covered by studies commissioned by various ministries over the years.

Cost of the activities of Estonian language training by area of government, incl. the costs of the Estonian Unemployment Insurance Fund, from 2014-2018 and forecast for 2019 (euros)

Area of government	2014-2018	Average from 2014-2018	2019*
Ministry of Education and Research	4,157,809	831,562	908,400**
Ministry of Social Affairs	9,777,839	1,955,568	8,560,080***
Ministry of Culture	4,746,806	949,361	2,782,293
Ministry of the Interior	1,329,791	265,958	1,991,845

Ministry of Justice	1,063,226	212,645	282,087
TOTAL	21,075,471	4,215,094	14,524,705

* Forecast costs.

** The costs of funding the activity of Open Call for Proposals for Local Authorities (Language Training Activities for More Successful Coping on the Labour Market), which are not known due to the format of the open call for proposals.

*** The Estonian language training budget of the Estonian Unemployment Insurance Fund recognised among the costs of the Ministry of Social Affairs is a part of the labour market training budget, the need for which is forecast and budgeted as a whole. The budget of labour market services of the Unemployment Insurance Fund is approved according to the need for services, i.e. according to which services clients need and at which volume, considering the profile of the clients on the one side and the situation on the labour market on the other side.

Source: National Audit Office on the basis of the data of the ministries and the Estonian Unemployment Insurance Fund as at 20 May 2019

The activities that required the most money from 2014-2018 were language training for the registered unemployed (the Ministry of Social Affairs area of government), integration training and activities of Estonian Language Houses (the Ministry of Culture area of government), compensation of Estonian language training costs to persons who passed Estonian language proficiency exams, the establishment of the e-learning environments Keeleklikk and Keeletee, the preparation and organisation of proficiency exams (the Ministry of Education and Research area of government) and language training for new immigrants and people applying for Estonian citizenship (the Ministry of the Interior area of government). The extensive study of Tallinn University and the CentAR Centre for Applied Research “Estonian Language Training for Adults with Other Native Languages as Part of Estonian Integration and Employment Policy: Quality, Impact and Organisation” was prepared in 2018 and can be found here: <https://centar.ee/case-studies/eesti-keelest-erineva-emakeelega-taiskasvanute-eesti-keele-ope-loimumis-ja-toohoivepoliitikas-kvaliteet-moju-ja-korraldus/>.

Source: Ministry of Culture and Ministry of Education and Research

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