

Follow-up audit on the accounting, preservation and mediation of museum collections

Has the situation in the museums improved?

Report of the National Audit Office to the Riigikogu, Tallinn, 22 August 2011

Summary of audit results

The National Audit Office audited whether after the audit “Accounting, preservation and mediation of museum collections” published in 2005 the situation in the administration, preservation conditions and display of museum collections has improved.

The task of museums is to preserve and present Estonian cultural heritage. For this purpose museums in the governing area of the Ministry of Culture stored 4.1 million museum items in 2010.

From 2005 to 2011 museums have been allocated 70,480,743 euros (1.1. billion kroons) for investments from the state budget. The amount forms 79% of all the allocations for investments from the budget of the governing area of the Ministry of Culture. Most of the funds have been invested in individual major objects. The amount planned for operating expenses of museums in 2011 is 13,079,327 euros, which forms 34% of all the operating expenses in the governing area of the Ministry of Culture.

The National Audit Office is of the opinion that compared to 2005 the activity of museums has become more visitor-centred and researcher-friendly. However, similarly to that before there is no adequate overview of collections, there is lack of space and collections are preserved in unsuitable conditions. The Ministry of Culture has not implemented several of the recommendations made by the National Audit Office and has, *inter alia*, not developed important strategic and legal documents.

There is still no national collection policy. Thus, prerequisites have not been provided for thorough and coordinated collection of objects of cultural value. The guidelines of the Ministry of Culture for drawing up documents about the collection policy of museums have not been completed until today. However, one-half of the audited museums have still developed a relevant document in some form, but a lot of these are too superficial.

The collections increase fast. Compared to 2005 the collections of audited museums have grown in total by 16.5% (on average by 3.3% a year). From 2005 to 2010 the increase in the museum collections remained below the international common limit of 2% in 59% of the museums.

The organisation of collections is still limited. According to the Museums Act museum items may be excluded from a collection only if the museum item has been damaged, destroyed, lost, handed over to another museum or returned to the owner. But if earlier the collection was not thought through or justified and therefore a museum has museum items that could be excluded from collections, according to the Museums Act this is not possible.

Lack of space still continues to be a major problem for museums. Therefore, museum items are stored in unsuitable conditions: in workrooms, cellars, attics or sheds. The preservation conditions are good or satisfactory in approximately one-half of the museums. Although in recent years a lot of investments have been made in museums, the storage facilities have not been a priority.

An overview of the collections is improving, but parts of the collections have not been properly recorded or covered with stocktaking. If by the end of 2004 audited museums had managed to

provide a research description of 68.5% of their collections, then by 2010 84.2% of the collections had been described. However, museums also have such materials that have not even passed initial registration. Less than one-half of the museums have managed to perform required stocktaking in their collections. No stocktaking has been carried out in the case of a total of 8% of museum items (including 27% of museum items in county museums and 3% in other national museums).

To obtain a better overview of and introduce museum collections, the new museum information system (MuIS) needs to be expanded. The MuIS contains entries about approximately 56% of the collections of museums in the governing area of the Ministry of Culture. The MuIS contains mostly only a minimum part of data about museum items, which is not sufficient in order to introduce museum collections to the public. No legal bases have been provided for using the MuIS.

Museums are more engaged in the introduction of museum collections. Although visiting museums in 2010 fell sharply, the number of visitors has generally been on an increase. As an important change, an opportunity has been created for examining museum collections in the Internet, but substantial development is hindered by the fact that a large quantity of collections has not been entered in the MuIS yet and most of the museums have managed to digitise less than 10% of their collections. The operating expenses of museums have decreased and their own revenue has increased by more than twice.

Major recommendations of the National Audit Office to the Minister of Culture:

- Develop and adopt a national collection policy. Ensure that each museum would develop a written collection policy that would include an overview of the current museum collection in terms of subcollections, an analysis of the growth possibilities and preservation conditions, clear selection criteria in supplementing collections and consideration of activities of other related museums.
- Initiate amendment of the Museums Act so that it would be possible for the museums, on the basis of a developed collection policy and through clear and regulated procedures, to also exclude from the museum collection such museum items that have no cultural value or are not in compliance with the collection policy.
- Draw up an action plan in order to ensure stocktaking in museum collections in accordance with the procedure for registration of museum items and the general rules for state accounting and ensure scientific description of museum items within reasonable time.
- Review the document “Estonian museums in the 21st century. Guidelines for development through 2006–2015”, transform it into a development plan serving as a basis for the actual work and bring it into conformity with Government of the Republic Regulation No. 302 of 13 December 2005 titled “Types of strategic development plans and procedure for the preparation, supplementation, implementation, evaluation and reporting thereof”.

Reply of the Minister of Culture: The Ministry of Culture agreed to several findings and remarks of the National Audit Office, but brought attention to the fact that the period under review also included economic depression, which brought along a reduction in the state budget support and investments several years running. This resulted in cutting the costs of state authorities that expressed itself in reducing the staff, salary cutbacks, holidays without pay, etc., due to which the result initially planned cannot be expected from the period under review. In its conclusions the National Audit Office has not paid any attention to economic recession or changes resulting therefrom.

Several of the recommendations made by the National Audit Office as a result of the audit of 2005 are being implemented. At the same time the ministry finds that although actual life does not always comply with the provisions of legal acts, this still does not disturb the functioning of the field.

Comment by the National Audit Office: The National Audit Office brings attention to the fact that

the economic crisis did not cover the whole audited period (2005–2010) and several shortcomings pointed out in the report are not related to allocations from the state budget or investments and thus also to the economic situation at the moment. Moreover, thanks to the EU support in the audited years the total amounts of investments as a whole increased significantly (reduction only in 2008). The total amount allocated for operating expenses of the museums decreased considerably in 2009, but it is already recovering to the pre-crisis level. This is, however, mainly due to an increase in management costs.

The revenue of museums has doubled in the period under review. Thus, although in 2009 and 2010 the increase in performance indicators retarded or was on the temporary decline, the impact of the economic crisis as a whole is not as apparent as presented by the Ministry of Culture.

The National Audit Office is of the opinion that a lot of tasks that the Ministry of Culture has promised to become engaged in should already have been performed (e.g. drawing up a national collection policy, amendment of the Museums Act in order to make it possible to organise collections, amendment of the “Procedure for registration and preservation of museum items” in order to legitimise the MuS). The National Audit Office is extremely worried that activities in the field do not always take place according to legal acts or that obsolete legal acts are not amended and thus it is not considered necessary to adhere to the principles of a state based on the rule of law.

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