

# Policy making and values

Inese Šūpule

## IN SHORT

- Many current challenges, such as overcoming the Covid-19 pandemic, migration, or climate change, require political action that goes beyond the national level and requires broad public legitimacy.
- If the values that underpin the policy-making process do not match the values and attitudes that prevail in society, the rules are not followed, or people express their dissatisfaction in protest.
- On highly polarizing issues, when political decisions involve choosing in favour of one side or another, it is almost impossible for policymakers to base their decisions on the conflicting attitudes and values of the entire population.
- In a democratic society, the key to this challenge is transparency and openness in the decision-making process.
- The different dimensions of values and attitudes that characterize a particular society should be considered when explaining the decisions made, facts and political decisions are not value neutral.
- Policy makers and the media need to be careful about confronting different identity groups, as this exacerbates conflicts and makes decision-making more difficult. In the policy-making process, one way to avoid conflict and confrontation between two groups is to find another, unifying identity or unifying value that underpins the political message. In Latvia, one of the unifying values of society is the family and family relationships as a value.



## Policy Brief

This summary of findings and recommendations is intended for policy and decision makers and is based on the findings of the study «Value (trans)formation in uncertain times: social cohesion and neoliberal ethos in Latvia». The conclusions are based on knowledge accumulated by the social sciences about the importance and influence of the dominant values, attitudes, and identities in society on political processes. The prepared document provides recommendations on how to promote a more united and cohesive society in Latvia and the EU, based on common values and considering the turmoil and uncertainty that escalated during the Covid-19 pandemic.

It is important to realize that many of today's challenges, such as overcoming the Covid-19 pandemic, migration, or climate change, require political action that goes beyond the national level and requires broad public legitimacy. At the same time, there are trends in Europe aimed at strengthening the role of national sovereignty, such as Brexit, and polarization between different social groups, such as supporters and opponents of vaccination. Therefore, all levels of analysis indicated have been considered in the preparation of the recommendations: global, national and among different groups.

### The concept of values, personal and identity values, value change

Among value researchers, values are associated with broad goals that an individual considers important and that determine his or her attitudes and behaviours. Values are formed in an individual's childhood, adolescence, and youth, growing up in a certain family and community, under the influence of parents, friends, and the public. The change of values is generally slow, and therefore researchers mostly observe value change between generations. A distinction is made between personal or individual values and values related to social belonging or social identity. Researchers around the world have shown that both individuals' personal values and the values associated with social belonging or identity influence their political behaviour and choices.

## Policy making and values

The policy-making process should ideally take into account not only the analysis of objective needs and available resources, but also the aspirations of citizens and their understanding of what is important to them in a given issue. If the values that underpin the policy-making process do not match the values and attitudes that prevail in society, the rules are not followed, or people express their dissatisfaction in protest. A particularly difficult situation arises in matters where society is highly polarized and political decisions involve choosing in favour of one side or another without compromise. It must be borne in mind that it is almost impossible for policymakers to base their decisions on the conflicting attitudes and values of the entire population.

In a democratic society, the key to this challenge is **transparency and openness in the decision-making process**, openly assessing all the risks and strategies for mitigating choice, as well as the pros and cons of alternative decisions. Decision-making must be closely linked to the **discussion of different decision options and the explanation of choices to the public**.

When explaining the decisions made, the different dimensions of values and attitudes that are specific to a particular society must be taken into account. Historically, very important dimensions of values in Latvia are ethnicity, the Latvian language, Latvia as a nation state, but they coexist with the socio-economic interests of different groups, family and work values, the value of individual self-determination, as well as the values of self-expression and self-realization. Value orientation that emphasizes self-expression and quality of life over economic and physical security is called «post-materialist values», and first who coined this term was R. Inglehart. Their growth in Western European countries has an impact on the views of the Latvian population and other dimensions of values, too.

This means that those involved in the policy-making process must accept and understand that **the facts on which decisions are based are interpreted by different groups, and that different interpretations of the facts may be**

**based on different sets of values.** Different value priorities lead citizens to have more faith in one pool of facts, as in a complex society any pool of facts will tend to be incomplete (simply not including all available information) and already linked to value-based choices. Recognizing that **fact-finding is not value-neutral**, like decisions made, can help policymakers explain these decisions to different groups.

Studies of values and social identity in Latvia and around the world show that identification with a social group is related to both an individual's personal values and the need to belong to a group, as it provides an opportunity to separate oneself from others and to establish a certain self-confidence. At the same time, identification with a certain social group or attitudes, is associated with the division of in-group and outgroup, us and them. It should be considered that different values and affiliations are manifested in different contexts: role in the family (mother, father, child, etc.), nationality, gender, profession, place of work, territorial affiliation (for example, a resident of metropolis or resident of small village), also vaccinated and non-vaccinated. They can all be important aspects of social identity, and the media and policy

makers **need to be careful about confronting different identity groups**, as this exacerbates conflicts and makes decision-making more difficult. In the policy-making process, one way to avoid conflict and confrontation between two groups is **to find another, unifying identity or unifying value that underpins the political message**. In Latvia, one of the unifying values of society is the family and family relationships as a value. Another approach to finding political solutions to a conflict of values is to reduce the emphasis on argumentation strategies related to the issue of values or identities, but to focus on the practical aspects of the solution and their implementation.

At the level of policy makers, it is important **to be aware of one's own value priorities and to understand the values that underpin the position of opponents**. This could be done by analysing the attitudes of particular social groups in surveys or in-depth interviews and focus group discussions.

Regarding the value aspect, the main task of policy makers is **to identify the values that underpin certain positions and arguments**. This will allow for a better implementation of the policymaking, preparation process, decision-making, and communication to the public.

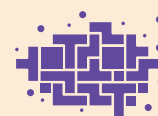
## About the project

The document is prepared in the project «Value (trans)formation in uncertain times: social cohesion and neoliberal ethos in Latvia» (Nr. lzp-2020/2-0068).

**Coordinated by:** Institute of Philosophy and Sociology University of Latvia

**Project director:** Dr. Inese Šūpule

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## Contact information

**E-mail:** inese.supule@lu.lv

**Address:** Kalpaka bulvāris 4  
Rīga, LV-1050, Latvija  
<https://fsi.lu.lv>

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UNIVERSITY OF LATVIA  
**INSTITUTE OF  
PHILOSOPHY  
AND SOCIOLOGY**