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LEGAL INFORMATION CENTRE FOR HUMAN RIGHTS
ЦЕНТР ИНФОРМАЦИИ ПО ПРАВАМ ЧЕЛОВЕКА

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STATEMENT

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Minorities' Education and Minorities' Participation in Decision Making: the case of Estonia

Dear Chair! Dear participants!

1. The territory of contemporary Estonia became a part of the Russian Empire in early 1700s. Article 12 of the Estonian Constitution of 1920 guaranteed the right to mother tongue education. In 1923 there were also a dozen of Russian upper secondary schools and four of them were funded by the Estonian state. In the years of Soviet power, there were considerable changes in Estonian school education, which developed as an inalienable part of all-Union schooling system, but there were opportunities to get education both in Estonian and Russian languages of instruction up to university level.

In 1989 Russian-speakers made up about 40% of the population but most of them were disenfranchised and hence failed to elect a single Russophone representative to the first parliament elected after regaining independence (1992-1995). This parliament adopted several important laws, including Basic Schools and Upper Secondary Schools Act (1993) which envisaged transition to Estonian-language training in Russian upper secondary schools (last three school classes) from 2000 (however, the deadline was postponed several times).

Since that time the right to education* on minority language (primarily in Russian) remains the constant theme for political, public, and legal debates.

2. In September 2007, Estonia launched transition to instruction on the level of upper secondary school (10 - 12 forms) predominantly in Estonian (Reform 2007). Reform was carried out by reference to respective provisions of the former Basic School and Upper Secondary School Act. After adopting the law in 1993, transition of "other language" upper secondary schools to Estonian was planned for academic year 2000 / 2001. In 1997 Parliament amended the law to put back the transition to academic year 2007 - 2008. Decision that transition to Estonian will affect 60 % of instruction was executed in 2000 as an amendment to Basic School and Upper Secondary School Act. In 2007, against the background of all too evident unpreparedness to transition, the Government made a decision that Russian-speaking minority school reform would be gradual, and that in the first place transferred to Estonian would be subjects like the Estonian language and literature, civics, history, geography and music. Completion of transition was to be effected in 2011: it was then that all schools would be obliged to fulfil the 60 % requirement.

Remarkably, no methodic, pedagogical or linguistic grounds were presented, and this decision remain pure political. The new Basic School and Upper Secondary School Act, in force as of 1 September 2010, did not bring anything radically new to what concerns the reform of Russian school. This time about 10 parliamentarians were of minority origin, and no one of them supported the Law.

3. By the opinion of representatives of minorities, as well as Estonian methodologists and teachers, the reform is not methodically prepared, its goals are not obvious, the stages and criteria for their evaluation are not justified, the qualitative monitoring of the reform is not even planned, and the resources are not calculated. Already from this it is clear that it cannot be successful, if only because no one understands what are the criteria for this very success. It is obvious that in the field of minority education in Estonia, purely political decisions dominate, and the opinions of minorities themselves or their representatives are consistently ignored.

4. Meanwhile, it was in Estonia that there was an interesting experience of involving minorities, if not in decision-making, then at least in discussing and justifying decisions. In July 1993, President Lennart Meri convened a special Advisory body, the Round table of national minorities on 10 July 1993 (hereafter – RT). Active part in the drafting of the statute of the RT took the CSCE Mission to Estonia. According to the Statute, RT is a standing conference of representatives of ethnic minorities and stateless persons residing in Estonia and of political parties. Its goal is to promote stability, dialogue and mutual understanding between different population groups. The RT initially was comprised of three sides: 1) 5 members of Estonian Parliament; 2) 5 members of the Representative Assembly, which brings together the Russian-speaking population; and 3) 5 representatives of the Union of National minorities. At the beginning the CSCE Mission was invited to participate at the RT sessions as an observer.

In the Round table sessions' was attended invited representatives of the Executive power, up to the Prime Minister. In some cases, the authorities seriously listened to the views of minorities, which contributed to the rejection of radical solutions and helped to solve potential conflict situations at an early stage. Minority education was also discussed at the Round table.

5. Nowadays, unfortunately, this promising mechanism was forgotten. After second President of Estonia, Mr Rüütel (2001 – 2006) the RT did not convene. Currently, there are all sorts of Advisory commissions under the ministries (the Ministry of culture, first of all), but their competence and influence cannot be compared with the presidential Round table. The participation of minority representatives in political parties cannot compensate for the lack of a special forum for dialogue, for obvious reasons. Minority problems, and minority education in particular, is not a priority for any mainstream Party.

Moreover, the majority of Estonian parties and their voters are characterized by the desire to ensure the preservation of the Estonian language, and the education of minorities in this context seems to be rather a hindrance. The members of minorities themselves are isolated from each other in different parties and act on the basis of party discipline. And in coalition negotiations, it is minority issues, including education, that are most easily sacrificed.

6. The example of Estonia clearly shows that the issues of minority education should be solved with the direct participation of minority representatives, and, what is extremely important – in the framework of an independent non-party forum. Otherwise, such vital problems will simply be hostages of the political process and political bargaining.

Thank you for attention.