

OSCE Human Dimension Implementation Meeting 2017

Statement of the Latvian delegation

WS 10: Tolerance and non-discrimination I, including Rights of persons belonging to national minorities, Roma and Sinti issues, Preventing aggressive nationalism, racism and chauvinism

Mr Moderator,

Latvia fully aligns herself with the EU statement and would like to make some remarks in national capacity and to share with you some examples of good practices and measures taken by the Latvian Government to promote rights of persons belonging to national minorities.

Latvia's integration policy ensures protection of rights of persons belonging to national minorities and enjoyment of their culture, language and traditions. These rights are not only written in the constitution, but also vividly practiced in the real life.

All Latvia's permanent residents are guaranteed the right to establish their national societies, unions and associations. The State has a duty to facilitate their activities and to provide financial support.

One of the tasks included in the Guidelines on the Development of Education in Latvia for the years 2014-2020 is promotion of multilingual personality both, by learning foreign languages, native language and the State language. Latvia has the second highest multilingualism indicator in the EU.

Bilingual education is an integral part of the Latvian education system, which aims to acquire both the Latvian and minority language skills. It has been consequent and long-term goal of Latvian government.

The Government provides state-funded national minority education programmes in seven minority languages: Russian, Polish, Belarusian, Ukrainian, Estonian, Lithuanian, and Hebrew. In total there are 109 educational institutions that implement minority educational programs (among them, 99 schools implement education programs in Russian and bilingually, 4 – in Polish and bilingually, 1 – in Ukrainian and bilingually, 2 – in Hebrew, 1 – in Latvian and Lithuanian, and 1 – in Latvian and Estonian) and 75 schools that have both Latvian and minority language programmes.

The Ministry of Education and Science has drawn up five model bilingual education curricula for primary schools that differ from each other in terms of the proportion of classes to be taught in the minority language and Latvian or bilingual. National minority schools can opt for one of these curricula or prepare their own. Minority secondary schools have been given 40% of the total number of subjects in the national minority language and free choice is given to the minority schools in determining the subjects which should be taught in the official state language.

Recently the Government of Latvia has made amendments to the rules on the content and procedure of exams, providing that the centralized exams for the 9th and 12th

grade schoolchildren will be held in Latvian. The aim of these amendments is to provide equal opportunities for graduates to continue their studies at professional and higher education institutions where the language of study is Latvian and equal opportunities when entering the labour market.

The amendments ensure an opportunity to develop high-level skills of state language, while maintaining full opportunities to study native language and culture.

There is a clear tendency of growing preference among the graduates of the schools with state financed national minority education to voluntarily choose Latvian language as a language of examination – this number has grown from 60% in 2011 to approximately 85% last year. It has to be noted that the above-mentioned amendments have been supported by the principals of the schools with minority education programmes, suggesting to determine a reasonable transition period for elementary school graduates. The amendments will come into force in academic year 2017/2018 with a transition period till 2019/2020 for current elementary school graduates.

The previous regulation granted a privileged status of the Russian language and was discriminatory regarding the Estonians, Jews, Ukrainians, Poles, and Lithuanians, which were not given the opportunity to respond in their minority language during the centralized exams.

About 60 000 pupils are enrolled in national minority education programmes, accounting for 26% of the total number of students.

Two of the minority schools are ranked among the five best in the country.

The quality of education is constantly monitored by the Ministry of Education and Science. Statistical data clearly shows that the examination results in minority schools do not differ substantially from the results observed in previous years. Examination results in some subjects are even better than before.

As a result of successful integration policy, in recent years the Latvian language proficiency among persons belonging to national minorities has improved considerably, especially among the youth. According to the recent study, more than 94% of persons belonging to national minorities can communicate in Latvian.

The state support for education in minority languages in Latvia is unique and exceeds that of many other European countries. Latvia's approach and long-term experience in minority education and integration is used by the HCNM as best practice to be introduced in other OSCE countries.

The Government of Latvia has constantly been exerting efforts to promote the dialogue with representatives of national minorities. Consultative bodies are a common practice of local governments. Five advisory councils on national minority issues are currently functioning at the national level – one is the President's Advisory Council on National Minorities, three different committees work under the Ministry of Culture: Advisory Committee of Representatives from Minority Non-governmental Organisations, Advisory Council for Implementation of Roma Integration Policy and Advisory Council for the Integration of Third-country Nationals.

The Ministry of Education and Science has established the Consultative Council on issues of national minority education. This institution helps to maintain a dialogue between the Ministry of Education and Science, students and teachers of national minority schools, parents' organizations and NGO's. Since 2012, the Head of Roma Community in Latvia is a member of the Advisory Council on Minorities Education under the Ministry of Education and Science.

With regards to the issue of Roma integration, Latvia is actively implementing the EU co-founded "Rights, Equality and Citizenship Programme" for the years 2014-2020.

The programme consists of a row of projects. During the years 2016-2017 first phase of the project "Latvian Roma platform I – Dialog, cooperation and involvement" was taking place. Main goal of the project was to facilitate cooperation, consultation and dialogue between Roma civil society, governmental and municipality institutions' representatives and social partners in order to ensure effective involvement of all relevant stakeholders and provide better coordination of the development and implementation of the set of policy measures on Roma integration at the national, regional and local level.

The achieved objectives are cooperation and dialog between representatives of municipalities and government sector and Roma people, knowledge about the access to available financial resources from EU structure funds, mutual learning and exchange of best practices on Roma integration in key areas at the local and regional level, awareness of representatives of local authorities, municipalities and governmental sectors about Roma culture and history, especially about the Roma genocide during the World War II, participation and effective involvement of the representatives of Roma community, including Roma youth and women as well as strengthening capacity and skills of Roma civil society representatives.

In total more than 400 participants were involved in the project activities, including 260 state and municipal authorities, non-Roma NGO's, as well as 150 Roma representatives from 23 Latvian cities.

The second phase of the project was approved by the Cabinet of Ministers in June 13, 2017 and will be introduced during the years 2017 – 2018. A special emphasis is placed on establishing and supporting Roma mediators, who's role will be to promote better dialogue between Roma families and local government institutions (schools, social services, the council administration), as well as the State Employment Agency. Training of mediators will be available in five Latvian municipalities.

We would like to point out that the above mentioned projects have been developed based on the recommendations of Roma activists and representatives.

Let me conclude by reassuring that national minorities and their culture is an integral and important component of Latvia's society and cultural space and we are glad to learn that our experience in society integration and bilingual education can be used in other countries in the OSCE region.

Thank you for your attention!