

OSCE Human Dimension Implementation Meeting

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Language policy in Latvia

Working session 11: Rights of persons belonging to national minorities

The Latvian Constitution and laws guarantee and protect the rights of persons belonging to national minorities to preserve and develop their language and their ethnic and cultural identity.

State Language Law is aimed at preservation, protection and development of the Latvian language, but at the same time provides for the integration of national minorities in the society of Latvia by observing their rights to use their native or any other language.

Latvia continues to develop and finance its liberal education model providing state-funded education in seven minority languages: Russian, Polish, Hebrew, Belarusian, Ukrainian, Estonian, Lithuanian. Currently (academic year 2013/2014) state finances 99 schools with instruction in Russian, and 65 bilingual (Latvian and minority language programmes) schools. Every school is entitled to determine by itself which subjects are taught in Latvian, but the total should be 60% of all subjects.

On 18 February 2012 a referendum was held in Latvia where a large majority of voters rejected constitutional amendments that would make Russian the second state language.

The referendum prompted a high turnout: 71.1% of Latvia's eligible voters participated in the referendum. Results were clear: only 17 % of eligible voters voted in favor of adopting Russian as the second state language. No substantive complaints about the conduct of referendum were received.

As regards Russia's claim that part of population (non-citizens) was not allowed to vote in referendum - the Latvian Government's position is that the right to vote is an integral part of citizenship. Non-citizens are ensured easy access to naturalization and citizenship.

The referendum reaffirmed that sensitive issues can be addressed through democratic means, and that work will continue towards developing an open and consolidated society on the basis of European democratic values and Latvian as the only state language.