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National minorities in Estonia: risk of poverty and social marginalisation

*Statement by the Legal Information Centre for Human Rights (LICHHR), Estonia
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Dear Chair, Excellences, Dear participants,

I am a representative of the Legal Information Centre for Human Rights, an Estonian NGO founded in 1994. Our representatives participated in these events more than once.

In Estonia, national and ethnic minorities make up about 30% of all population and almost all of them are ethnic Russians or other Russian-speakers. Regretfully, in our country minorities face major risks of poverty and social marginalisation as compared to majority members.

According to Statistics Estonia, there are noticeable differences in the annual incomes of ethnic Estonians and non-Estonians. For instance, in 2012, the difference in average annual income among ethnic Estonians and minorities was about 20%.

In Estonia, there are more minorities among the poor as compared with ethnic Estonians. In 2012 at-risk-of-poverty rate of ethnic minorities was noticeably higher (30%) than that for ethnic majority (23%). The absolute poverty threshold of ethnic non-Estonians was 16% as compared with 13% of ethnic Estonians. (These figures concern rates before social transfers excluding pensions).

Statistical Office of Estonia also measure a material deprivation rate. It does it mind the calculation of the share of persons, who cannot afford at least three items of the nine. The items of the list are: 1) to pay rent or utility bills, 2) keep home adequately warm, 3) face unexpected expenses, 4) eat meat, fish or a protein equivalent every second day, 5) a weeklong holiday away from home, 6) a car, 7) a washing machine, 8) a colour TV or 9) a telephone. In 2013, this rate was 16% for ethnic Estonians and 29% for ethnic minorities.

Minorities seem to be overrepresented among homeless people. The study of homeless people in the capital city of Tallinn conducted in September-December 2011 involved 926 interviewees and 4/6 of them were Russian-speakers (the same year minorities made up less than half of all capital inhabitants).

Representatives of minority groups are in majority in the Estonian prison population. According to the 2013 report of the Ministry of Justice, in the past ten years minorities made up slightly less than 60% of all prisoners.

In the Crime and Security Survey, conducted by Statistics Estonia at the end of 2008, 25% of ethnic Estonians and 29% of minorities were victims of crimes (except consumer fraud) within the last 12 months.

Russian-speakers are more likely to be trafficked. Many of them reside in the economically depressed North-Eastern part of the country. The 2006 study conducted by the Estonian Open Society Institute showed that Russian-speaking women suffered two times bigger pressure from recruiters than Estonian women. Furthermore, according to various experts 70-85% of Estonian prostitutes are of Russian or other minority origin. Minorities are also much more vulnerable in terms of spread of drug abuse and HIV/AIDS.

In recent years, the unemployment rate among minorities has been almost two times higher than among ethnic Estonians. Poor proficiency in the Estonian language is an important explanation of this phenomenon. However, discrimination (including structural discrimination) may be another major factor behind the inequality in the labour market. The researchers of the Institute of International and Social Studies of the Tallinn University have made important analysis, based on the results of the Estonian Labour Force Studies for 2000-2010. The researchers concluded that it is much *less* likely for minorities to work in the upper levels of the professions when compared to majority members, even with the same human capital. In corroboration, it should note that according to the 2011 national census minorities (aged 10 and older) there were more representatives of with tertiary education (34%) than ethnic Estonians (28%).

Dear Chair, Dear participants,

A considerable trend of social marginalisation of Russians and other Russian-speaking minorities who actually belong to well-educated social strata deserves special attention and appropriate action on the national level.

Thank you for your attention.