



Estonian Human Rights Report 2012

Summary

This Estonian human rights report by the Estonian Institute of Human Rights has been compiled for the purpose of mapping important problems in the area of human rights in Estonia. The report shows that there are no serious problems related to human rights here, and Estonia is a country that respects human rights. However, this does not mean that we should not focus on the subject of human rights in Estonia. The protection of human rights should be improved in many areas and hopefully the publication of this report will have a positive impact on that.

The survey covered in the report shows that public awareness of human rights is relatively low. A worryingly large number of respondents (30%) were unable to answer the question of what human rights are – they associate nothing with the term “human rights”. The majority of people who left that question unanswered were over 50 years old. The best known human right was the right to life (92%), the right to education (87%) and the right to equality before the law (86%). Estonians are considerably more aware of human rights than non-Estonians.

Compared to some other countries, public awareness of human rights is not lower in Estonia, but the situation is definitely not satisfactory. The low level of awareness indicates that people are often unable to detect a violation of their rights and therefore cannot stand for their rights. Furthermore, people are unable to distinguish violations of human rights among other problems in the society and therefore cannot give answers that would allow us to assess the human rights situation in Estonia.

There are several reasons for the low level of awareness. People primarily perceive problems that concern them more acutely. These include social and economic problems deriving from insufficient income and standard of living. Non-Estonians experience additional problems arising from poor knowledge of the official language. At the same time, the coverage of human rights in Estonian media is very limited and therefore the level of awareness of human rights has remained low starting from what these rights are to how to stand for one’s rights. People’s rights should also be introduced by officials, but they often lack training in the area of human rights. Estonian media should therefore pay considerably more attention to human rights than until now and the study of human rights should be enhanced in general education schools, higher education institutions and professional training courses.

The majority of the population of Estonia is of the opinion that there are no human rights violations in Estonia. 54% of the Estonian population find that everything is in order in the area of human rights, while 29% think that this is not the case and 17% are unable to answer the question. These figures do not significantly differ from those of other countries. The replies to additional questions unfortunately showed that a large number of those who find that not everything is in order in the area of human rights in Estonia do not actually know what human rights are and consider their economic hardship as a violation of human rights (23% of the respondents). Compared to Estonian-speakers, satisfaction with the human rights situation is lower among the non-Estonian-speaking population (40% and 61%, respectively). This is due to the fact that a number of the non-Estonian-speakers consider the Estonian language skill requirement and the transition of upper-secondary schools to 60% Estonian language based studies as violations of human rights. This does not generally constitute a violation of human rights – rather, the insufficient proficiency in the official language may cause a feeling of exclusion.

The main problems related to human rights highlighted by the residents of Estonia include the issue of women’s rights and the salary gap (8%) and inequality (8%). A relatively small part of the population sees problems in the area of freedom of speech (5%), compliance with the law and unjust punishments (5%), as well as discrimination at the workplace (5%), the lack of citizenship and the absence of the possibility to participate in elections (5%), children’s rights (3%), age-related discrimination (3%) and



the poor treatment of people with disabilities (2%). Several human rights related problems, although very serious, have been pointed out by an even smaller percentage of people or not mentioned at all, as those issues concern a relatively small group of people (e.g. people with disabilities). In order to obtain a more objective overview, the problems of human rights among specific small groups of people should perhaps be studied more thoroughly in the future.

In the experts' opinion, there are no problems in Estonia with fundamental or classic human rights. As a member of the European Union, we have established high standards of human rights. People's political rights, the right to life, democracy and freedom of speech are always ensured. Estonia also stands out positively at an international level. Since 1990s, we have joined the majority of human rights related conventions and our image among international organisations is good. However, several experts emphasised that human rights are ensured well in legal acts, but not always in practice. Those issues concern the protection of basic rights, for instance the right to fair and impartial and affordable court proceedings, the protection of people's rights in pre-trial proceedings etc.

Several experts also noted that different groups are not equally protected in the society. The most vulnerable groups of population include families with many children, the long-term unemployed, women, the elderly, particularly elderly people living in sparsely populated regions, people with disabilities, the family members (i.e. caregivers) of people with disabilities, people living in welfare institutions and same-sex couples. There is often little information about the situation of the said groups and therefore they are not reflected in surveys the target group of which is a cross-section of the population.

As the survey showed, several experts also found that the overall awareness of human rights is very low. On the one hand, people tend to over-amplify everyday issues and place many problems not belonging to this area in the context of human rights. The public is often not well informed of laws and therefore people do not know their rights and lack the skill and courage to stand for their rights. People tend to remain alone with their problems and do not know where to turn to for the protection of their rights.

There are problems with tolerance towards several groups of people, which is a sign of insufficient public awareness and education in the area of human rights. Besides poor public awareness, a lack of financial resources prevents the distribution of human rights related information. This also limits the activities of NGOs dealing with human rights and many other issues are thus given higher priority than human rights. At the same time, we have to admit that there are positive trends as well. For instance, it is very positive that all the surveyed organisations intend to continue their work in the area of human rights, as there is much work to be done and many problems to be solved.

Expert opinions do not always correspond to the public opinion, which is understandable, because experts have more information and are trained in handling human rights problems. In addition, experts can more clearly see specific problems related to public institutions, as well as the concerns and needs of various groups of people.

Experts do not agree in all the issues. The opinions of experts are sometimes influenced by the sector they represent and the group they have closer contact with. The differences are manifested between experts from public institutions and experts from NGOs, but also between experts from NGOs operating in different fields of activity. The experts' varying familiarity with individual areas of life and groups of people is also reflected in their assessments and priorities. There are also differences in whether social and economic problems can be viewed in the context of human rights or whether these form a separate set of issues.

International organisations are generally satisfied with the human rights situation in Estonia. In various areas, proposals have been made to strengthen the protection of human rights, but the proposals are



based on the principle that Estonia is a country that respects human rights. Positions expressed at an international level do not always coincide with the public opinion in Estonia or the assessments of Estonian experts, as the experience base is different. This report strives to cover the more significant assessments given to Estonia in international reports, but it cannot be excluded that more opinions can be found.

The Estonian Institute of Human Rights believes that this report will contribute to the constant analysis of the human rights situation in Estonia and allows us to enhance the protection of human rights. In addition, the institute wishes to start publishing these reports on a regular basis.