



PUBLIC OPINION SURVEY ON HUMAN RIGHTS IN ESTONIA

Survey conducted among the population aged 15-74 years

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SUMMARY OF THE SURVEY OF THE POPULATION

The Institute of Human Rights 2016 survey on human rights in Estonia is in large part similar in content and structure to a study carried out earlier, in 2012. This made it possible to perform not only synchronous analysis but also compare results to the past situation and analyze the trends that emerged. The survey encompassed the entire Estonian population and allowed the human rights-related knowledge, attitudes as well as behaviour and experience of various population groups to be characterized through a number of characteristics (age, nationality, language of communication, place of residence, education, income etc.).

1 Knowledge of human rights

The study revealed that compared to the similar study in 2012, the results were predominantly the same – people’s understanding of what human rights are or mean continues to be lower than it could be. The results confirm both that the topic is not meaningful to the respondents and that they do not see significant infringements on human rights in Estonia.

Three explanations for “human rights” are advanced with equal frequency: freedom, people’s rights in very general terms, and right to life. The topic is still unfamiliar for many – only a rather small contingent is able to elaborate on what human rights are, and around half of the respondents (49%) did not answer at all when asked for an explanation about human rights; they did not directly associate anything with the term “human rights”. Already on the last occasion (2012), the number of those who did not answer was high – 30% – but now it was higher. From this, we can conclude that the topic is not relevant to this respondent group and that significant human rights violations do not exist for them.

This year as well, the number of people who did not answer was highest among the over 60-year-olds who attended school in the Soviet era, back when human rights were not on the curriculum. Russian-speaking inhabitants as well (and residents who primarily use a language other than Estonian) included significantly more people who did not answer – 56% in the case of Russian-speaking respondents vs. 46% of Estonians. This is understandable, because there is little talk of human rights outside the Estonian-speaking communication space and what mention there is occurs in a distorted, propagandist context.

The viewers’ own assessment of their competence on the subject of human rights is quite objective and aligns with the respondents’ other answers, displaying a paucity of expertise on questions where knowledge is required for an answer. The results show that 46% consider themselves to be generally or well informed but 49% are not particularly or at all up to date with the topic; 5% did not provide an answer. Compared to the Estonians and respondents who use Estonian as their language of communication, the Russian-speaking respondents perceive their own knowledge in this field to be lower. Of the regions, we can bring out Ida-Viru county, where over 60% of the respondents consider their human rights knowledge to be poor or did not venture an answer. There are also significant differences in age groups.

The oldest age group is least abreast of the topic – 40%. Compared to the previous time, the result has not changed much.

In spite of the extremely limited knowledge, most respondents consider the amount of information on the human rights topic to be sufficient or somewhat sufficient – 62%. 24% say there is little information, including 6% who say there is very little information. 15% say they are not interested in the topic or can't answer. Compared to the previous time, the result has not changed much. In a situation where people are not completely clear on what human rights are, the finding that 62% consider it sufficient or somewhat sufficient cannot be deemed reflective of the actual situation. This finding most likely is not a reflection of inadequate knowledge but rather the fact that the human rights issue is unimportant for the respondents, due to which they are sufficiently satisfied with the current situation and in spite of their lack of knowledge are not inclined to seek additional information.

Information on human rights is obtained from several different sources. Similarly to the previous study, the main information source for the population has been the media – 64% – which is strikingly different in the case of respondents with different languages of communication both in terms of specific channels and in terms of content. The media is followed by the Internet (41%) and school and university (35%).

The main information source for both Estonians and Russian-speaking respondents in the case of both respondent groups is the media. There are no major differences in the rankings of the most important information sources. It is noteworthy that Russian-speaking inhabitants get significantly less information about human rights from school than do Estonians (25% vs. 40%), which is a significant finding that should be reviewed as well as a concern that will require improvement in the future. The Russian-speaking community also receives less information from the Internet. They also obtain information more frequently than Estonians from friends and family (32% vs. 27%).

Television is more important to Russian-speaking respondents than it is to Estonians – 19% obtain additional information about human rights from TV. The members of this respondent group are more likely than others to obtain information from the internet (40%) and some also prefer mailed brochures (15%).

A positive finding is that compared to the last study, the share of Internet and school and university has increased as a source of information on human rights. 68 and 72% of respondents in the two youngest age groups (15-29 and 20-29), respectively, and 94% of working university students specified school or university as information source. This shows that the coverage of human rights topics is currently significantly better in school and university than it was in previous years. Of the members of the 50-59 age group, 29% prefer newspapers as an information source, but television (30%) and Internet (27%) are important as well.

Whereas people preferred to obtain information about human rights above all from television, now the Internet (including Russian-language Internet) has emerged as the preferred channel, followed by television and newspapers.

Competence in the field of human rights was also defined by knowledge about various rights and freedoms. In the first question on this issue, respondents had to think of rights themselves. The second question with the same function included a list with one deliberately incorrect statement that was not actually a human right. There were key differences in how groups with different characteristics answered the first of the questions. Estonians were more

likely than the Russian-speaking respondents to associate human rights with freedom of speech and right to life. The Russian-speaking inhabitants were more likely than Estonians to consider important the right to work, social security and – similarly to the previous study – the right to protection of personal data. As a positive aspect, it can be noted that the differences between Estonian and Russian-speaking inhabitants on these matters are not noteworthy. It seems that the outlook of the Estonians and Russian-speaking inhabitants are quite similar if one leaves aside the political and linguistic topics.

Similarly to the previous study, different age groups also prioritize rights in different ways. Younger age groups – who were educated in the re-independent Republic of Estonia period – know significantly more about human rights than the average respondent. Pensioners who went to school in the Soviet period either left the question unanswered or said something that was only indirectly or narrowly connected to human rights. The youngest respondents more frequently mentioned the right to education and freedom of speech, which are also dealt with on the curriculum as well. The 20-29 age group highlights freedom and fundamental rights (the Constitution) more than other age groups. Younger people are less likely than average to consider the right to social security/holiday/pension important. The latter topics (plus free medical care) are, on the other hand, very important to the older age group. For its part, the older age group places less importance on equal gender rights, protection of personal data, right to education and privacy. People with higher education more often mention various human rights topics and there are fewer than average respondents who did not answer – 32% compared to 62% declining an answer among those with basic education. Knowledge of human rights thus depends largely on educational attainment: in the general education system, human rights are specifically covered on the upper secondary school curriculum. To sum up, we can say that there was no significant change on this topic compared to the previous study.

As to the other question, where respondents were provided with a list of human rights, it turned out that right to life – 92% – was the best-known human right. Right to work (83%) and to education (82%) were also well-known, as was right to equality before the law (86%). Yet the amount of information “static” in the answers is high due to deficient knowledge; for instance, 49% of respondents think that human rights include the right to an average income guaranteed by the state. The government has no duty to ensure an average income, of course, and this cannot be treated as a human right. This result once again shows that respondents are not capable of completely defining human rights.

For the first time, people’s attitudes were studied toward the possibility of restrictions on some human rights in order to prevent the threat of terrorism. Some forms of human rights restrictions were studied as to what specifically would be permitted if specific criteria are met. The relevant question thus gauged respondents’ competence in the human rights field. 57% of inhabitants said they would consent to some restriction of rights and 25% said they would be against it. Estonians were more likely than Russian-speaking respondents to consent to having rights restricted and they were most likely to consent to having freedom of movement and freedom of assembly restricted.

To sum up, it can be said that people often categorize topics under human rights violation that should not actually belong there, the reason being that they lack knowledge in the relevant field. Only a small part of the violations are genuinely related to human rights or fundamental rights topics. Two problems that have emerged are inequality at the workplace

and low standard of living, in regard to which some among the population are troubled by the rise in social inequality.

2 Human rights in Estonia

Estonian inhabitants are split when it comes to whether human rights are protected and respected: 68% of Estonian inhabitants feel that everything is in order when it comes to human rights in the country, while 14% feel that it is not the case. Last time (2012), the result was 54% and 29%, respectively; the situation has thus, in the opinion of the respondents, improved significantly.

The younger age groups see the human rights situation in a more positive light than do the older groups. The 20-39 age group sees the human rights situation in the most positive light; last time the 15-19 age group had the most favourable view.

It is noteworthy that the opinion of the older people has improved the most – last time, 31% of the 60-74 age group felt their human rights were being violated, but this time only 14% of the over 60 group feels that way.

There is a great difference between the opinions of the Estonian and Russian-speaking respondents: for example, 74% of Estonians feel that everything is in order in terms of human rights, and 12% find that they are being violated; while 54% of the Russian-speaking population feels there are no problems but 18% feel there are problems. The result last time was 45% vs. 36% – thus the result for the Russian-speaking inhabitants in particular has improved markedly.

The topic is still an unfamiliar or uncomfortable one for many Russian-speaking respondents – 28% of them did not answer the question. Of people with higher education, 79% believe that there are no problems with human rights in Estonia, while 57% of respondents with primary or basic education believes the same and 27% did not answer the question.

The opinion regarding whether human rights are protected also depends on the respondent's income. Respondents with a monthly income of up to 400 euros are more likely than average to feel that human rights are violated in Estonia. A similar result came out of the last study. This most likely attests to a certain dissatisfaction with the quality of life.

Looking at Estonia's different regions, we see that Ida-Viru County inhabitants have the most controversial opinions on the issue of human rights (figure 3a). 47% say that human rights are protected and 23% say they see problems. What stands out is that the situation has improved markedly in this area compared to the previous study – the adherents of both positions were an equal 37%.

It also turned out that of the respondents who do not use the Internet, fewer than the average number took a positive view – 63% – and a greater number of respondents than average did not state an opinion. During the previous study, the responses also varied based on respondent's citizenship, but this time the result did not diverge from the average.

People's opinions about human rights protections are thus significantly influenced by the language in which they habitually communicate and nationality correlated with that language, educational level (often related to Estonian proficiency) and income and to some extent, place of residence as well (in largely Russian-speaking Ida-Viru county, close to one-quarter (23%) of the respondents found that human rights were not upheld in Estonia, while

under half had a positive view (47%). On the basis of this, we can make the generalization that the main cause behind the difference might be Estonian (as a language of interaction and an acquired second language in the case of higher education) and operating in an Estonian-speaking community and media/information space.

Compared to the last study, the situation has improved markedly – most recently, 29% of inhabitants said that human rights are being violated in Estonia.

In the next question, the study examined which human rights respondents felt were violated. Aspects that were cited most often as human rights violations were aspects related to the socioeconomic situation and low standard of living as well as the issue of obtaining citizenship for non-citizens – by 14% and 12% of respondents, respectively. These were followed by dissatisfaction with lack of education in their native language and lack of information in languages other than Estonian as well as discrimination at the workplace. In fact these topics are not directly tied to human rights or human rights violations.

The opinions of Estonians and Russian-speaking respondents proved quite different from those from the last study. Estonians most frequently brought out problems related to low standard of living (17%) followed by government's failure to meet its obligations (7%) and gender and age-related inequality (6%).

The Russian-speaking population continues to mention the problem of citizenship (29%) and linguistic discrimination against non-Estonians, as it is not possible to acquire an education in another language or use another language for conducting business (15%). It is possible that their opinions are influenced by a misconception disseminated by the Russian Federation – that members of this social group have the right to Estonian citizenship even if they do not meet the requirements (the Estonian state has allegedly deprived or "stripped" them of citizenship) as well as by the personal inability to receive Estonian citizenship due to low language proficiency.

These topics are erroneously considered a violation of human rights and the result is similar to the previous study.

To sum up, only about one-fifth of the problems mentioned by people can be categorized under human rights topics. The rest of the responses are not directly related to the human rights topic.

It turned out that in addition to criticism about failure of the state to provide equal treatment or to meet obligations, some of the respondents also brought out aspects related to relationships between people. For example, racial and age-related discrimination or disparagement is encountered specifically in people's own communication in everyday situations as well as in Internet comment sections. The same holds true for disparagement or exclusion for ethnic reasons. In this case, the report does not distinguish between unequal treatment accorded by the state and equal treatment among individuals; the responses pertain to both of these fields.

In the opinion of 6% of inhabitants, their own human rights or those of an acquaintance had been violated in Estonia. Compared to the last study (13%), the corresponding group has decreased and thus society has moved toward greater inclusiveness and harmony. As in the last study, no one single answer stood out overwhelmingly in the explanations. Instead, very different topics were brought out. The most frequent answer was low standard of living and the citizenship issue (which cannot be classified as human rights), with 18 and 16 mentions, respectively. During the last study, the cases most mentioned were, equally, between work discrimination and the non-Estonians' citizenship problem.

In the assisted-form question, the most frequent answer (31% of respondents) found that there are problems ensuring social equality. Racial, ethnic and linguistic inequality ranked second; the rights of the disabled came third. Ensuring social equality is not directly a human right, and as a result, 31% of people in this context erroneously classify non-human-rights-related aspects as human rights. Compared to the previous study, the result has not changed much.

The result shows that on the level of popular talk, there is a widespread opinion that human rights are probably violated in Estonia, although many lack any specific experience to refer to.

Russian-speaking respondents are more likely to say their human rights or those of an acquaintance have been violated (53% vs. 35% for Estonians). The assessments of the question from Estonians and other respondents are also different. Estonian-speaking respondents more often list the following as problematic – social equality, inequality of disabled people, age-related, gender-related and racial/ethnic inequality. The Russian-speaking population most often cites ethnic/linguistic equality (32%), followed by social equality (29%) and free elections (17%), i.e. the fact that stateless people could not vote in parliamentary elections. Of this list, only the social equality issues could be regarded as a human rights issue.

Compared to the last study, Estonians more infrequently cited lower social equality, rights of the disabled, age-related equality and children's rights as problems. The share of respondents who feel Estonia has no problems with human rights or who can't say has increased significantly.

Russian-speaking respondents made less mention of racial and ethnic problems and problems in the field of children's rights. The share of those who did not answer the question has also grown.

The topics brought up by Russian-speaking respondents are constantly monitored by international organizations besides Estonian human rights organizations and no systematic human rights violations have been established by these organizations.

The majority of inhabitants (60%) would turn to the Estonian court system in the event they felt their human rights were violated. The courts are followed by lawyers and the chancellor of justice; this result has not changed since the last study (2012). Yet there are key differences based on ethnicity and language of communication. One such area that should be mentioned is the low knowledge among Russian-speaking respondents of the institution of chancellor of justice and their erroneous view of the European Court of Human Rights, which they give as an option to turn to, although it is possible only after exhausting the judicial recourses in Estonia.

The study finds that over half of Estonian inhabitants are not up to date with the topic of human rights. In addition to lack of knowledge in the given area, it attests to the fact that people have not personally had to deal with the problems in this field, which on one hand shows the problems exist only in modest form, and the related low level of interest in the entire constellation of themes. To sum up, we may conclude that human rights problems are

not viewed as important by most Estonian inhabitants and that they are not something people think about every day.