



CLSF Latvijas Cilvēktiesību komiteja FIDH Latvian Human Rights Committee

МФПЧ Латвийский комитет по правам человека

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Tackling coronavirus in Latvia and minorities: linguistic limitations in informing the public and Roma issues

Providing information: the problem of languages

The Ministry of Health and the Centre for Disease Prevention and Control both have a Russian-language versions of their websites¹. However, these versions have had no news sections. As at March 12, no information on the coronavirus was available in Russian on either of the two websites. Moreover, the information on coronavirus sent to people by authorities electronically was in Latvian only. After objections raised in the public sphere on March 11-12², on March 13 these (and some other) governmental web portals began providing some relevant information in Russian as well.

On March 13, the state-owned TV has half-admitted that the denial of information in Russian was a “shame”.³ On March 19, the state-owned media outlet lsm.lv has published a report by a social anthropologist that the news on COVID19 did not reach the Russian-speaking residents as fast as the Latvian-speaking majority, for the “lack of a mechanism to communicate directly”.⁴

In our opinion, the problems goes deeper, and amounts to structural racism, sometimes deadly dangerous (also before, there were cases of prohibiting public bodies to distribute leaflets in Russian... about cancers⁵). There is a need to establish safeguards – minimum duties of medical establishments and bodies to serve customers in minority languages, where the share of relevant minorities exceeds a certain threshold (besides Russian, this would be relevant for Polish and Belarusian in some areas of the Southeastern Latvia).

¹ <http://www.vm.gov.lv/ru/> and <https://spkc.gov.lv/ru> (RU) Notably, there was some information in English <https://spkc.gov.lv/lv/aktualitates/get/nid/787>

² The Latvian Human Rights Committee was among the first ones to raise this issue, in a paid Facebook ad on March 11 <https://www.facebook.com/latvianhumanrightscommittee/posts/3516251801780816> MPs from mostly-minority Harmony party (pro-minority parties, while always represented in the parliament, have been permanently excluded from coalition-building, since 1990) have raised the issue in the parliament on March 12 <http://novayagazeta.ee/articles/30301/> & <https://www.facebook.com/agesins/posts/1504358696399228> & <https://rus.delfi.lv/news/daily/latvia/soglasie-informaciya-o-koronoviruse-tolko-na-latyshskom-yazyke-ugroza-dlya-vsego-obschestva.d?id=51959143> (RU)

³ <https://www.facebook.com/ltv7rus/videos/648886455686780/> (RU)

⁴ <https://rus.lsm.lv/statja/analitika/analitika/v-latvii-ne-hvataet-mehanizma-obschenija-naprijamuyu-s-russkojazychnimi-socioantropolog.a352354/> (RU)

⁵ <https://rus.lsm.lv/statja/novosti/obschestvo/zaschita-latishskogo-jazika-prevratilas-v-jazikomaniyu.a68912/> (RU)

Demographic and legislative context:

According to a survey by authorities, conducted in 2017, 37.7 % of the country's population spoke Russian at home.⁶

Current laws⁷ allow provision of health information by public bodies in so-called “foreign languages” (i.e., all except the official Latvian language and the nearly-extinct Liv languages), but do not mandate it for any specific cases. There are statutory limits⁹ on using “foreign” (minority) languages in electronic media, even private ones.

The draft Law on Administrative Punishments in the Fields of Public Administration, Public Order and Usage of the State Language (bill No. 342/Lp13) has been adopted by the Parliament in the second reading of the three, on February, 27, 2020. The most dangerous provision of the draft law, the ban to send “prospects, bulletins, catalogues and other materials to natural and legal persons in a foreign language along the official language, unless those persons request so” (Para. 1 of Section 21; earlier it was numbered as Section 19 of the draft law) has been softened upon a proposal of the Parliament's Legal Commission.¹⁰ Now, the prohibition will apply to public entities and those private persons which fulfil functions delegated by the public entities.¹¹ The provision still remains harmful, both due to its applicability to state universities etc, and because of the important meaning of public print information.

Roma community: access to healthcare and water

Among the specific problems of the Roma community (0.3 % of the population, as at 2020¹²) identified earlier, there are insufficient access to healthcare and basic housing-related services, including water.¹³

Sincerely yours,
secretary-executive

Aleksandrs Kuzmins

⁶ <https://www.csb.gov.lv/en/statistics/statistics-by-theme/population/search-in-theme/2747-latvian-mother-tongue-608-population-latvia> (EN)

⁷ See paras. 2-3 http://www.vvc.gov.lv/export/sites/default/docs/LRTA/MK_Noteikumi/Cab_Reg_No_130_-_Use_of_Languages_in_Information.doc (EN)

⁸ See Section 5 <https://likumi.lv/ta/en/en/id/14740-official-language-law> (EN)

⁹ See Sections 32 and 66 <https://likumi.lv/ta/en/en/id/214039-electronic-mass-media-law> (EN)

¹⁰ Table of amendments with proposals for the 2nd reading

<https://titania.saeima.lv/LIVS13/saeimalivs13.nsf/0/9E56D45811A32ACDC2258514004CA064?OpenDocument> (LV)

¹¹ Media report <https://rus.timeline.lv/raksts/zakony/52253-bolshe-nikakoy-ofitsialnoy-informatsii-na-russkom-yazyke-v-seyme-novyy-zakonoproekt> (RU)

¹² Rows CIGANS and CIGANS (ROMS) relate to the residents of Roma ethnicity. The column KOPA is for “TOTAL” numbers https://www.pmlp.gov.lv/lv/assets/ISVN_Latvija_pec_TTB_VPD_2020.pdf (LV)

¹³ http://iic.lv/wp-content/uploads/2017/08/1-2- INFORMATIVS_MATERIALS_PASVALDIBAM-ROMI_1.pdf P. 11 (LV)

Some information in English is available at

http://oldweb.km.lv/lv/doc/nozaru/integracija/Romi/romi_latvija_petijums_ENG.pdf See also p. 26 at <https://rm.coe.int/fifth-report-on-latvia/1680934a9f> (EN)