



## Executive Summary

### Country Report Latvia 2008 on measures to combat discrimination

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#### 1. Introduction

Latvia is, and always has been, a multi-ethnic country, although the proportion of the different ethnic groups among its population has varied. Ethnic origin is recorded in the Population Register. It is based on the ethnicity of either of a person's parents and can be changed upon reaching the age of majority by choosing the ethnicity of any grandparents; the entry of ethnicity in passports is optional. By 1 January 2009, out of 2 267 866 people registered in the Population Register of Latvia, the ethnic composition was as follows: 59% Latvian; 28% Russian; 3.7% Belarusian; 2.5% Ukrainian; 2.4% Polish; 1.35% Lithuanian; 0.43 Jewish; 0.1% Estonian; the others including 0.37% Roma. Latvian citizens constitute 1 860 618 persons or 82% of the population; of these, ethnic Latvians constitute 72%. 15.7% of inhabitants are non-citizens<sup>1</sup>, of which ethnic Russians constitute the largest group at 65%. This helps to explain why issues relating to non-citizens are often treated as mainly concerning Russians or Russian-speakers, and the rights of citizens and non-citizens, as well as linguistic issues are very sensitive.

A study conducted in 2002 indicated that the percentage of ethnic Latvians in the public sector is disproportionate. The Roma population experiences discrimination in employment and accessing services, which was confirmed by a study conducted in 2003. Specialized Roma classes exist in some communities, perceived as a learning aid by some and as discriminatory by others. It should also be noted that the Roma population in Latvia is relatively small, comprising 8591 people according to the official data, although more according to the data of Roma associations, since it is possible that the ethnicity of the other, non-Roma parent was chosen for official purposes despite the self-identification of the person and irrespective of his or her perception by others.

There are no specific studies on the issues of age in employment. However, it is common knowledge that age is an issue in employment. The difficulties of disabled persons in finding employment are also common knowledge, although there are no sufficiently representative studies to confirm this either. In 2007, a study on specific problems in the labour market of Latvia and its regions was carried out on discrimination monitoring in Latvia; it evaluated the openness of the Latvian labour market as regards ensuring equal attitude towards all social groups, including the so-called risk groups – people with special needs, pre-retirement age etc., and examined the existing social inequality and its expressions among various social groups in regions.

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<sup>1</sup> Non-citizens is a special category of people - former USSR citizens who were resident in Latvia on 1 July 1991 and have not obtained citizenship of any other country, thus this term does not encompass foreign citizens and stateless persons.

There is no documented evidence about the difficulties encountered by sexual minorities, but this is most probably due to the fact that many homosexuals are forced to conceal their sexual orientation as a result of the negative attitudes commonly found in Latvian society. Sexual orientation to a significant extent continues being a taboo topic, and the repeated attempts to amend the Labour Law to add express reference to sexual orientation in the non-discrimination clause instead of simply “other circumstances” succeeded only in September 2006. Also the negative publicity to non-discrimination issues resulting from the holding of the Gay Pride in Riga in July 2005 has to be noted. The event triggered very strong sentiments and intolerant statements from high standing officials and resulted inter alia in the adoption of a constitutional amendment defining marriage as the union between a man and a woman; in 2006 a vociferous anti-Pride movement appeared and the Gay Pride parade was banned, the ban being initially upheld by the 1<sup>st</sup> instance court (the appellate instance court in April 2007 held that the ban had been illegal).

In this context, it appears that it is necessary to take a more active stand to actually promote equal treatment, as the lack of case law cannot be taken as an indicator that no problems exist. Currently, the only consultations with NGOs taking place on a regular basis are those addressing issues of disability and gender. While the framework for dialogue with social partners also exists, the issue of discrimination has so far been addressed to a limited extent only and mostly concentrating on gender issues. Consequently, there is also very little public debate and what discussion there has been has so far concentrated almost exclusively on the issues of Russian-speakers and the related issues (including linguistic ones), as well as- after the events surrounding the Gay Pride parade – the sexual orientation issue. The creation of a Secretariat of the minister for special assignments for Integration of the Society (integrated into the Ministry of Children, Family and Integration Affairs as of 1 January 2009) has resulted in other grounds of discrimination also being addressed and some discussion of them being initiated.

The only group that is being specifically targeted to some extent is that of disabled people, where the law is attempting to provide some financial incentive to employers to employ them. There is no provision on possible positive action anywhere in Latvian legislation.

## 2. Main legislation

The cornerstone of the prohibition of discrimination is Article 91 of the Latvian Constitution providing, *inter alia*, that human rights shall be observed without discrimination of any kind. Thus, the Constitution outlaws all discrimination, but does not expressly state the grounds on which discrimination is prohibited. The Constitution is regarded as having direct effect, that is, it directly binds all public bodies, but it does not have horizontal effect. This means that while discrimination is illegal in the public sector even without any further laws, which are thus only needed to provide for sanctions and the enforcement of the principle of non-discrimination, in the private sector the introduction of special laws to outlaw discrimination is essential. The same applies to international treaties: the treaties binding on Latvia only bind the public bodies.

Apart from Protocol No. 12 to the European Convention of Human Rights, which it has signed but not ratified yet, Latvia is a party to most of the important international agreements relevant for counteracting discrimination such as: International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights, the Optional Protocol to the Covenant; the Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights, the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Racial Discrimination (CERD), Framework Convention on the Protection of National Minorities and the Convention of the Rights of the Child. Latvia has also signed the Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities. The Latvian Government has not recognized the competence of the Committee on the Elimination of Racial Discrimination, though. The above-mentioned ratified instruments constitute part of the domestic legal order after they have been promulgated in the Official Journal and can be applied directly by domestic courts, unless their application depends on the enactment of a statute.

Anti-discrimination law is fragmented in Latvia: there is no one single comprehensive law, and the law still mostly contains scattered and random anti-discrimination clauses that were adopted even before the accession process started. This remains the main problem in relation to Latvian anti-discrimination law since discrimination is not outlawed in the private sector unless expressly provided for by statute and, even though it is outlawed in the public sector due to the supremacy of the Constitution, the absence of a specific implementing law considerably complicates enforcement of the prohibition.

The most comprehensive prohibition is found in the Labour Law adopted in 2001 and drafted taking into account the requirements of the relevant Directives; subsequently it was amended to address the remaining gaps. It prohibits discrimination in employment relationships covered by this law, and since November 2006 its non-discrimination provisions apply to state civil service relationships. The Labour Law is the only law to include sexual orientation as a prohibited ground and, together with the law on Social Security that was amended in December 2005 in order to comply with the Directives, it is also one of the two laws that expressly refer to age and disability; the list of grounds includes race, skin colour, national or social origin, gender, religious, political or other opinions, property or family status or "other circumstances". Moreover, it includes a provision on the shift of burden of proof. It is noteworthy that the Law on Consumer Protection amended in 2008 addresses one of the important gaps in the Latvian anti-discrimination legislation, namely access to goods and services. This is another law that provides for the shift of burden of proof, but its list of prohibited grounds is limited to gender, race and ethnic origin, which is unfortunate.

A number of other laws contain non-discrimination clauses with exhaustive or open lists of prohibited grounds of discrimination, which never include all the grounds covered by the Directives. Sexual orientation is notably missing from Latvian laws – with the exception of the Labour law – and age is also problematic. Even where the list of grounds is left open, which is also the case for the law on Social Security, thus potentially encompassing all grounds, this does not comply with the requirement that the law be expressly applicable to all specific grounds addressed by the Directives. The Law on Education contains a closed list limited to "property and social status, race, ethnicity, gender, religious or political opinions, health condition, occupation and place of residence". Also, there are laws that do not contain any anti-discrimination clauses, for example, the law on housing, although housing issues now come under the amended Law on Consumer Protection.

The Criminal Law amended in 2007 protects against discrimination on the basis of racial or national origin, as well as “violation of prohibition of discrimination provided for in legal acts”. To be efficient, this provision requires adequate coverage of discrimination by other legal acts, which is not the case yet.

The main problem with Latvian anti-discrimination legislation is the patchy nature of the regulation, from which most other problems arise. Some fields are left uncovered, notably, access to self-employment, and even within the fields covered, some of the grounds remain ambiguous; the basic definitions exist only in three laws (the Labour Law, Law on Social Security and the Law on Consumer Protection), and only the Labour Law and the Law on Consumer Protection provide for the shift of burden of proof. There is a lack of a consistent system of sanctions, and only after the amendments adopted in November 2006 the hitherto very limited legal standing in discrimination cases for NGOs and other entities with legitimate interest in the implementation of the anti-discrimination provisions was broadened. The very limited amount of Directives-related case law serves to confirm both the incomplete character of the Latvian legislation and the lack of awareness.

### 3. Main principles and definitions

The Labour Law, the Law on Social Security and the Law on Consumer Protection contain definitions of direct and indirect discrimination and harassment which were drafted based on those in the directives and comply with them; they also prohibit instruction to discriminate. However, protection against victimisation exists only in the framework of the Labour Law and the Law on Consumer Protection and in connection with a complaint to the Ombudsman’s Office. The law is silent on the issue of discrimination by association or on presumed grounds or characteristics; the wording of the anti-discrimination provisions in Latvian laws referring to a person’s (meaning the person who is invoking the provision) race, religious conviction etc. certainly would leave it easier to address discrimination based on assumed characteristics than that based on association. However, in the absence of the relevant case law testing these two issues, the only thing that can be said with certainty is that the law contains no express prohibitions.

The grounds for discrimination are not defined either in the Labour Law or elsewhere and it is particularly feared that disability might be interpreted narrowly, using the technical meaning of this term, i.e. depending on formal recognition of a person’s diminished ability to work and excluding *de facto* and milder forms of disability. Age, disability and sexual orientation are expressly mentioned only in the Labour Law and Law on Social Security.

The Labour Law, the Law on Social Security and the Law on Consumer Protection are also the three laws dealing with exceptions and they only provide for a general genuine occupation requirement exception and the Law on Social Security specifies that harassment cannot be thus justified; there is no case law yet. Additionally the Labour Law provides for an exemption for employment by religious organisations which on its face is broader than the one provided for by the Directive. The Labour Law also sets out the obligation of the employer to provide reasonable accommodation for disabled people.

There are no rules, nor known plans of adopting such, addressing the issue of multiple discrimination.

#### 4. Material scope

The Labour Law provides protection against all forms of discrimination (direct, indirect, harassment, instruction to discriminate and victimisation) in all aspects of employment relationships, both in the public and private sector, including state civil service relationships (yet excluding military service and contract work of self-employed persons; a draft law addressing the latter group of persons is pending in the Parliament), including the establishment of such relationships, both in the public and private sphere, concerning *inter alia* gender, race, age, disability, religion and sexual orientation<sup>2</sup>.

Access to vocational guidance and training, as well as issues of education in both the public and the private sectors are covered by the Labour Law which refers to “occupational training” and the Law on Education<sup>3</sup>, which also applies to both the public and private sectors. The problem with the latter, however, is that it contains an exhaustive list of grounds which does not include age, disability (although it could be argued that the latter can be subsumed under the “health” heading) and sexual orientation. Education and training could also come under the Law on Consumer Protection, but the list of its prohibited grounds is limited to gender, race and ethnic origin.

The respective laws on membership of and involvement in organisations of workers or employers or in professional organisations do not always contain anti-discrimination clauses; while in relation to the former two the provision of the Labour law applies, professional organisations remain problematic and uncovered.

The field of social protection, including social security and healthcare, has been covered by the amendments to Law on Social Security adopted in December 2005; they do list age and disability<sup>4</sup>, yet express reference to sexual orientation is missing. Also, this law defines social services as those provided by the state or municipality, hence it does not apply to the private sector.

Access to goods and services is covered as of 23 July 2008 by the amended Law on Consumer Protection. However, its list of prohibited grounds is limited to gender, race and ethnic origin, which as such is not contrary to the Directives, but shows the unwillingness to address the problem of discrimination in a wider context.

#### 5. Enforcing the law

There are a number of legal avenues for addressing cases of discrimination:

<sup>2</sup> The complete list includes “race, skin colour, age, disability, religious, political or other conviction, national or social origin, property or marital status, sexual orientation or other circumstances”.

<sup>3</sup> Listing as prohibited grounds “property and social status, race, ethnicity, gender, religious or political opinions, health condition, occupation and place of residence”.

<sup>4</sup> The list of prohibited grounds, with the exception of sexual orientation, is the same as in the Labour Law, see footnote 2.

- Courts of general jurisdiction; so far only a handful of cases alleging discrimination have been decided by the courts.
- Constitutional Court; legislation which is allegedly discriminatory on the grounds of age has twice been challenged in it. In one of the cases, the age restriction for university teachers and higher administrative positions in scientific institutions was invalidated, while in the second case the age restriction for remaining in the civil service was allowed to stand.
- Possibility of submitting a complaint to the same public institution that has treated the person differently or to a higher institution.
- State Labour Inspectorate if discrimination has occurred within the framework of a labour relationship; the inspectorate can impose a fine. However, no complaints about discrimination have been received by the Inspectorate so far.
- Ombudsman's Office, which is empowered to strive for amicable settlement; it can file a complaint in an administrative court if it is in the public interest, or bring a case to the civil court if the issue is violation of equal treatment.

The normal avenue for redress would be a court of general jurisdiction. A law on state-sponsored legal aid in civil and administrative cases has been in force from 2005, which is a welcome development, yet its real impact has still to be evaluated. After the November 2006 amendments organisations can submit a complaint or being a case on behalf of the natural persons who are the victims of discrimination. Also the Ombudsman's Office can bring such a case.

The provision on the shift in the burden of proof has been included in the recent Labour Law, which only applies to employment relationships, and the Law on Consumer Protection. It does not exist in any other sphere and the scarce number of cases (namely, five so far) in which it was applied does not yet permit drawing any conclusions about its application. In cases coming under the Administrative Procedure Law the exception of examination *ex officio* applies.

The national law is silent on the issue of situation testing and the use of statistical evidence, and there is no evidence of them being used and hence no case law; it is difficult to predict how the courts would react to the use of such evidence.

The scarcity of case law also means that it is difficult to evaluate the application of sanctions: the new provisions of Criminal Law providing for criminal penalties of up to two years' imprisonment have not been applied yet. In the context of employment, in the discrimination cases brought under the Labour Law the amounts awarded were 2000 Lats (around 3000 Euros and the judgment was reversed on appeal) in the sexual orientation-based discrimination case, and 1000 Lats (around 1500 Euros) in the gender and discrimination cases; the courts, when deciding on the amount of damages to be awarded, specifically and expressly use the considerations of the need for the sanction to fulfil the preventive function.

The Administrative Procedure Law provides for compensation for financial loss or personal harm, including moral harm, which has been caused to an individual by an administrative act or an actual action of an institution. The Code of Administrative Offences provides for a fine of up to 500 Lats for violation of prohibition of discrimination.

The current case law suggests that, in the absence of discrimination-specific provisions in the Civil Law, the other provisions in the Civil Law for moral damages in relation to the violation of dignity and honour might be and indeed have been applied.

However, none of these sanctions has ever been applied in the context of discrimination covered by the Directives, thus their character of being “effective and dissuasive” depends on their application in the future. All in all, the incomplete legal framework makes the issue of sanctions, as well as in general that of actually applying and enforcing the existing anti-discrimination law, rather problematic.

## 6. Equality bodies

Since March 2007 the tasks of the specialised body are performed by the Ombudsman’s Office which is entrusted with the task of promoting the observance of human rights, including the promotion of equal treatment – without listing the grounds of discrimination and thus encompassing all of them. Its functions include inquiring into any individual complaint related to human rights violation, as well as starting investigations on its own initiative, analyzing the observance of human rights and issuing surveys and reports. The Ombudsman’s Office is entitled to review individual complaints, to acquire the necessary information and to strive for an amicable settlement. If this fails, the Office can advise the parties of its opinion and proposals in the form of recommendations and also present its suggestions and recommendations; however, it cannot enforce its recommendations, nor can it levy any fines. It has the right to bring a Constitutional Court case if the legislation does not comply with a norm of higher legal force. Likewise, it can file a complaint in an administrative court if it is in the public interest, or bring a case to the civil court if violation of equal treatment is at issue. It also provides legal advice to the victims and can help them to prepare a court case.