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Pandemics of social inequalities: status of national and ethnic minorities in Latvia and Estonia

In Latvia and Estonia the pandemic highlighted and deepened socio-economic inequalities due to nationality and ethnicity. The higher rates of COVID-19 among minorities may have resulted from limited access to high-quality health services and information in minority languages. In addition, the lower socio-economic status of the minorities compared to the titular communities, resulting from the place of residence, occupation, and level of education, have increased the risk of poverty and social exclusion among Russian-speaking people in these countries.

Inequalities in access to healthcare. Some social communities in Latvia and Estonia have not had equal access to health care despite the fact that public policies and programs in this field were aimed to respond to the collective and individual needs of residents. Issues such as the lack of transportation, occupation inequities, and the problem of caring for children or taking a leave make it difficult for members of national and ethnic minorities to seek medical assistance. In addition, language barriers influence the relationship between patients and healthcare providers, and thus the quality of healthcare.

In Latvia, the lowest vaccination rate is in Latgale, which is inhabited by Russian-speaking minorities and Polish minority, both in terms of the percentage of vaccinated seniors and the level of interest to get vaccination across all age groups. On the one hand, it may be due to the fact that Latgale is the region with the lowest number of vaccines delivered (largely it was the regional family doctors' fault who ordered fewer vaccinates). On the other hand, general practitioners, who play an important role in informing patients about vaccinations, have decided to carry out a vaccination program less frequently than in other regions of Latvia.

Inequalities in access to information. National and ethnic minorities in Latvia and Estonia benefit from a wide range of media content, including programs broadcasted from Russia (RTR Planeta, PBK and NTV Mir). For this reason, providing reliable information and increasing public awareness of the pandemic were an important goal of national information campaigns. Despite this, the news in minority languages reached minorities with a significant delay. As a result, in the first days of the pandemic, the presence of children in Russian-speaking kindergartens was much higher than in Latvian ones, where, fearing for the health of their pupils, parents decided to leave them at home.

Research conducted in Latvia showed that Russian-speakers more often felt being insufficiently informed about COVID-19 (53%) than ethnic Latvians (40%). Other studies also found that during the pandemic, national and ethnic minorities in Latvia were more critical toward the government's actions as they felt that their interests were not represented by the national authorities (IEŚ Commentaries, No. 330). A similar situation was observed in Estonia, where during the first two weeks of the state of emergency, the level of awareness of the coronavirus among the Russian-speaking population was slightly lower than among the titular community, but the difference quickly was reduced thanks to the availability of information on state institution websites and in public media (ETV +) in Russian.

In Latvia, the implementation of the idea of the Ministry of Health to prepare an information leaflet on vaccination in two languages – Latvian and Russian – proved to be problematic. This would not be in line with the law on language, according to which state institutions can communicate with the public only in the state language (according to the guidelines of the State Language Centre, such a publication could be offered in Russian only if a given person agrees to that). Despite this, thanks to the efforts of the Ministry of Health, from March 2021, the content of public media (including LTV7 in Russian) was presented in commercial media because minority groups were familiar to them.

Inequalities in the place of residence. From the beginning of the pandemic, the highest coronavirus incidence rates in Tallinn have been recorded in the Lasnamäe district, where the majority of residents are Russian-speakers living in multi-generation households. This area is characterised by a high population density, multi-apartment houses, and large-area stores, where to practice social distancing was difficult. In addition, the infection rate was also influenced by the culture, lifestyle, and habits of the local inhabitants, who were accustomed to spending extensive time with their community, family, and close friends.

Inequalities in occupations and professions. Individuals belonging to national and ethnic minorities usually have lower income than the titular majority, which made them more willing to continue working with symptoms of the virus due to fear of losing their jobs (for this reason, they also visited a doctor less frequently). Russian-speakers are often employed in agriculture and industry, making them more vulnerable to the virus. Additionally, more than a half of all private sector workers are non-Latvians (51.3%), which made them more vulnerable to job loss than public sector workers due to the pandemic crisis. Furthermore, research conducted in 2020 showed that 40% of Estonians experienced a loss of income due to the pandemic compared to 54% of individuals belonging to ethnic and national minorities. At the same time, almost 30% of non-Estonians had economic difficulties due to the pandemic (compared to 18% of the titular community). This problem was especially noticeable in the north-eastern region of Estonia – Ida-Viru – inhabited mainly by Russian-speakers, employed especially in the energy sector, where the possibility of remote work was limited. Moreover, some of them used to go to work by public transport. In total, according to a study commissioned by the Government Chancellery and the Ministry of Social Affairs in December 2020, non-Estonians had twice as few opportunities to work remotely as Estonians – 15% and 31% respectively.

Ida-Viru is also the region with the highest unemployment rate (14.7% in Q1 2021) since the state of the emergency was announced. This region remains one of the most severely affected by the negative effects of the pandemic – the decline of employment was caused by restrictions on economic freedoms, but, above all, by limitation of oil shale extraction and production.

Inequalities in access to education. During the pandemic, members of national minorities, similarly to the titular majority, had limited access to education. Their position, however, resulted from a more difficult economic situation – in many cases the lack of computers, limited access to the Internet at home, and the low quality of distance learning. When it comes to Latvia, in Latgale access to the Internet and modern digital solutions are the lowest in the whole country.

National projects aimed to deliver computers to families where distance learning was a big challenge (for example to schools in Narva, Estonia, where almost one fifth of students did not have the appropriate equipment at home or one computer was used by several children). In addition, in many municipalities in Latgale, there have been difficulties in providing meals to pupils due to the lack of uniform regulations, procedures, and logistics.

Conclusions. According to a report delivered in 2020 by Oxfam, the international humanitarian organization, national, and ethnic minorities – along with young people, women, and low-income individuals – are at a higher risk of economic exclusion. These people are able to work remotely less frequently, and, therefore, they are more exposed to the virus. In turn, according to research provided by the Institute of Political Sciences in Paris (SciencePo), the possibility of working at home increases among people with higher levels of education, high income, white-collar workers, people over thirty-five, and men.

Studies in Latvia and Estonia also reveal an exceptional situation for Russian-speaking minorities during the pandemic. Due to their place of residence, occupation, level of education, and access to information, they were more exposed to the risk of poverty and social exclusion (IEŚ Commentaries, No. 345). Although Latvia and Estonia have taken measures to reduce the negative consequences of the spread of the coronavirus in response to the pandemic, in many cases they have been insufficient. In Latvia, state communication in the minority language turned out to be a big challenge, which additionally influenced the dynamics of vaccination. The situation was slightly better in Estonia, where the Estonian Health Insurance Fund covered the cost of treatment and COVID-19 tests for people who were not included into the state health insurance system. It is also worth noting that the levels of availability

of information for members of national minorities and for the titular majority were similar because from the first days of the state of emergency, important information was delivered in Estonian, Russian, and English. Assistance was provided by Russian-speaking specialists from various departments and ministries as well. In turn, it helped to reduce the gap of support provided to residents during the pandemic.