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Human rights during pandemic

Ombudsman of the Republic of Latvia

Human rights principles must be always present and understandable, and crisis situations are no exception. They cannot be ‘put on a higher shelf’ and used afterwards also in time of pandemics what we have been experiencing for more than a year now. During this time of pandemic, I in my position as Ombudsman have carefully followed that restrictions set by the government are reasonable and are set for a possibly short period of time. When more and more civil and politic rights, including rights to freedom of speech and expression, freedom of assembly and movement, are being restricted, it can become a serious threat to democracy.

I have been paying attention to whether information from the government to the society is precise, clear and timely, and, I must say, it has not been so during this time. It is still very important to provide information to each person in the society, carefully considering the form and means of communication in order to reach different groups of people: different age groups, people with disabilities, etc. Are everyday announcements from the government and other responsible institutions being equally delivered via all information channels to reach all target groups. I have noticed that lack of important crisis management information available for people with visual and hearing impairments.

Restricted accessibility of public libraries limits availability of state and local government’s services to people who were using public libraries as the place where they had access to computers and internet. Often librarians served as social workers and councillors for elderly people, especially those living alone in remote areas.

I must admit that current situation with restrictions is a great challenge to all of us. Along with the information and data on the spread of the disease and its control measures, it is crucial that emotional and psychological support is available to all groups of the society – working people, children and young people, the elderly and people with disabilities. It is necessary in order to deal with stress, special attention should be paid to people perceive the news and information more sensitively.

Particularly regarding Covid-19 pandemic we can observe wide spread of distorted information. Freedom of speech provides wide spectrum of reception and distribution of information. From human right perspective, it cannot be reduced merely to protection of ‘true information’, as diverse opinions form a discussion. Spread of disinformation has been a challenge that many countries must face; it can harm democratic values, discredit the state and professional journalism. Media diversity is considered as the main means to limit disinformation and propaganda. In certain cases, freedom of speech leads to hate speech and might lead to hate crimes, inviting community members to unlawful actions, resulting in threat to integrity of the State.

Also, the state must ensure strong, independent and sufficiently funded public broadcasting with their main task to provide the society with significant information. Regarding disinformation, it is crucial to promote critical thinking and media literacy, which should be started at schools.

On the other hand, crisis situations strongly affect also social and economic rights of people. In such uncertain times businesses go bankrupt and many people lose their jobs. Unemployment and limited support from the State as I observed during last year drive many people, many families into poverty and misery.

As to access to education for children and young people State and local authorities must find solutions to provide students with learning possibilities – either with

technical means such as computers and access to internet or allow students or their parents to receive information about study process otherwise.

This time has put us all on 'pause', it has been and still is a period of increased stress and we look ahead with great uncertainty. Most of us have adapted to live in what some call 'the new normal', but there are still many people struggling to enjoy all rights each and every of us deserve. I wish to all of us to be mindful and present in our decisions and measures.

Thank you for your attention and stay safe!