

AS WRITTEN



PERMANENT MISSION OF  
**ESTONIA**  
TO THE UNITED NATIONS

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STATEMENT BY

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“ ‘ETHNIC AFFAIRS OF  
THE REPUBLIC OF ESTONIA

AT THE TWENTY FIRST SPECIAL SESSION  
OF THE GENERAL ASSEMBLY

1 JULY 1999

Check against delivery

Mr. President,  
Ladies and Gentlemen:

For the beginning I would like to recall that Estonia aligned itself with the statement of the representative of Germany who spoke on behalf of the European Union and associated member states two days ago.

On my national capacity I would like to touch upon the following issues:

- wellbeing of families with children
- the role of education; and
- women's participation in labor force

Mr. President,

People are the most important and *valuable resource* of any nation. Especially for a nation which does not possess any remarkable natural resources and has a population of only 1,5 million.

During the last ten years the Estonian population has diminished 7%. A trend, which can be explained by significant decrease in fertility rates, increase in mortality, especially among men and migration.

The number of children per mother (total fertility rate) has decreased two times - from 2,3 in 1988 to 1,2 in 1997. Population forecasts indicate that in 25 years, if the present tendencies will continue, there will be 12% less inhabitants in Estonia than today.

It is clear that changes in social-economic environment have influenced the demographic processes of my country. Despite of the very quick positive developments in Estonian society during the past few years, today's conditions do not yet satisfy families to consider having more than one baby. However, despite the declining population numbers the priority of the Estonian government is *not oriented to raise the number of births, but rather to further develop the standard of living and raise the quality of human resource.*

Mr. President,

The poverty survey conducted with the support of the UNDP country office in Estonia shows that families with children are the most vulnerable group exposed to poverty. 48% of children under the age of ten and 44% of those

between 10 and 19 years live in poverty. It means monthly income per family member is less than 67dollars.

Clearly, urgent action is needed to improve the living conditions of children, and to ensure that each child would have a possibility to develop his or her full potential. This is not only a moral issue for society. The future of the society itself will depend on investments into children today.

The same survey reveals that no region in the world has suffered from such drastic changes in the nineties than the countries of the former Soviet Union and of Central and Eastern Europe. For most of these countries transition has proven to be a traumatic process with declining income and hyperinflation. Though Estonia's economic growth is among the highest in Europe, tough reforms have had a serious influence on social welfare, with the particular impact on children and families with children.

The poverty risk of a household increases significantly with the number of children and other non-working family members. This also explains the low birth rate during the nineties. For example, birth of the first child rises poverty risk 10%. When mother decides to take maternity leave the risk increases by another 25%.

Mr. President,

Estonia believes that high quality of life should be guaranteed for all stages of a person's lifetime. Birth of a child, divorce, loss of a husband, high age should not be endangering factors. From the above-mentioned facts emanates that the social policy measures of the Estonian government should be focused on improving the well being of families with children.

Recent government decisions envisage measures to improve the level of childcare system and to set up an additional financial support system for motherhood. These are not merely family policy decisions and poverty reduction methods, but have also a positive effect on women's self-esteem helping to form a positive attitude towards life.

Mr. President,

Each individual must have the right and the opportunity to make the most of his or her potential. Key to that is education. Surveys show that better education brings along more active attitude and a greater ability to cope with

responsibilities. Since the children of poor families do not receive sufficient parental guidance, care and education it is difficult for them to rise to a higher level of wellbeing. For that reason the second priority of the Estonian government's family policy is *education*.

The level of general education among the Estonian population is very high. Every 5<sup>th</sup> woman and 7<sup>th</sup> man between the ages of 20 to 60 has a university degree. Only 15% of the same age group have studied at school less than five years. Traditionally education and learning have high prestige in Estonian society. Generally women's education level is higher than that of men.

Hunger for education among the young generation is clearly visible today. The number of students is increasing from year to year. There are twenty-two university students per one thousand residents. Our goal is to preserve that level and raise it further. All-major Estonian political parties have declared quality of education to be of primary importance. I would like to underline that our government attaches main importance precisely to the quality of education, rather than just access to it. Basic education is compulsory and guaranteed for children up to the level of secondary school.

Mr. President,

My last remarks touch upon the issue of *women's participation in labor force*. At present women's participation in labor force in Estonia does not much differ from that of men. 83% of men and 76% of women of working age are employed. Women's high employment rate is explained mainly by high education level. Financial considerations for supporting the family are of great importance as well. In our country, clearly the best strategy for families with children to cope with their daily life would be for both parents to work. The state supported day care system is of paramount importance in supporting mother's employment. At present 65 to 72% of children between the ages of 3 and 6 are enrolled to day care institutions.

Mr. President,

Taking good care of its citizens regardless of their age and handicaps is the primary task of every government. Creating good conditions for a healthy family life, welfare and personal development must be our guiding light leading us into the twenty-first century.