Committee on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights
Sixty-fifth session

Summary record of the 5th meeting
Held at the Palais Wilson, Geneva, on Wednesday, 20 February 2019, at 10 a.m.

Chair: Mr. Zerbini Ribeiro Leão

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Consideration of reports (continued)

(a) Reports submitted by States parties in accordance with articles 16 and 17 of the Covenant (continued)

Third periodic report of Estonia (continued) (E/C.12/EST/3; E/C.12/EST/Q/3; E/C.12/EST/Q/3/Add.1)

1. At the invitation of the Chair, the delegation of Estonia took places at the Committee table.

2. Ms. Einman (Estonia) said that it was hoped that measures taken by both the Government and civil society to reduce the gender pay gap had had some effect, and an in-depth analysis was being conducted to obtain more precise data to inform the development of further appropriate measures. Research already conducted had included a survey of employers to assess their awareness and implementation of the Gender Equality Act, and a five-yearly survey of the public’s awareness of gender equality issues, personal experience of discrimination and perceptions of gender stereotypes in society. The Ministry of Finance had carried out an analysis of the gender pay gap in the public sector, on the basis of which the Ministry of Social Affairs had formulated suggestions for the Government on how to help reduce it. The amendments to the Gender Equality Act, which were expected to be adopted by the new Government following the parliamentary elections in March 2019, would help employers better tackle the challenge. Other awareness-raising measures had included an annual gender pay gap day, career days to tackle gender stereotypes by introducing boys and girls to subjects that each gender tended traditionally not to choose, training for careers counsellors on gender equality issues in education, and training for public servants on gender mainstreaming. Several conferences and other events had been held, including on gender equality in education, and the Ministry of Education and Research had also conducted research on the topic. The Government met regularly with non-governmental organizations to set common goals and ensure a common direction of work.

3. Mr. Ehrlich (Estonia) said that statistics would be provided in response to the Committee’s requests for information on employment, unemployment rates and occupational safety. While civil servants were prohibited from participating in strikes, under article 59 of the Civil Service Act, they were permitted to engage in collective action to protect their rights as long as less than half of the particular institution’s officials was taking part. Civil servants were entitled to belong to trade unions and had recourse to the Public Conciliator and to the courts for settlement of collective disputes. The intention of the draft act on collective bargaining had been to reform the previous Collective Agreements Act, which dated from 1993. Although the new draft act had not been adopted in 2014 owing to lack of agreement between trade unions and employers, the 1993 Act remained in force and broadly covered all aspects of collective bargaining and collective disputes. Moreover, the 1993 Act had itself been amended since 2014, and the most significant problems thereby resolved.

4. There was no current list of companies in which strikes were banned; the most recent list dated from 1990, and trades unions and employers had been unable to agree on a new one. In the meantime, the rights of employees were not being violated, since the absence of a list meant that, in effect, employees of any company were entitled to strike.

5. In 2018, the average monthly pension under the first pillar of the pension system had been €447, an increase of approximately 7 per cent over the previous year. On 1 April 2019, pensions would increase by 8.4 per cent to an average of €487. While, as with any benefit, pension levels could always ideally be higher, they were sufficient: only 1.6 per cent of retirees receiving that pension lived in absolute poverty. There had been an upward trend in pension levels for a number of years.

6. It was true that, as with other forms of insurance, unemployment insurance was not paid when an employment contract was terminated through the fault of the employee concerned. However, a separate benefit, known as unemployment allowance, could be claimed by anyone who met certain conditions regarding income, regardless of the manner in which their previous employment had ended. With regard to the coverage of
unemployment benefits, in 2017, unemployment insurance had been paid to 30 per cent of unemployed persons, unemployment allowance had been paid to 27 per cent of unemployed persons and nearly 30 per cent of unemployed persons had received a disability allowance, taking total coverage to nearly 80 per cent. Self-employed persons were ineligible for unemployment insurance, but were entitled to unemployment allowance.

7. With a view to ensuring that unemployment insurance payments were sufficient and expanding coverage to all types of contract, the present Government had begun work to reform the unemployment benefits system by 2020. In June 2018, it had launched a study of the types of unemployment benefits and the different scenarios for the future, the first results of which had been received the previous week. A public consultation would be launched in March 2019 to determine the best future direction for the unemployment insurance and allowances schemes, including which kinds of contracts would be covered and whether unemployment benefit could still be paid to those working only a few hours per week.

8. Ms. Liebenberg (Country Rapporteur), noting that the minimum wage was set by negotiation between employers and trade unions, said that she would like to know whether the Government played a regulatory role in that context. She recalled that the second pillar pension was mandatory for persons born in 1983 and later, but was optional for persons born between 1942 and 1982, and that the deadline for subscriptions from the latter group had been October 2010. She would be interested to know how many of those in each group were covered, and whether the second pillar pension was open to all workers, including the self-employed. Given that the work capacity allowance was paid from the Unemployment Insurance Fund, whereas it had formerly been paid as a disability allowance from the public budget, she wished to know if employers and employees were now effectively bearing the funding burden of that allowance. Lastly, had any research been conducted into the impact of the amendments to the 2009 Employment Contracts Act – which was intended to combine flexibility and security in all types of atypical forms of contract – on employment security and conditions of work?

9. Mr. Ehrlich (Estonia) said that a study conducted in 2013 by a group of think tanks had found that the Employment Contracts Act had had a direct and generally positive impact on working conditions. The general strategy of the reform was to increase the number of people active on the labour market and to provide support through social security. Since 2009, part-time work and teleworking had increased significantly, enabling new groups to be brought into employment and provided with benefits. While there had been an increase in the number of reports of accidents in the workplace, that could be attributed to the greater number of people working and the increased level of reporting, which were both positive developments.

10. Trade unions and employers negotiated and agreed on the amount of the minimum wage, and the Government then wrote that agreement into a regulation that formed part of the annual general budget and the basis for a number of different benefits linked to the minimum wage. The Government did not participate in the negotiations.

11. Under the 2018 pension reforms, two changes had been introduced to the first pillar pension: from 2027, the retirement age would be tied to average life expectancy; and from 2021, it would be possible to choose when to begin receiving the pension. A third aspect of the reform was that subscriptions to the second pillar pension would be reopened in 2020 and 2021, which would affect the coverage rate. Further information on the second pillar pension would be provided subsequently in writing.

12. Pursuant to paragraph 4 of the Work Capacity Allowance Act, the allowance was financed from the State budget through the Ministry of Social Affairs. Employers and workers did not therefore bear the burden of the allowance itself. However, the related social services, which were currently funded by the Government through the European Social Fund, would, from 2021, be financed equally by workers, employers and the Government, in accordance with the normal financing mechanism of all labour market services. Annual spending on services was approximately €20 million, and would probably increase slightly until 2020; however, the amount of allowances paid out was nearly €300 million, so the major part of the burden was on the Government and the State budget.
13. **Mr. Chen** (Country Task Force) said that he would like to know why the amendments to the Gender Equality Act would not enter into force until 2020, if any changes to them were planned, and what impact the State party expected the reform to have on the beneficiaries. He would welcome details of the kind of collective action that civil servants could take and specific examples of past cases.

14. **Ms. Einman** (Estonia) said that the amendments to the Gender Equality Act were expected to reduce the gender pay gap, raise awareness on gender equality and the gender pay gap and help employers to better promote gender equality and more systematically address the gender pay gap in their organizations. The amendments had gone through a first reading in parliament, but unfortunately not the second reading. The plan was to present the amendments, unchanged, to the new Government after the elections in March 2019, so that they would come into force in 2020, incorporating any opinions of the new Government.

15. **Mr. Ehrlich** (Estonia) said that there was no specific definition of collective action pertaining to civil servants; the only condition imposed by law was that less than half of the institution’s officials should take part. Examples might include a go-slow or picketing. As far as he was aware, civil servants had not in practice invoked the right to engage in collective action, possibly because the Civil Service Act had been enacted only in 2012, since when the economy had been doing well and there had been few disputes between the civil service and the Government.

16. **Mr. Uprimny** said that he would like to know whether the rationale behind the legislation on collective action was to avoid a situation in which public services were blocked because of a strike. If so, to the State party might consider using the International Labour Organization recommendation that strikes should be allowed except in essential services.

17. **Mr. Ehrlich** (Estonia) said that the rationale was indeed to avoid the closure of important public services. That approach had been taken because the country was small, with only a limited number of civil servants, and the trade unions and employers had failed to agree on what the most important public services were, despite an attempt to do so in 2014. The solution found provided as much protection as possible through the collective actions mechanism, laying down that less than 50 per cent of an institution’s officials were permitted to participate.

18. **Mr. Kalmet** (Estonia) said that, under exceptional circumstances and only with court approval, marriage could be allowed at the age of 15 years. In recent years, there had been two cases in which such permission had been granted by the courts. In one case, the court of first instance had denied permission, but the circuit court had overturned that decision, by which time the child in question had reached adulthood. The other case had concerned a girl aged 17 years whose mother had agreed to the marriage and whose father had not been present. The court had decided that the girl understood the implications of marriage and granted permission. It was therefore not general practice to grant such permission, and cases were isolated. Some other countries in the region also allowed the marriage of 15- and 16-year-olds, if permitted by the courts, the ministry of justice or the ministry of the interior.

19. While no single act had been adopted to outlaw domestic violence, amendments to existing legislation, including the Penal Code, the Code of Criminal Procedure and the Victim Support Act, did address the issue. Under the most important of the reforms, which had been to the Penal Code and had entered into force on 1 January 2015, a violent act against current or former family members or individuals with other close links to the assailant constituted an aggravated offence. Similarly, all such offences committed in the presence of a child were considered to be aggravated offences. The effect was that cases of domestic violence could now be distinguished when reported to the police and, in practice, the authorities were stepping up action to respond to offences against family members as a matter of priority. Later amendments to the Penal Code, such as those introduced in 2016 to criminalize stalking and any kind of sexual harassment, filled gaps in the legislation. Statistics had shown an increase in the reporting of offences of domestic violence and stalking, which indicated that victims and bystanders were more aware of the crime. As a result, the police was able to take action, the social sector was able to intervene and provide help for victims, and the law enforcement agencies were able to prevent offences by granting restraining orders within criminal procedure, without the need for the victim to bring action.
20. **Ms. Laarmann** (Estonia) said that the rate of alcohol consumption in Estonia had fallen significantly, from more than 40 litres of absolute alcohol per capita in 2008 to 10.3 litres in 2017. The Government was continuing to implement the national alcohol strategy that had been in place since 2014.

21. The rate of new HIV cases had dropped by two thirds in the previous decade. The total number of diagnosed cases currently stood at 7,770; most of those had occurred in the counties of Ida-Viru and Harju. Although the HIV epidemic was mainly concentrated among at-risk groups, including persons who inject drugs, sex workers and prisoners, there were signs that it was beginning to affect the general population. In 2019, the resources allocated to HIV treatment and drug addiction services would be increased by 20 per cent.

22. All harm reduction and drug treatment services, including needle exchange programmes, were available free of charge to anyone who required them. There were 7 opioid substitution therapy services and 37 needle exchange programmes in operation. Since 2018, two mobile drug treatment facilities had been set up in order to reach more people. However, greater efforts were needed to raise awareness of the benefits of such services among their target populations. There was also further work to be done to reduce the stigmatization of drug addiction and to address the particular needs of women who used drugs.

23. Persons found in possession of small quantities of drugs were charged with a misdemeanour; those found with larger quantities were charged with a criminal offence. If convicted, they were liable for procedural costs, including drug testing fees. In 2018, a pilot project had been conducted in which persons convicted of drug offences were provided with counselling and treatment instead of being punished; the results had been encouraging and there were plans to expand the initiative in 2019 and allocate it permanent funding.

24. Under articles 134 and 135 of the Family Law Act, parents could be deprived of the custody of their children as a result of drug use only by way of a court order. Such action was intended only as a last resort in cases where the application of other measures was not deemed sufficient to protect the well-being of the child. Child protection workers received regular training and assistance in dealing with cases using a solution-oriented approach, with the principal aim of helping people to improve their parenting skills.

25. **Mr. Koppel** (Estonia) said that health insurance was compulsory in Estonia and health-care services were provided based on patient need. More than 40 clearly defined population groups were covered by health insurance; they included children, pregnant women and registered unemployed persons. The budget for health insurance increased by between 6 and 10 per cent each year and had risen to €1.5 billion, the equivalent of €1,200 per insured person. Emergency health-care services were available to everyone in Estonia, irrespective of their insurance status.

26. **Mr. Ehrlich** (Estonia) said that data on cancer rates in Estonia would be forwarded to the Committee in writing.

27. **Ms. Liebenberg** said that, despite the welcome increase in provision of childcare facilities, the number of places available for babies under the age of two years remained very low, hindering progress towards the equal distribution of family responsibilities between men and women. In respect of the legislation prohibiting surrogacy, she would be interested to learn whether the Government had any plans to rescind the ban, which meant that same-sex couples and women who were unable to bear children were deprived of the right to enjoy the benefits of scientific progress. It would be useful to hear the delegation’s comments on how the criminalization of surrogacy was compatible with the Covenant.

28. The Committee was concerned about the increasing number of people, particularly older persons, who were at risk of poverty. Information would be welcome on any strategies aimed at reducing those numbers. She would be grateful for statistics on the number and percentage of persons in the State party who were homeless or living in substandard housing. She would also like information on whether there was sufficient social housing available, including details of the average waiting time for social housing. It was unclear which groups were most affected by inadequate housing or a lack of housing.

29. In connection with reports of high levels of radium in groundwater in the north of the State party, she would appreciate details of any limits the Health Board had imposed on the
amount of radioactive content permitted in water, as well as of the steps being taken to ensure that drinking water was free from radioactive contamination.

30. It would be useful if the delegation could provide information on the take-up rate of antiretroviral therapy among persons living with HIV, particularly those belonging to marginalized groups such as drug users. She wished to hear about the measures being taken to improve HIV testing services and encourage early initiation of antiretroviral therapy, as well as any awareness-raising initiatives intended to reduce the stigmatization of drug users and persons living with HIV. She would also appreciate information on the strategies and policies in place to address the high suicide rate in the State party.

31. Mr. Sadi (Country Task Force) said that even one child marriage was one too many. Despite the small number of such marriages occurring in the State party, the principle was an important one that formed part of international standards and ought to be upheld. He also wished to understand why domestic violence was such a serious problem in the State party. The Committee required all States parties to enact specific legislation on domestic violence; simply incorporating provisions on it into the Criminal Code was not sufficient. Lastly, clarification would be appreciated regarding the reasons behind the high rate of alcohol consumption in the State party, particularly among certain population groups.

32. Ms. Shin said that she would be grateful for information on both the number of cases of domestic violence reported to the police and the actual frequency of domestic violence. She would appreciate the delegation’s comments on what was being done to address the gap between the two figures. She urged the State party to enact specific legislation on domestic violence that incorporated prevention, protection and punishment measures.

33. Mr. Uprimny said that the Committee had received reports that a number of women who used drugs had lost custody of their children despite the existence of legislation prohibiting such action. It would be helpful to learn whether the authorities intended to consult organizations of drug users, including female drug users, when redesigning drug policies. The Committee was also concerned that drug users were forced to pay for compulsory drug tests. Had the Government considered decriminalizing drug use or applying administrative sanctions only after individuals had rejected several opportunities to join drug rehabilitation programmes?

34. Mr. Chen asked why the suicide rate in the State party was so much higher among men than among women.

The meeting was suspended at 11.25 a.m. and resumed at 11.35 a.m.

35. Ms. Kiilo (Estonia) said that, in 2018, the Government had begun to develop a new, holistic Preschool Education Act, which would provide all children with high-quality preschool and childcare services. Already 95 per cent of children under 7 years of age attended preschools, but efforts were being made to make the system more flexible and adaptable to the needs of families and children, taking into consideration the working hours of parents and providing support for families of children with special needs.

36. Mr. Koppel (Estonia) said that surrogacy was illegal in Estonia, but that discussions on surrogacy and its implications had been held both publicly and among healthcare professionals in 2018 and would continue in the future.

37. Ms. Rummo (Estonia) said that there had been an increase in the percentage of persons aged 65 and above who lived in relative poverty, from 42 per cent in 2017 to 47.5 per cent in 2018. As people who lived alone were at a higher risk of living in poverty, the Government had developed a new type of benefit in the form of an annual allowance, which was paid automatically to persons living alone and was expected to reduce the relative poverty rate by five percentage points. It had also established an income supplement, equivalent to one year of pensionable work for every child raised, from which 229,000 pensioners had benefited. Pensioners also enjoyed free transportation services. Lastly, despite the recent increase in relative poverty among pensioners, the severe material deprivation rate, which showed real inequality, remained rather low.

38. Mr. Ehrlich (Estonia) said that poverty had increased in relative terms, not in real terms.
39. **Ms. Reimaa** (Estonia) said that the Government had statistics on homelessness and access to social housing, but had not included them in the report because of the word limit. The Government would send the Committee that data as soon as possible.

40. **Ms. Laarmann** (Estonia) said that the stigmatization surrounding HIV was a serious issue in Estonia and elsewhere and that overcoming it would take time. The Government would therefore continue its efforts and seek new innovative approaches to tackle the issue.

41. **Mr. Kalmet** (Estonia) said that persons under the age of 18 did not have the right to marry as a matter of principle, but that exceptions could be and had been made. Adolescents could apply to the courts to request the right to marry, in which case the court would make a decision, taking into the account the best interests of the adolescent, as well as the interests of any unborn child, in accordance with the Child Protection Act and the Convention on the Rights of the Child.

42. **Mr. Ehrlich** (Estonia) said that, under the Family Law Act, only adults could get married; however, in accordance with the General Part of the Civil Code Act, adolescents could in some cases apply to the courts to be considered as adults before they reached the age of 18. As a result, there were no “child” marriages as such in Estonia, as any person under the age of 18 who got married had been deemed an “adult” by the courts.

43. **Mr. Kalmet** (Estonia) said that there was no specific law on domestic violence because Estonia did not have specific laws for specific offences. That said, every punishable offence, including domestic violence, was included in the Penal Code. The most recent data on the number of reported and unreported cases of domestic violence, from 2014, indicated that 60 per cent of domestic violence cases were reported to the police. However, those figures might be inaccurate, as they had been collected prior to the amendment of the Penal Code that had established domestic violence as a separate offence. The Government would therefore endeavour to gather more up-to-date statistics and send them to the Committee in due course. It should also be noted that domestic violence was not necessarily reported by the victims themselves, but sometimes by other family members, neighbours, colleagues and doctors.

44. **Ms. Einman** (Estonia) said that domestic violence and violence against women were the result of gender inequalities and unequal power relations between men and women, which unfortunately persisted in Estonia. Therefore, any policy aimed at tackling gender inequality also aimed to prevent domestic violence. The Government had organized several activities and campaigns to raise awareness of the harmful effects of domestic violence and support mechanisms for victims. Surveys showed that significant progress had been made in raising awareness and in the reporting of domestic violence, but there was still room for improvement. Several offences that had not been punishable previously were now included in the Penal Code. Moreover, services for victims had greatly improved and women’s shelters offered free services, including case-based psychological counselling, psychotherapy, legal counselling and housing, throughout the country. There was also a round-the-clock crisis hotline for victims of domestic violence.

45. **Mr. Kalmet** (Estonia) said that the possession of small amounts of drugs, of up to the equivalent of 10 average doses for average users, was considered a misdemeanour. The prevalence of drugs was a problem in Estonia, but it was important to differentiate between drug users and drug producers, traffickers and dealers, as the latter were usually organized criminals who should be punished in order to prevent the spread of drug use. It was not always easy to determine whether a person in possession of a large amount of narcotics, such as 100 doses, was a user or a dealer, but such persons were usually punished. The courts adopted a more lenient approach to persons whose drug use constituted a misdemeanour and who were willing to enter drug rehabilitation: they were not punished, but referred for such treatment. The parliament would soon vote on an amendment to the Penal Code that would apply the same principles to persons caught with larger amounts of narcotics. Therefore, if a person in possession of 100 doses of drugs was considered to be only a user and was open to rehabilitation, the criminal case would be closed and the person would receive treatment. A repeat offender, regardless of the number of offences, could be formally punished by the courts, but would nevertheless still be sent for rehabilitation as opposed to prison, as long as he or she was willing to undergo treatment.
46. Mr. Ehrlich (Estonia) said that the Government took the issue of suicide very seriously. The University of Tartu had conducted a study on suicides committed between 2006 and 2016 which showed that there had been a decrease in the number. It provided insight into which groups of the population were more at risk of committing suicide and made several policy recommendations that the Government would take into account.

47. Ms. Crăciunean-Tatu (Country Task Force) said that Estonia was to be commended on its strong education system, almost universal access to preschool education, rate of educational attainment at secondary level and proportion of adults having completed tertiary education. However, according to the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO), between 2011 and 2016, the net enrolment rate in primary education had decreased, while the rate in secondary education had increased. How did the State party explain those figures?

48. She would also be grateful for an explanation of the still relatively high general dropout rate, especially among boys, and how the Government intended to address the significant gender disparity in enrolment at the tertiary level. She would welcome data on the impact of sexual and reproductive health education on the number of female dropouts due to pregnancy. She would be interested to hear about any measures the Government envisaged to overcome the problems it had in attracting high-quality teachers, especially in mathematics and sciences, resulting from the perceived low social status of teachers and in spite of a recent wage increase.

49. She would also like to know what had been done to address the concentration of woman and girls in traditionally female-dominated fields of studies, such as education, and whether measures had been taken to eliminate discriminatory gender stereotypes from schoolbooks and the school curriculum. Noting the high proportion of young adults who did not have any professional or vocational qualifications, she asked the State party to explain the possible reasons and planned solutions.

50. With reference to the policy on language in secondary education, whereby 60 per cent of subjects in schools should be taught in Estonian, and the imposition of fines and other penalties for not meeting that quota, she asked how the State party was ensuring that the career paths of children belonging to national minorities were not affected in a discriminatory and disproportionate way and whether the transition to the policy was being monitored with the involvement of representatives of national minorities. How was flexibility ensured, particularly in vocational education?

51. The country’s leadership in digital innovation was commendable, but people who lacked the skills necessary to take advantage of Internet-based services could be excluded from the benefits of the digital economy. She would therefore like to know what was being done to ensure that the 20 per cent of the population who reportedly did not use the Internet – many of whom were likely to be older adults with lower incomes and lower levels of education – did not suffer discrimination in access to social services, health care and employment.

52. The policy emphasis on the Estonian language, while understandable, could be harmful to the country’s cultural diversity. Reports that the Language Inspectorate often took a punitive approach and imposed fines on public officials whose command of Estonian was considered insufficient were a particular concern. She had also been concerned to read that the use of minority languages by local government authorities was guaranteed only in communities where at least 50 per cent of local residents belonged to the minority in question and that ethnic Russians were not permitted to use their patronyms in official documents. She would like to hear the rationale for those policies and whether any changes were envisaged. She would also like to know the State party’s policy regarding the use of historical street names, given that, during a 2016 visit, Council of Europe representatives had noted with concern that Russian language street signs were completely absent from the eastern city of Narva. More generally, she would be interested to hear what was being done to reduce division based on linguistic barriers and to ensure that cultural diversity was seen and accepted as an asset rather than as a threat to Estonian culture and society.

53. Ms. Kiilo (Estonia) said that the education authorities compiled comprehensive statistics, which often differed from the data compiled by UNESCO and the Organization for
Economic Co-operation and Development. Those differences were generally attributable to technicalities, such as the method used to calculate the population base. For example, children might be recorded as not being in formal education when their family had actually left the country for a short period of time. In addition, children did not always start school at the age of 7, when compulsory education officially began. The law permitted children to begin their formal education at a later age when a delay was beneficial for their development, and families sometimes availed themselves of that possibility. However, the authorities monitored the situation of every child very closely in order to ensure that no child was left outside of the education system without due reason.

54. The Ministry of Education also monitored the gender balance at all levels of education. Gender gaps started to become evident at the end of compulsory education. Boys were more likely to move into vocational education and training, where dropout rates were higher, while girls were more likely to progress into upper secondary and higher education. The lower educational achievement rates among boys were therefore closely linked to their traditional career choices. However, a slight increase in the proportion of young men completing tertiary education had been visible in recent years. Higher education was now free of charge for full-time courses delivered in Estonian and that reform should, it was hoped, be having a positive impact on higher enrolment and completion rates. No conclusion could be drawn as yet: the authorities were awaiting the results of an impact assessment that would serve to guide the development of future educational strategy.

55. There were no official data to support the claim that pregnancy was a significant cause of school dropout, and the legal and health-care systems made ample provision for pregnant teenagers to remain in education. She would be interested to know the source of any information that pointed to the existence of a particular problem that the Ministry needed to address. Estonia had a long tradition of including sexual and reproductive health education in the national curriculum and the topic was considered one of the most important parts of the teaching programme.

56. The Ministry did, on the other hand, recognize the need to improve its ability to attract and retain teaching professionals. It aimed to do so by ensuring extremely good working conditions, including a salary equivalent to at least 120 per cent of the average salary in Estonia. In respect of social status, surveys indicated that teaching was in fact a highly valued profession. One of the main disincentives for teachers was the lack of in-school support, in the form of services such as speech therapy and special educational needs units, to facilitate their day-to-day work. However, that lacuna had been addressed in a special act passed in 2018 and the new system now in place should ensure that all children received the attention and services they needed.

57. The Ministry had been working to attract young adults without professional qualifications back into education. To that end, vocational training was provided free of charge and support schemes were available for adult learners at high risk of unemployment. As a result, young adults now accounted for 40 per cent of enrolments on vocational training courses. In addition, more and more adults were choosing to enter higher education in pursuit of career changes.

58. Ms Reimaa (Estonia) said that, according to a survey carried out in 2018, 82 per cent of Estonian homes had an Internet connection, 97 per cent of the population used the Internet, more than 90 per cent on a daily basis, and 55 per cent used social media. Courses were offered to adults over 55 years old free of charge in order to help them to get accustomed to the Internet and understand digital media.

59. Multiculturism was very well supported and promoted, and was part of everyday life. The Government funded around 30 Sunday schools that provided linguistic and cultural support and education for the country’s ethnic minorities, which included Ukrainians and Belarusians as well as Russians. It also funded cultural associations, organizations and festivals. The use of patronyms was never refused in day-to-day formalities. Legislation allowed people who so wished to have two names appear on their passport, specifically a patronym in addition to their family name, although a special application was necessary. In villages in the western part of Estonia that had been settled by Estonian Swedes, street signs usually displayed the historical names alongside the Estonian equivalents. The same was true
with Russian in the eastern area of Estonia traditionally inhabited by Russian Old Believer communities. However, Narva had always been an Estonian city and the possibility of displaying Russian equivalents alongside the historical Estonian names had never been considered because it had never been requested by the local authorities. The Government’s overarching aim was to promote integration, language knowledge and contact between peoples while also helping minorities to maintain their cultural heritage and traditions. In day-to-day life, it was generally possible to receive service in any area in one of three languages – English, Estonian or Russian – and she was not aware of any complaints having been received in that respect.

60. Mr. Abashidze said that two meetings had proved insufficient to cover all issues satisfactorily. For example, he had not been provided with statistics regarding the number of stateless persons in Estonia. He would also like clarification as to the precise definition of a national minority and the number of ethnic groups that had been granted cultural autonomy as a national minority. Was it only the Finns and Swedes? If so, he would like to know why cultural autonomy had not also been granted to the country’s Russian, Ukrainian and Belarusian minorities, which accounted for 25 per cent, 2 per cent and 1 per cent of the total population respectively. The delegation should also clarify whether cultural autonomy affected access to grants and finance or was simply a question of legal status.

61. Ms. Liebenberg, commending the State party for having sent a diverse delegation and having provided careful, well thought-out responses backed up by statistics, said that she looked forward to receiving the outstanding responses within the next 48 hours.

62. Ms. Reimaa (Estonia) said that the Cultural Autonomy Act was one of the country’s oldest laws. Any national group could apply for autonomy under the Act but thus far no application had been lodged on behalf of the Russian community. That community was made up of Estonian citizens of Russian ancestry, Russian citizens and people of undetermined citizenship and was represented by several umbrella organizations: there was no central organization able to make an application on behalf of all component parts of the community. However, that situation did not prevent the community from enjoying cultural autonomy; there were Russian museums, Russian television channels and Russian schools, inter alia, and the Government allocated considerable resources to the promotion and development of Russian culture in Estonia.

63. Mr. Ehrlich (Estonia) said that, as a small country, Estonia attached great importance to the international order and human rights. Thanking the Committee for the constructive dialogue, he undertook to provide written answers to the outstanding questions and to implement the recommendations subsequently received.

*The meeting rose at 1 p.m.*