

Risks and Challenges: EU Enlargement and Russia

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MINORITY ISSUES

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RUSSIAN CITIZENS IN ESTONIA SEEK MORE POLLING STATIONS FOR RUSSIAN PRESIDENTIAL POLL

Narva Union of Russian Citizens Chairman Yurii Mishin said on 22 January that he has delivered a letter to the office of Russian President Vladimir Putin requesting his assistance in opening more polling stations in Estonia for the Russian presidential elections in March, BNS reported. Mishin criticized the Estonian authorities for not providing alternative premises for Russian polling stations for the Duma elections in December, thus limiting them to the Russian Embassy and consulates. The letter, signed by 300 residents of the northeastern cities of Narva and Sillamae, claimed that hundreds of Russian citizens were forced to stand in line in freezing temperatures while waiting to vote in the elections. The turnout in Estonia for the Russian Duma elections was low, with only 15.5 percent of the 105,000 eligible voters participating (see "RFE/RL Newsline," 9 December 2003). SG

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**RFE/RL Newsline
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LATVIAN EDUCATION REFORM PASSES SECOND READING DESPITE PROTESTS

Parliament on 22 January approved the second reading of amendments to the Education Law despite ethnic Russian students' protests, LETA reported. The amendments stipulate that as of 1 September, secondary students in minority schools must take at least five classes in Latvian a year, in addition to Latvian language and literature classes. The current law requires that 60 percent of subjects be taught in the Latvian language as of September. The new amendments, which face a third reading, will allow schools to teach in minority-languages on subjects pertaining to minority identities, culture, and language. Ethnic Russian students would be most affected by the reforms. Prior to the reading, For Human Rights in a United Latvia (PCTVL) staged a rally in front of the parliament building, in which about 200 protesters, most of them students, demanded the resignation of Education and Science Minister Karlis Sadurskis. On the morning of 23 January, about 800 students from Russian-language schools refused to attend school and began an unauthorized protest in front of the Education and Science Ministry building. SG

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RFE/RL Newslines
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ESTONIAN COALITION PARTIES DIVIDED OVER EDUCATION REFORM

Education Minister Toivo Maimets of Res Publica on 27 January presented a new scheme to parliament for financing schools, LETA reported on 28 January. He proposed using a school-voucher scheme to improve the quality of education in schools. Under Maimets' plan, state funding would be allocated for individual pupils through vouchers that could be used at the school of their choice. The current system largely bases state and municipal funding for schools on their total enrollment, with individual municipalities providing additional funding on their own. The Reform Party expressed support for the reform, but the People's Union opposed it, arguing that it would lead to the closure of rural schools. SG

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RFE/RL Newslines
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ESTONIAN CENTER PARTY SEEKS TO EASE NATURALIZATION REQUIREMENTS

The opposition Center Party parliament faction on 29 January presented amendments to the citizenship law proposing that applicants for citizenship who were born prior to 1939 be exempted from requirements that they exhibit proficiency in the Estonian language, BNS reported. The faction argued that teachers and psychologists have determined that it is much more difficult for elderly people to learn a foreign language. The proposals also call for requirements that applicants pass tests on their knowledge of the Estonian Constitution and citizenship law be dropped for persons born prior to 1939. Center Party deputy Mikhail Stalnukhin said the elimination of the requirements would benefit more than 17,000 elderly people. The proposed amendments also call for people who settled in Estonia prior to 1 July 1990 to be allowed to take a simplified Estonian-language course whose requirements the government would determine separately. The amendments, if passed, will go into effect on 1 January 2005. SG

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LATVIAN LEADERS CONDEMN RUSSIAN DUMA'S STATEMENT ON EDUCATION REFORM

Prime Minister Einars Repse on 4 February said the Russian State Duma's approval of a statement saying Latvia's planned educational reform will negatively effect the countries' relations grossly interfered in Latvia's domestic affairs, BNS reported. The reform, which will require minority schools to teach a mostly Latvian-language curriculum, will largely affect Latvia's Russian minority (see "RFE/RL Newslines," 3 December 2003). Foreign Minister Sandra Kalniete described the statement, in BNS's words, as weird and unacceptable, adding that it is unusual for one country's parliament to comment on another's draft legislation. She said Latvia's Foreign Ministry will not send any official response to Russia because "we can't help them if Russia is unable to understand where foreign policy ends and domestic policy begins." She said she believes the Duma statement is merely rhetoric, noting that bilateral economic cooperation is increasing. President Vaira Vike-Freiberga said she is not surprised by the Duma's statement, adding that such announcements from various Russian institutions have already "become daily routine," therefore "this is no better than any other" announcement. SG

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RFE/RL Newslines
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THOUSANDS PROTEST AS LATVIAN PARLIAMENT PASSES EDUCATION-REFORM BILL

Latvian lawmakers approved controversial amendments to the country's education law requiring that 60 percent of subjects in minority schools be taught in the Latvian language from 1 September, BNS reported. The vote came as an estimated 5,000 opponents of the reform, including many students of Russian schools, staged protests in front of the parliament building and presidential residence chanting slogans such as "No to reform!" and "Hands off Russian schools!" Under the new legislation, minority schools will have the right to choose the 40 percent of their curriculum that is taught in minority languages. In the second reading of the amendments, the parliament had backed even greater restrictions that allowed schools to teach only subjects pertaining to minority identities, culture, and language in minority languages (see "RFE/RL Newslines," 23 January 2004). The planned reforms have led to sharp public exchanges between Russia and Estonia, roughly one-third of whose 2.3 million inhabitants are ethnic Russians. SG

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RFE/RL Newslines
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LATVIAN PRESIDENT TO SIGN EDUCATION AMENDMENTS INTO LAW

Vaira Vike-Freiberga announced on 10 February that she will sign the contentious amendments to the education law that parliament passed amid fierce public protests last week (see "RFE/RL Newslines," 6 February 2004), BNS reported. The amendments, which require that 60 percent of subjects in minority schools be taught in the Latvian language from 1 September, were condemned by the Russian State Duma and the Russian Foreign Ministry after their passage. Vike-Freiberga said it is important that the reform not be allowed to adversely affect studies. The chairman of Latvia's Russian Language School Support Association (LASOR), Igors Pimenovs, expressed regret that no serious discussions were held with the teachers and parents of pupils in Russian-language schools. He predicted that the amendments will promote the further division of society in two hostile camps. LASOR was organizing a picket in front of the president's residence for 11 February and a conference of defenders of Russian schools on 6 March. Nearly one-third of Latvia's population is ethnic Russian. SG

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RFE/RL Newslines
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ESTONIAN PARLIAMENT APPROVES BILL TO EASE NATURALIZATION REQUIREMENTS

Parliament overwhelmingly approved in its final reading on 11 February a bill aimed at reducing the time required for individuals to become naturalized citizens, BNS reported. The bill, which was proposed by the opposition Center Party, cuts from one year to six months the required time an individual must legally reside in the country after applying for citizenship. The bill does not change the requirement that individuals must legally reside in the country for at least five years to be eligible for citizenship. The five opposing votes came from the opposition Pro Patria Union, which argued that shortening the process will hinder the authorities ability to screen applicants adequately. SG

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RFE/RL Newslines
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THOUSANDS PROTEST LATVIAN EDUCATION REFORMS

An estimated 8,000 people staged a rally in front of the president's residence in Riga on 11 February to protest Latvia's recently passed school reforms, BNS reported (see "RFE/RL Newslines," 6 February 2004). The measures will require minority schools to teach a larger share of their curriculums in the Latvian language. The protesters, which BNS described as mostly students from Russian-language schools in Riga, Daugavpils, and Jelgava, as well as students from Ukrainian and Jewish schools, subsequently marched to the city's central square. The protest action passed peacefully, although three 13-year-old students were reportedly detained for holding posters bearing Nazi symbols, which are banned in Latvia. The Russian State Duma on 11 February approved a resolution calling for the imposition of economic and other sanctions against Latvia over its passage of the reforms, and Russian lawmakers are expected to discuss the issue further next week. SG

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NEARLY TWO-THIRDS OF LATVIA'S NONCITIZENS WANT CITIZENSHIP

A study carried out by Latvia's Naturalization Board with funding from the Finnish government revealed that slightly more than 64 percent of Latvia's noncitizens want to obtain Latvian citizenship, BNS reported on 17 February. Only 14 percent did not want citizenship, with the remainder unsure or undecided. The study, which involved interviews with 200 specialists and 6,950 noncitizens throughout the country, indicated that factors most frequently preventing people from acquiring citizenship are a belief that citizenship should be given to them automatically and hopes that the naturalization process will be simplified in the future. It also revealed that 90 percent of noncitizens support naturalization and regard it as a positive move. Roughly 45 percent of the children of noncitizens have become citizens, the survey suggested. In early 2003, Latvia had 504,300 noncitizens, representing 22 percent of the country's population. SG

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ESTONIAN GOVERNMENT REJECTS BILL EASING NATURALIZATION

The cabinet decided on 19 February not to support an opposition Center Party-proposed bill that would have eased requirements for gaining Estonian citizenship through naturalization, BNS reported. The bill would have amended the Citizenship Law by not requiring applicants for citizenship who were born before 1 January 1939 to pass an Estonian-language examination and prove familiarity with the Estonian constitution and citizenship law. Center Party parliament deputy Mikhail Stalnukhin estimated that the number of such persons is just over 17,000. Another proposed amendment would have allowed persons who settled in Estonia before 1 July 1990 to naturalize by passing a simplified course of study created by the government. Stalnukhin said the number of such stateless people is a little less than 115,000. A government spokeswoman said current examinations are a reliable method of assessing proficiency in Estonian, and that there is no need to change the system. SG

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RFE/RL Newsline
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OSCE COMMISSIONER CALLS FOR MORE DIALOGUE ON LATVIAN EDUCATION REFORM

Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE) High Commissioner on National Minorities Rolf Ekeus told Latvian Education and Research Minister Karlis Sadurskis in Riga on 25 February that constructive dialogue is needed to allay concerns among Latvia's Russian-speaking youth regarding the country's ongoing education reform, BNS reported. Ekeus said the aim of his visit was not to judge the reform, but familiarize himself with the situation. He said the observations he and his team make will be included in a future report about the status of minority languages in EU member states. Sadurskis claimed the campaign against the education reform is being financed "from Moscow." Ekeus met the same day with Justice Minister and acting Society Integration Affairs Minister Aivars Aksenoks to discuss integration issues, and was scheduled to meet with President Vaira Vike-Freiberga and Naturalization Board head Eizenija Aldermane on 26 February. SG

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Monday, 1 March 2004

LATVIA REFUSES VISA TO RUSSIAN STATE DUMA DEPUTY SPEAKER

The Latvian Foreign Ministry announced on 27 February that it will not grant Russian Deputy Duma Speaker Dmitrii Rogozin a visa that would allow him to attend a 6 March congress in defense of Russian-language schools and opposing the country's education reform, BNS reported. Foreign Ministry spokesman Rets Plesums said visas were granted to two other Russian officials -- State Duma Property Committee First Deputy Chairman Viktor Gerashchenko and Duma foreign-affairs specialist Aleksandr Kuznetsov, who applied for visas together with Rogozin. Plesums said the ministry supports broad and open dialogue among politicians and good relations with neighboring countries, and welcomed the extension of an offer to State Duma Speaker Boris Gryzlov to visit Latvia. The ministry explained that previous public statements made by Rogozin "do not indicate willingness to develop a constructive dialogue among politicians." Latvian parliament Foreign Affairs Committee Chairman Rihards Piks (People's Party) commended the decision, claiming that Rogozin "was not coming over as an official making an official visit. He would have come to instigate people to ethnic hatred." SG

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ESTONIAN CITIZENSHIP-QUALIFICATION TESTING MADE MORE ACCESSIBLE

The National Examination and Qualification Center has made it more convenient for noncitizen high-school students to take the examination on the Estonian Constitution and the citizenship law they must pass to acquire citizenship, BNS reported on 2 March. More than 12,000 high-school students resident in Estonia, most of them ethnic Russians, hold no citizenship of any country. Whereas the exam was previously only given at designated locations, the center will now send representatives to any high school where at least 10 students express interest in acquiring citizenship to provide consultation and administer the exam. Andres Aaremaa, a departmental head at the center, said he expects about 2,300 students to take the exam this year. SG

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PACE REPRESENTATIVES TO EVALUATE MINORITY SITUATION IN LATVIA

The Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe's (PACE) Monitoring Committee on 4 March decided to send representatives to Latvia to evaluate the situation of minorities there, BNS reported the same day. The committee, which monitors member states' adherence to commitments and obligations, will send two representatives to Latvia later this month to determine whether a monitoring procedure should be established (see <http://assembly.coe.int>). Russian Deputy Duma Speaker Dmitrii Rogozin's, who was recently denied a Latvian visa (see "RFE/RL Newsline," 1 March 2004), proposal that representatives be sent to evaluate the situation regarding Latvia's Russian minority and the country's education reforms, BNS reported. Andris Berzins, the head of the Latvian delegation to PACE, expressed regret that PACE Secretary-General Walter Schwimmer and the committee supported Rogozin's proposal without first examining a report about Latvia prepared by the commission's chairwoman, Josette Durrieu. The report reportedly stated that Latvia's education reforms and other policies do not infringe the rights of the country's minorities. "We were going to a wedding, but a funeral took place," Berzins said. Latvian parliament speaker Ingrida Udre is planning to send a letter to Schwimmer to protest the decision. SG

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LATVIAN LEFT-WING ALLIANCE WANTS RUSSIAN TO BE OFFICIAL EU LANGUAGE

Three high-ranking members of the alliance For Human Rights in a United Latvia (PCTVL) announced on 16 March that an important aspect of their European Parliament election campaign will be to urge the EU to grant official status to minority languages, including Russian, BNS reported. PCTVL head Tatyana Zdanoka, current parliament deputy Jurijs Sokolovskis, and former parliament deputy Miroslavs Mitrofanovs hold the top three positions on the PCTVL's candidates list for the June elections. Mitrofanovs said the EU's current language policies are discriminatory toward minorities, and proposed that languages such as Catalan, Basque, and Russian be given the status of official EU languages. Zdanoka, who is banned from running in Latvian parliamentary and local elections because of her post-January 1991 Communist Party membership (see "RFE/RL Newsline," 8 August 2002), said the PCTVL wants to establish and is willing to head a party representing ethnic Russians living in the European Union. However, she expressed doubt that it could be formed before the European Parliament elections. SG

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LATVIAN PRIME MINISTER ORDERS NEGOTIATIONS OVER EDUCATIONAL REFORM

Indulis Emsis on 18 March ordered Education and Science Minister Juris Radzevics to assemble a group of negotiators to hold discussions regarding pending education reforms that will affect minority schools, BNS reported. He said the group "must arrange for consultations and dialogue with public organizations interested in the constructive solution of education problems, the key task being to identify the problems and offer solutions in implementation of the minority education reform." Emsis also asked Radzevics to consider the possibility of forming a separate department in his ministry for dealing with the education of minorities. The most controversial aspect of the reforms, which will go into effect as of 1 September, is the requirement that at least 60 percent of schools' curriculum be taught in the Latvian language. SG

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LATVIAN PRESIDENT URGES RESPECT FOR MINORITIES

Vaira Vike-Freiberga on 26 March urged Latvians and minorities living in the country to respect each other and live in harmony, BNS reported. Speaking at the opening of the Minority Information and Culture Department of the Society Integration Ministry, Vike-Freiberga said that as a future member of the European Union, Latvia "has passed all laws to ensure people their human rights." Vike-Freiberga also said that although Latvian is the only official state language, "each person, each language, and each culture" is uniquely valuable. Integration Minister Nils Muiznieks said the new department will provide consultation and assistance to minority organizations and cultural centers in preparing projects, and will offer its premises for events, concerts, and other activities. SG

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PROTESTS HELD AGAINST LATVIAN EDUCATION REFORM

Some 2,000 students from Russian schools boycotted classes and gathered in an unsanctioned rally in Riga's Esplanade park on 15 April protesting planned education reforms that will increase the number of subjects taught in the Latvian language in minority schools, BNS reported. Rally organizers had predicted some 50,000 would attend. The demonstrators later marched to the Cabinet of Ministers and Ministry of Education and Research buildings. Parliament deputies Jakovs Pliners and Vladimirs Buzajevs from the leftist alliance For Human Rights in a United Latvia presented a letter, written in Russian, to Education and Research Minister Juris Radzevics. The letter, signed by 6,800 people, called for an immediate moratorium on the plans and that any future reforms only be made in consultation with the Russian community. Latvian Security Police chief Janis Reiniks told a Riga City Council meeting later in the day that some 5,000 people had participated in the protests. SG

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LATVIAN PRINCIPALS REPORTEDLY THREATENED OVER MINORITY-EDUCATION REFORM

President Vaira Vike-Freiberga said after a meeting with some 20 principals of minority schools from across Latvia on 26 April that some of them said they were threatened with physical violence for supporting the planned minority-education reform, BNS reported. She promised the principals that the matter would be discussed with Interior Minister Eriks Jekabsons. Vike-Freiberga expressed regret that a number of Russian-language media in Latvia are playing a destructive role by reporting about the reforms in a negative manner and "refusing to acknowledge any positive achievements." This is a serious problem, she said, since 70 percent of the parents of minority-school students receive their information primarily from the Russian-language media. She called for setting up working groups of teachers to gather and promote successful models and classes for the bilingual studies program. SG

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BALTICS: EU, RUSSIA AGREE COMPROMISE FOR JOINT MINORITIES DECLARATION

By Ahto Lobjakas

EU foreign ministers in Luxembourg have settled on a compromise proposal to jointly address with Moscow the situation of Russian-speaking minorities in Estonia and Latvia. Disagreements over the wording of a paragraph on Baltic minorities are the last obstacle to the signing of a landmark joint EU-Russia declaration on enlargement. Russia's Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov will respond to the proposal at today's Partnership Council meeting with the EU.

Brussels, 27 April 2004 (RFE/RL) -- After weeks of bitter wrangling, the EU-Russia joint declaration on enlargement is virtually ready.

The two sides have already resolved all of Russia's concerns over the economic impact of enlargement. Last week, they reached agreement on most key issues to do with goods transit between the Russian mainland and Kaliningrad.

Last night, the EU agreed to what it hopes is an acceptable compromise for Russia to address what is perhaps the thorniest issue -- the situation of the Russian-speaking minorities in Estonia and Latvia.

There are hundreds of thousands of Russian speakers in the two Baltic countries. Moscow has argued that the Russian-speaking minority, though large, suffers discrimination because of strict language and citizenship laws that affect everything from education to employment.

Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov is due today to hold talks on the issue with European Union officials. If Russia accepts the compromise, it will pave the way for extending Moscow's partnership treaty with the EU to the bloc's new members.

This in turn will help prevent a possible trade war and heightened tensions in EU-Russia relations.

According to a draft obtained by RFE/RL, the EU now suggests that the last paragraph of its joint statement with Russia should read as follows: "The EU and the Russian Federation welcome EU membership as a firm guarantee for the protection of human rights and the protection of persons belonging to minorities. Both sides underline their commitment to the protection of human rights and the protection of persons belonging to minorities."

Estonia's foreign minister, Kristiina Ojuland, told RFE/RL that Estonia is satisfied with the agreement.

"I am very pleased to be able to note that the EU position that was formulated [on 23 April] has remained the same. It has been passed on to the Russian side. This position, in my opinion, embodies fully the solidarity principle inherent in European Union [membership]," Ojuland said.

Irish Foreign Minister Brian Cowen, speaking for the current EU presidency, said he expects the agreement will be signed today.

That sentiment was echoed by the EU's external relations commissioner, Chris Patten.

Russia has been holding out for wording that is more critical of the governments of Estonia and Latvia.

But its suggestion -- that the EU add another sentence supporting the "social integration" of minorities -- was refused following talks yesterday.

Moscow has argued that the Russian-speaking minority, though large, suffers discrimination because of strict language and citizenship laws that affect everything from education to employment.

Estonian sources have told RFE/RL that, instead of the Russia suggestion, the EU has retained a second possible formulation should difficulties arise in today's discussions.

An EU source told RFE/RL the sentence says that further support will be provided to the "social inclusion" of the minorities. It is not clear if Russia would accept such wording.

Estonian Foreign Minister Kristiina Ojuland refused to comment on any further possible modifications.

"At this stage, it would not be politic to comment on the text in any greater detail. It meets the Estonian position, and is within the confines of the mandate provided by the Estonian government [on 22 April]. And I think this text is, in any case, a very significant improvement over the draft first tabled by the

European Commission a week ago," Ojuland says.

Latvian Foreign Minister Rihards Piks added he was very satisfied with yesterday's compromise, and urged Russia not to press for further modifications.

A number of sources told RFE/RL that Latvia was highly concerned with securing for itself a binding guarantee from the other member states, as well as from the European Commission, that it fully meets the Copenhagen political EU membership criteria.

The issue has received relatively little attention in Latvia, but has become politically very sensitive in Estonia.

Accordingly, Estonia last week listed a number of tightly defined conditions without the fulfillment of which it would be unable to support any reference to its minorities.

Among them were a refusal to accept the naming of specific member states or groups of member states who might suffer from minority issues. Any references to minorities were also to be non-specific. Finally, Estonia said it would reject the term "integration" as too far-reaching.

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LATVIA TO URGE NONCITIZENS TO APPLY FOR CITIZENSHIP FOR THEIR ELIGIBLE CHILDREN

Children and Family Affairs Minister Ainars Bastiks and Integration Minister Nils Muiznieks on 27 April announced a government campaign to urge noncitizens to apply for Latvian citizenship on behalf of their children born in Latvia after the restoration of independence in 1991, BNS reported. Latvian Naturalization Administration head Eizenija Aldermane said many parents incorrectly believe that their children automatically receive citizenship and thus have not filled out the requisite applications. According to the Citizenship and Migration Administration, applications for citizenship had been received for just 1,601 of the 17,036 children born to noncitizens in Latvia after 21 August 1991. As part of the campaign, which is supported by a grant from the U.S. Embassy in Riga, letters will be sent to parents without citizenship soliciting such applications. SG

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ESTONIAN PRIME MINISTER FORESEES BETTER RELATIONS WITH RUSSIA

Juhan Parts said in an interview in the Russian-language daily "Molodezh Estonii" of 29 April that Estonia's membership in NATO and the EU will help improve relations with Russia, BNS reported. He expressed hope that the Russian administration would cease protesting about the problems of Estonia's Russian speakers and choose a more constructive approach toward improving relations between the two states. Parts rejected suggestions that the EU would force Estonia to give citizenship to all its permanent residents, noting that the country has been meeting all international citizenship standards for many years. He admitted that something must be done to encourage the more than 100,000 noncitizens to apply for citizenship, but pointed out that citizenship involved not only rights, but also duties and in a normal society no one expects that citizenship be granted on a silver platter. He called on noncitizens to take the first step and try to learn the language of the country in which they are living as this could only benefit them. SG

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