

Results of foreign student and migrant survey on manifestations of intolerance in Latvia

In Latvia, the number of foreign students and nationals, including visibly different minorities, has been increasing. According to the Ministry of Education and Science in 2016/2017, the proportion of foreign students has reached 11% or 7,880 students, an increase by 27% compared to 2015. Students from more than 80 countries study in Latvia – most study in Riga, but there are also foreign students in Ventspils, Liepāja, Valmiera and Daugavpils. At Riga Stradins University, foreign students constitute 22% of the student population. The number of foreign students will continue to increase as attracting foreign students has been set as a priority for universities.

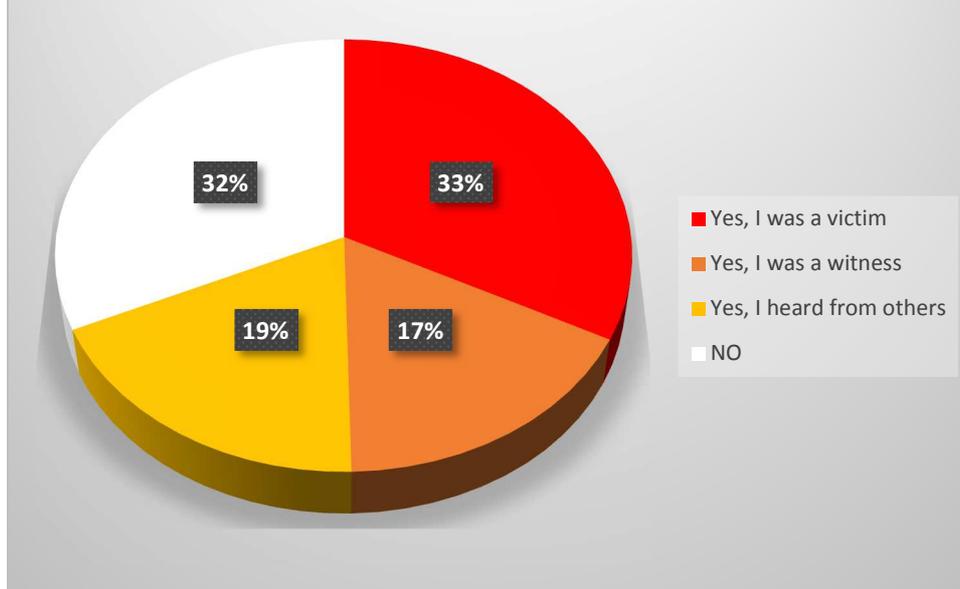
Different public opinion polls have consistently indicated high levels of intolerance among the Latvian population towards visibly different migrants, Muslims, other non-Christian religions, as well as negative attitudes and concerns about the reception of asylum seekers.

Anecdotal evidence received from various sources in the past has shown that foreign students have been victims of racist incidents. Unofficial information also suggests that universities have not adequately responded to such cases. In order to gather more information, in September and October 2016, Latvian Centre for Human Rights (LCHR) conducted a survey of foreign students and migrants on manifestations of intolerance (hate speech, hate crimes, etc.) in Latvia. For that purpose, NGOs working with migrants, asylum seekers and refugees, and their representatives were interviewed, and an anonymous online survey was conducted among foreign students in Latvia. 11 NGO, migrant representatives were interviewed and 135 foreign students from the EU and other countries took part in the online survey.

Facing intolerance

According to the results of the foreign student survey almost 2/3 of respondents or 68% have faced different forms of intolerance, including, hate speech, hate crimes and discrimination. 33% of respondents replied that they themselves were victims, while 36% were witnesses of such incidents or have heard about such incidents from the others.

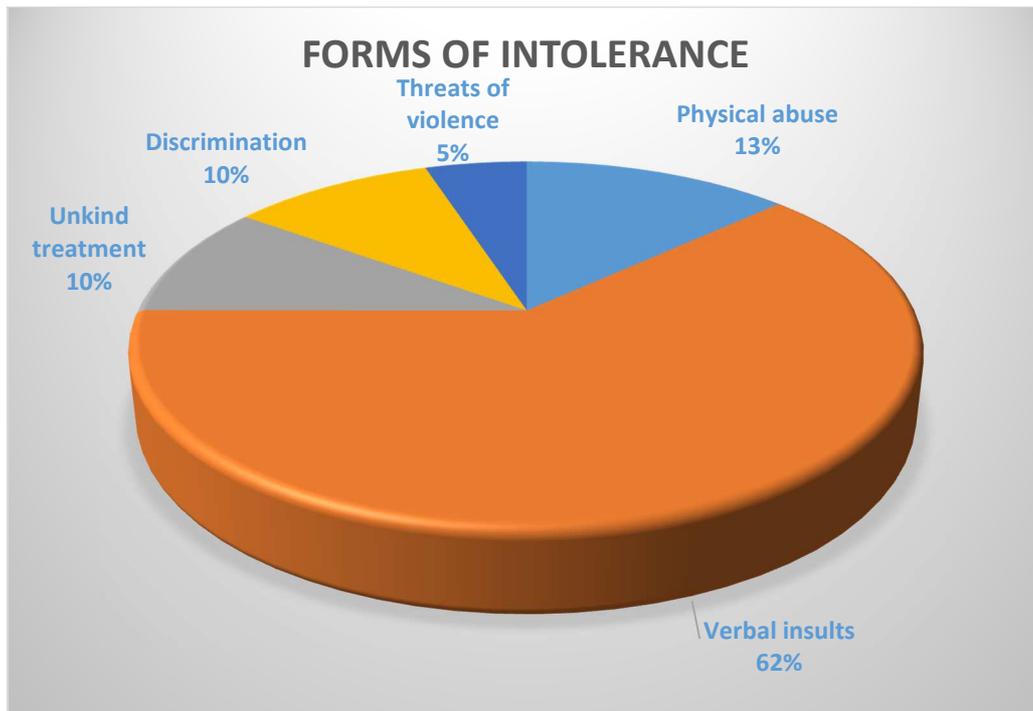
Are you aware of cases of hate crime/hate speech and/or discrimination in Latvia? (%)



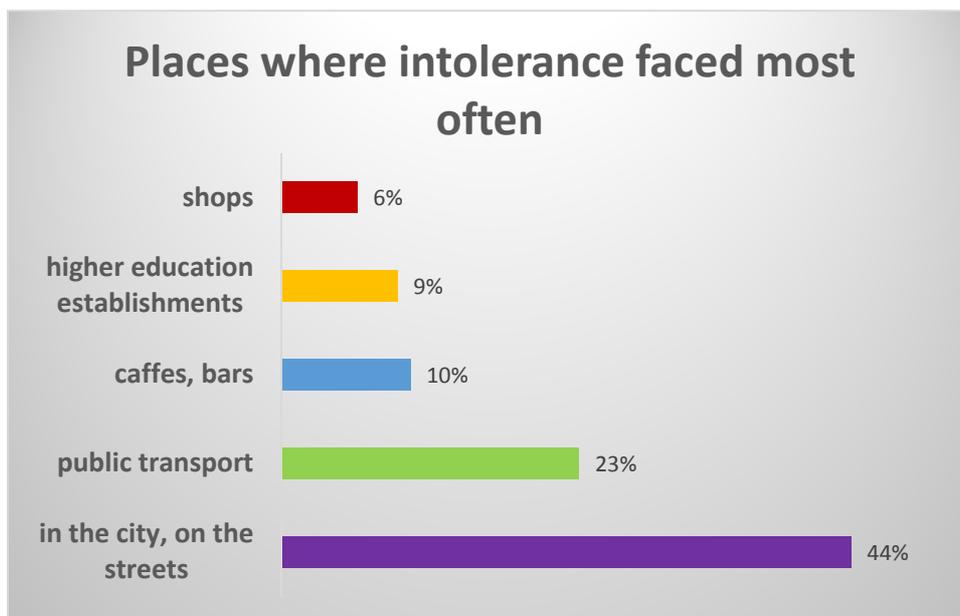
The most common form of intolerance is verbal insults and harassment (62%), such as name-calling, calls to leave Latvia, ridiculing and making offensive comments of other people's ethnic origin, language, religion, sexual orientation, skin color etc. Some NGO/migrant representatives and students indicated that such attitude is frequent in public places, e.g. in streets, public transport, cafes and bars, shops, and also in educational establishments, e.g., from the university staff.

In 13% of cases, foreign students were victims of a physical attack or an attempted attack, or they had heard that others were victims of such attacks, while 5% have faced threats of violence. This was reported by foreign students and asylum seekers with darker skin color. In at least two cases, physical attacks were on the grounds of sexual orientation.

Surveyed students and NGO/migrant representatives mentioned several possible discrimination cases, e.g., refusals to rent an apartment, denial of entry to night clubs and bars, discriminatory treatment in workplaces or refusal to hire foreigners, especially with dark skin color.



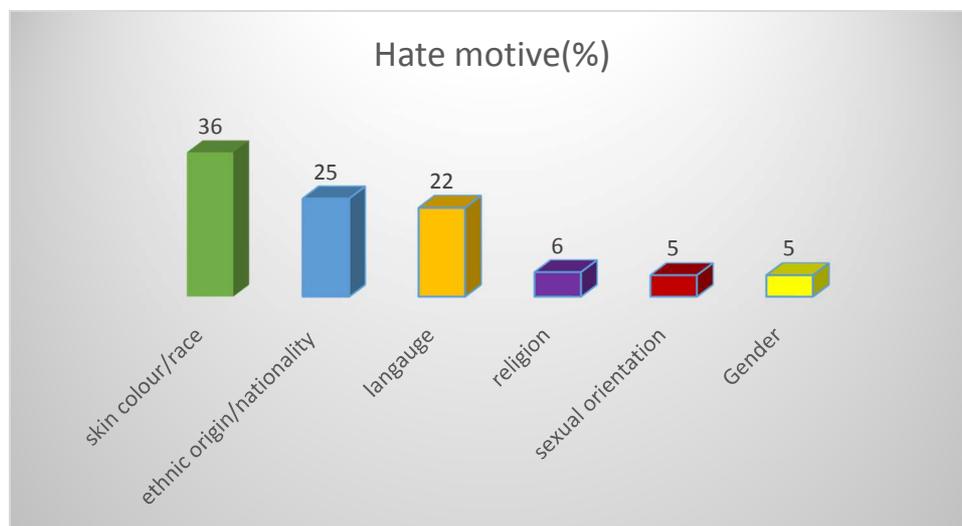
Both NGO/migrant representatives and surveyed students mentioned that offensive comments are made by locals – elderly persons in public transport and young people when intoxicated. Sometimes skin color (also ethnic origin) is automatically associated with terrorist threats. Some NGO/migrant representatives and students indicated that foreigners learn from one another about unsafe places that should not be visited and try to avoid them.



Skin color and race are mentioned by 36% of those, who were subject to intolerance, as the most common hate motive, while 25% mention **ethnic origin** and **xenophobia** as hate motive. Relatively often **language** (22%) is mentioned as a reason for intolerant

attitudes. Respondents noted that talking in a foreign language in public places sometimes causes dislike, unkind and aggressive comments and responses by certain individuals, such as people yelling at foreign language speakers to stop talking in a foreign language or are angry if someone does not speak or understand Latvian or Russian. 6 % of foreign students have experienced negative attitudes because of their **real or assumed religious belief**, which most often has been manifested through offensive comments in public places. Several respondents also mentioned harassment against women wearing traditional Muslim headscarves. Intolerance due to **sexual orientation or gender** is mentioned by 5% of respondents, while 2% have experienced anti-Semitism.

In many cases respondents indicated two or more bias grounds– e.g., skin color and religion, skin color and gender, language, ethnic origin and sexual orientation.



Reporting of hate crimes/speech

An absolute majority or 86% of students that have been victims of hate incidents have not reported it, including 1/2 of those students who have faced physical violence. The majority believe that these incidents (especially verbal insults) are not serious enough to be reported. Some do not trust the police (9%), some do not believe that reporting will change anything (8%), while some are used to such incidents (8%).

Victims mention several reasons for not reporting physical attacks. One of them is the perception that reporting to the police in case of violence would not help a foreigner, and that the police would be more responsive to claims from locals, not foreigners. The respondents also mentioned unsuccessful past attempts to turn to the police, when the police refused to accept the complaint or failed to react in an appropriate manner. Information about such cases spreads among other foreigners and students affecting their perception that reporting to the police is not effective or is even pointless. Respondents also mentioned that the reasons for not reporting are fear of adverse

consequences, unwillingness to attract attention to themselves, and that the police will share same views with the offender.

Concerning asylum seekers, an NGO representative said that they do not want to speak about violence and threats of violence widely as they are afraid that such claims may have a negative impact on the outcome of their case.

Interaction with state and law enforcement authorities

27% of surveyed foreign students said that they have negative experience when dealing with state institutions and law enforcement authorities, night club security staff or they have heard about negative experience from others. 14% highlighted negative experience with the police, e.g. extortion of a bribe, physical violence, lack of response when police officers are addressed in a foreign language, and general unkind attitude. Some students also mentioned insulting or unkind attitude from personnel of the Office of Citizenship and Migration Affairs (4%), and the State Border Guard (3%).

Awareness of their rights

The majority of surveyed students (80%) are not informed where to report hate crimes/hate speech/ discrimination. The majority of students would need information where to find help in such cases. Many students as well as NGO/migrants representatives said that they need more information about their rights in different realms of life because such information is available mainly in Latvian. Some foreign students stressed that universities do not provide sufficient information about their rights and that their attempts to submit a complaint to the university about negative attitudes were unsuccessful.

Conclusions

Although the survey unofficial information and perceptions by foreign students and migrants, overall, it confirms significant risk for foreign students and migrants to become victims of hate incidents and the difficulties they may face in integrating into the Latvian society. As such incidents were mentioned quite often it can be concluded that prejudice and stereotypes based on race, ethnic origin, religion and sexual orientation are widespread. Visibly different individuals, such as persons with darker skin colour, Muslims, as well as sexual minorities are groups that face higher risk of becoming victims of hate crimes.

There is very low level of awareness about own rights among foreign students, including information about where to complain in cases of hate incidents. A great challenge is the Lack of trust in the police is a serious challenge, as respondents believe that the police is not interested in resolving their cases. There has been hardly any contact among local NGOs and foreign students, and the response of universities to hate incidents has been limited or non-existent.

Quotes:

“I am "lucky" because I don't have "coloured skin" so I did not have any struggle about it. But really, even when I discussed with some Latvian people, even those who are very educated are racist. And if I would received those kind of comments, I would never ever want to come back to this country, even if I appreciate the landscape, the culture and so on. I think it is a very, very big gap in the Latvian citizen's culture. They are really not open-minded to dark-skinned people and Arabs.”

Student from France

“An elderly woman in the trolley-bus told to my dark-skinned friend: “black as a satan, nigger!””

Student from Ireland

“A man in the tram started staring at me with disgust and with his hand showed motion of cutting his throat of and then pointed at me. Then he passed me and said in Latvian "you should die and go back to your country disgusting dog". (..) It's a horrible situation which I hope no one will have to go through.”

Student from Sweden

“Man shouted LOOK NIGGAS ARE INVADING while dark-skinned persons were entering the bus”

Student from Germany

“The situation that happens the most is that people feel the need to lean in my personal space and whisper or scream the N-word and make monkey noises and tell me to go back home in the banana boat I came in”

Student from Sweden

“Silly teenagers touching my hair or commenting on my skin colour, trying to take my picture without permission and countless racial slurs”

Student from Ireland

“Sadly I'm used to it, all the weird stares and abusive name calling I just block it out and ignore because I try not to let the situation escalate or give the person what they want which is usually attention or a response from me. It sucks but what else can I do”

Student from Ireland

“My friend was forced to run six kilometers while the police car kept driving behind him. Every time he stopped, they pushed on his knees so he would run faster. After an hour they gave back his passport, phone and credit cards”

Student from Sweden

“They understood that we are from Turkey and hit my friend on the head with a bottle”

Student from Turkey

“Once was hit on the head by an elderly lady for not speaking Latvian or Russian, and have been yelled at many times for not being fluent in Latvian/Russian.”

Student from Norway

“Why would you care? What would you do? Racism and discrimination is so "normal" now it's become neutralised. Every time I try to make it known that what was said is not okay am told that am exaggerating. What am I suppose to do with the consequences that what will happen if a teacher is reported? What should I do with all the hate and problems that the department in question while give me?

Student from Sweden

The survey and interviews were conducted by the Latvian Centre for Human Rights within the framework of the project “Promotion civic engagement in eliminating discrimination and intolerance”. The project was implemented from 1 July 2016 to 31 October 2016. It was funded from the Latvian government “NGO fund” which is administered by the Society Integration Foundation. Latvian Centre for Human Rights bears full responsible for the content of this publication.



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