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## HUMAN RIGHTS SITUATION IN THE BALTIC STATES

### ISSUE

The Baltic states face the challenge of re-establishing their national identities while respecting the rights of their large Russian-speaking minorities.

### BACKGROUND

Russian minorities in Estonia and Latvia have been the main focus of international concern. Moscow has attempted to link the withdrawal of Russian troops from these countries to the status of the Russians that remain. Lithuania's small Polish and Russian minorities are not currently an issue.

#### Latvia:

Latvia is perhaps in the most precarious position with respect to minority problems. Ethnic Latvians comprise a bare majority of the population (52%), and in many parts of the country (including Riga) are in the minority. Russians make up 34% of the population, Belarusians 4.5%, Ukrainians and other nationalities 9.5%.

Tensions have arisen as Latvians face the threat of becoming a minority in their own country and as Russian-speakers watch their pre-independence status erode and fear for their rights. About 600,000 Russian-speaking residents were denied the chance to vote in the June 1993 elections as they were not considered citizens under existing legislation. The Latvian parliament is currently debating controversial new citizenship legislation.

Observers from the UN, the CSCE, and the Council of Europe broadly agree that Latvia is not abusing the rights of its minorities. Many have urged a more rapid implementation of recommendations designed to improve the situation, however. A CSCE Mission of Long Duration to Latvia has been established for this purpose.

#### Estonia:

The Russian minority in Estonia comprises 30% of the population, approximately one-quarter of whom are citizens of Estonia. Tensions between the Estonian and Russian communities were exacerbated by Estonian residency legislation and by informal referenda on secession held in the largely Russian-speaking north-east. Legislation allowing non-citizens to vote in local elections is bringing Russians into the political process at the municipal level.