Consideration of the Report of the Republic of Estonia submitted under article 44 of the Convention on the Rights of the Child

**Introductory Statement by**

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Mister Chairman,

Honourable Members of the Committee

It is a great honour for the delegation of the Republic of Estonia to participate in the current session. While regretfully many years have passed since the last time our delegation appeared before the Committee, the Convention, as well as the Committee’s last concluding observations for Estonia and the general comments of the Committee, have played an increasingly central role in influencing Estonia’s policies on topics related to children’s rights. We will do our best to assist the Committee in considering our periodic report and would like to emphasize our commitment to the submission of future reports in a timely manner.

Honourable Committee, let me introduce the Estonian delegation – Mr Andre Pung, Ambassador, Permanent Mission of Estonia to the United Nations and Other International Organisations in Geneva; Ms Hanna Vseviov, Head of Children and Families Department, Ministry of Social Affairs; Ms Signe Riisalo, Head of Child Welfare Policy, Ministry of Social Affairs; Ms Heli Paluste, Head of Health Care Unit, Ministry of Social Affairs; Mr Aare Pere, Counsellor, Analysis Division, Criminal Policy Department, Ministry of Justice; Ms Elise Nikonov, Chief Specialist, Department of Children and Families, Ministry of Social Affairs; Mrs Triinu Kallas, 1st Secretary, Permanent Mission of Estonia to the United Nations and Other International Organisations in Geneva.

Dear Committee, as the periodic report covers mainly the state of affairs up to year 2011 (and partly up to 2013), I’m going to emphasize not only the content of the report, but will also give a short reflection to relevant recent developments. Let me emphasize that in a country with only 1,3 million inhabitants and 233 000 children it is evident that the well-being of every child is utmost important. Therefore, the state expenditures to family and child related social, health and education policies and measures have been rising yearly and reached approximately 1 billion euros, which makes round 10% from the overall state budget.

In 2010, the Department for Children and Families was created in the Ministry of Social Affairs, which was followed by the adoption of the Strategy for Children and Families for the years of 2012 to 2020. The Strategy defines the most important cross-sectoral objectives and activities for guaranteeing well-being of all children's and families and lay an emphasis on evidence-based policymaking. Also, the institution of Child Ombudsman was created in the office of the Chancellor of Justice from 2011. These important structural changes have set a strong foundation for further advancement of children's rights in Estonia.

Mr Chair, one recent achievement, which belongs to the most important steps in furthering children’s rights, has been the adoption of the new Child Protection Act in 2014, which did not only modernize the principles regarding children’s rights, but also led to the establishments of the well-functioning state child protection service from 1st of January of 2016.

I’m glad to emphasize that the Child Protection Act sets a strong basis for guaranteeing children’s rights not only in the social welfare sector, but in all fields of life, including health, education and justice systems. The Act emphasises our commitment to prevention, early intervention and cross-sectoral cooperation. In order to secure that these principles are fully enforced, the Act expressly defines responsibilities of different stakeholders.

Firstly, a number of responsibilities apply to *all* public and private persons. One of such obligation is to set the best interest of the child as a primary consideration in all decisions affecting children, and in the course of ascertaining the best interest of the child, to seek and take into account the child’s opinion. Secondly, all persons who offer any measures to children, have an obligation to cooperate with other such parties to guarantee the best possible outcomes for the children concerned. And thirdly, each and every person who has knowledge of a child in need of assistance, has an explicit obligation to notify the local government or the helpline service 116 111. The helpline service promptly forwards the notification to local governments child protection worker, and if necessary, gives immediate advice to the caller. In addition to adults who may gain knowledge of a child in need, the service is widely known and used by children.

Dear Committee, I’m glad to announce that following the example of many other countries, the Child Protection Act bans the corporal punishment of children, with adoption and enforcement of that principle, Estonia is now a member of rather exclusive family of countries in the world setting the wellbeing of children to the first place in their policies and practice.

To further guarantee that these provisions, laid down in the law, are implemented in real life, significant steps have been taken to support parents in raising the children without violence. In addition to several NGO-s who promote and teach positive parenting practices, in recent years, the government has piloted an evidence-based parenting programme and created a widespread public campaign, which includes a website with videos helping parents to tackle most common parenting challenges in a child-friendly manner.

The central professional for a child in need of assistance is the child protection worker in local government. Upon becoming aware of a child in need of assistance, the child protection worker has an obligation to promptly assess the physical, medical, psychological, emotional, social, cognitive, educational and economic situation of the child and the parenting skills of the person raising the child. The local government must develop, and based on the assessment, offer measures that are based on the child’s needs, support the relations between the child and the persons raising the child, support the social coping skills, which are accessible, timely, effective and have a long-term positive effect.

Throughout the years, one difficulty in guaranteeing children’s rights has been the unequal capacity of local governments, whereby for smaller local municipalities, it has not always been possible to hire specialised child protection workers. This situation has been gradually improving, as in last 10 years, the number of child protection workers in local municipalities has increased from 153 to 226, while the number of children per one child protection worker has decreased from 1726 to 1091. Further improvements are planned in the course of the currently occurring administrative reform, which includes the merging of smaller local municipalities, resulting in bigger and stronger ones with solid professional capacities.

In addition, the Child Protection Act sets forth several commitments by the central government in supporting local municipalities in child protection work. Most importantly, a specialised Unit of Child Protection has been created and has already started work under the Social Insurance Board. The Child Protection unit has local representation in four regions of the country and through newly recruited 30 specialists provides direct assistance to local governments in resolving complicated cases, as well as coaching and supervising in the preparation of development plans and services supporting the well-being of children. In addition, the state has committed to continuous organising and financing in-service training for all child protection workers. It is worth to mention that one uniform electronic case management and data gathering system is used state-wide to support child protection workers in local government. Availability of reliable data is a cornerstone for evidence based policies.

In the last years, there have been considerable increases in family benefits and thereby improvements in reducing child poverty. Since 2014, universal child benefit for a family with one child has increased from 19 euros per month to 50; for a family with 2 children from 38 to 100 and, most significantly, for a family with 3 children from 57 to 500 euros per month (starting from July 2017). In the course of last 10 years, child poverty has decreased – absolute poverty has decreased from 15% in 2005 to 4,6 % in 2015 – the decrease has been more than three times. According to the prognosis, the further increases in family benefits will have a considerable effect on child poverty – relative poverty is estimated to decrease further by 15% and absolute poverty by 41%.

Special consideration has also been given to single parent households. As one of the reasons for the high poverty risk of single-parent households is that the other parent does not pay maintenance for the children, a maintenance support scheme was introduced. The legal change, which entered into force at the beginning of the current year, guarantees that when a parent does not fulfil his or her maintenance obligation towards his or her child, the maintenance support – a 100 euros per month per child - is paid by the state. The state will then claim back the support from the debtor parent.

In addition to the aforementioned developments, there have been gradual improvements regarding specific vulnerable groups of children. Firstly, alternative care has become continuously more family-like and child-friendly, as the number and quality of training offered to service providers has significantly improved and children are increasingly placed in families or substitute home families consisting of no more than 8 children each.

Secondly, in cooperation of various ministries, legal and policy changes have been prepared to guarantee that children in conflict with the law do not receive excessive punitive reactions, but instead, restorative justice measures are used and the main emphasis is on offering assistance and necessary treatments to the child. Thirdly, to better assist children who have suffered from sexual violence, Estonia has adopted the Barnahus-model, which helps to guarantee that the child victim is listened to in a child-friendly manner and receives immediate and high quality treatment and care. The first Barnahus has already been launched, developments for others are underway.

Children have a right to be heard as equal members of the community. One important improvement to enable child participation in practice has been granting 16-18-year-old children the right to vote at local government elections. The first opportunity to exercise this right arises already in the current year. To prepare children to exercise this right, awareness rising activities have been planned by the Chancellor of Justice and youth NGO-s.

Dear Members of Committee, let me also draw your attention to the highlights of several trends in the health status of our children. The share of children rating their health as very good has steadily increased from 29 in 2012 to 33 percent in 2014. Infant death rate has decreased from 4,4 in 2006 to 2,7 per 1000 live births. Also child and adolescent death rate per 100 000 has decreased from 61,2 to 37,9 during same time period.

It is important to underline that all children in Estonia are fully covered with health insurance, which gives them very wide scale of primary health care (including preventive school health services) and all special health care services. I’m happy to announce that starting from next month all new-borns are automatically registered to the family doctor’s patients list after their birth.

Similarly, all children in Estonia have a right and access to free basic and secondary education, which also has to take into account the special needs of every child. In the most recent PISA test, the results of the students in Estonia were the 3rd best in the world. Also, Estonia's education system has proven to be internationally successful in guaranteeing equally high quality education to children from various social-economic backgrounds. One of the current priorities in education is combatting school bullying. The government has committed to guaranteeing that by 2020, in all kindergartens and at least 90 % of schools would be covered by evidence-based violence bullying prevention programmes.

Regardless of the progress that has already been made, it is clear, that to keep moving towards a world in which each and every child grows up in an atmosphere of happiness, love and understanding, and has a chance to fully realise his or her potential, much work still lies ahead of us. We acknowledge the further challenges and appreciate all suggestions. Dear Mr Chair, Dear Committee Members, we will now do our best to answer all your questions as thoroughly as we can.