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Estonia: Language police gets more powers to harass

Estonia must curb the discriminatory powers of the country's language proficiency watchdog, Amnesty International said. In a letter to Estonia's Prime Minister Andrus Ansip, the organization's Secretary General Irene Khan today called the government's Language Inspectorate "repressive and punitive in nature" and "counter-productive in promoting social integration and social cohesion."

The Inspectorate was established in 1998 under the jurisdiction of the Ministry of Education. It monitors Estonian language proficiency of the employed population, issuing certificates and determining the minimum fluency levels required by law. To this end, the Inspectorate carries out both announced and unannounced monitoring, including visits to work places.

Irene Khan's letter is in response to the amendments of the Law on Language, introduced earlier this month and taking effect on 1 March this year which extend the powers of the Language Inspectorate to recommending dismissals of employees for insufficient Estonian language skills, making people who already have a language certificate re-sit a language exam and nullifying the language certificates of those who fail a re-sit of their language exam.

"These amendments mean that people belonging to linguistic minorities will be in an even more vulnerable position on the labour market," Irene Khan said in her letter.

Estonia has a sizeable linguistic, predominantly Russian-speaking, minority which constitutes roughly a third of the population. Estonia's stringent language requirements for employment, which have come under criticism from the United Nations and the Council of Europe as well as representatives of civil society, mean that linguistic minorities find themselves disadvantaged on the labour market and are disproportionately affected by unemployment.

Amnesty International has repeatedly highlighted to the Estonian authorities the fact that many persons belonging to linguistic minorities are afraid of and feel harassed by the Language Inspectorate, and that the repressive and punitive nature of the Language Inspectorate prevents the realization of human rights for all in Estonia.

A resident of Tallinn recently e-mailed Amnesty International:

"I used to work as a taxi driver but lost my job thanks to the Language Inspectorate. They call you to the transport commission for the slightest infraction of the high way code where the ladies from the Language Inspectorate are waiting for you. Everything is well planned. They call only the Russian speakers. They

can sack you not because you are a bad worker, not because passengers have been complaining but because you don't know Estonian well. I have three children, a mortgage and an alcoholic husband but nobody cares. I have to pay for language courses and they are not cheap -- two or three monthly salaries. I don't have a job and I cannot pay for the Estonian language courses. How am I going to live? Isn't this discrimination?"

Amnesty International urges the Estonian government to re-consider the latest amendments to the Law on Language and consider more constructive approaches to linguistic integration, such as free or fully reimbursable Estonian language classes for all, rather than the repressive, punitive, and ultimately alienating measures used by the Language Inspectorate.

See also: *Estonia: Linguistic minorities -- discrimination must end*,
<http://web.amnesty.org/library/index/eur510022006>

Public Document

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