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Estonia: Every third person a potential victim of discrimination

For so long, we have been under Russian influence, forced to learn Russian. It is important that we assert our national identity now in order for our culture and our language to survive and develop.

Johannes, ethnic Estonian in his mid-20s

I am happy that Estonia is independent. I can see that the future is brighter for kids here than it is in Russia or would have been in the Soviet Union. But I am sad for myself. I used to be an engineer, now I am considered a useless Russian who does not speak Estonian and does not contribute to society.

Dmitri, a stateless man in his 50s from the Russian-speaking linguistic minority

(Tallinn, Estonia) Amnesty International welcomes the openness of the Estonian authorities to discuss one of the country's long-standing human rights issues -- the discrimination and exclusion from everyday life that a third of the population often experiences. These people are the Russian-speaking linguistic minority who face limited access to the labour market and who have restricted minority rights.

Amnesty International's delegates have presented the organization's report, *Estonia: Linguistic minorities in Estonia: Discrimination must end*, to government officials. They have called on the authorities of Estonia to improve access to employment for Russian speakers and become more proactive in finding solutions that reflect the needs of minorities.

In particular, Amnesty International is calling for Estonia to reconsider its decision not to recognize its Russian speaking minority as a linguistic minority and comprehensively review the structure and working methods of the Language Inspectorate.

"The way the Language Inspectorate has been implementing the Law on Language is not only ineffective in promoting the Estonian language, but also has created a fear of state institutions and a perceived job insecurity thus further alienating Russian speakers from Estonian society," said David Diaz-Jogeix, Europe and Central Asia Deputy Programme Director at Amnesty International.

"We welcome the commitment made by Estonian government officials to reimburse people for the costs of all Estonian language courses as of 2007. We welcome the pledge of the Estonian authorities to make the transition for Russian-speaking secondary school students from Russian into Estonian language more gradual. However, we are concerned that the levels of support for teachers and students to cope with the

transition is inadequate and may lead to weaker academic performance, increased drop-out rates and further social marginalization.”

Nearly 13 per cent of people belonging to minorities were unemployed in 2005, compared to around 5 per cent of ethnic Estonians. A number of international treaties contain provisions which oblige states to respect and protect the right to work. However, the citizenship and language requirements for employment both in the public and in the private sector limit access to employment for Russian speakers.

People who were born and have lived all their lives in Estonia but have not been able to gain Estonian citizenship are deprived of the possibility of working as state or municipal officials, meaning they are deprived of the opportunity to contribute to their communities according to their potential.

Even in the private sector Russian speakers may face barriers in the labour market because of language requirements, for professions which deal with the public in areas where the vast majority of clients are Russian speakers. This problem is particularly pertinent in the north-eastern city of Narva where 93 per cent are Russian speakers yet many people find themselves unemployed as they cannot speak Estonian.

"Russian speakers are caught in a vicious circle -- they do not have the language skills required by the government to get many jobs and they cannot get these qualifications as they do not have the money to acquire them, either because they are unemployed or too poor," David Diaz-Jogeix said.

"It is the responsibility of the government to provide a pragmatic and needs-based solution and it can do this by allowing stateless people to work in the public sector and amending private sector language requirements to allow non-Estonian speakers to hold suitable jobs."

According to Estonian law, only citizens of the country have the possibility to be considered as belonging to a national minority. This means that nearly 20 per cent of the population of Estonia cannot enjoy internationally recognized minority rights despite belonging to the Russian-speaking minority.

"The Estonian authorities must reconsider its present definition of what constitutes a national minority to acknowledge the existence of a *de facto* Russian-speaking linguistic minority, so that all Russian speakers regardless of whether or not they are citizens of Estonia can enjoy their minority rights," David Diaz-Jogeix said.

"Consolidation of national identity must not be at the expense of minorities' rights."

See: *Estonia: Linguistic minorities in Estonia: Discrimination must end* AI Index: EUR 51/002/2006
<http://web.amnesty.org/library/index/engeur510022006>

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