

AI Index: PRE 01/208/2009
03 June 2009

Lithuania: Proposed law would violate human rights and reinforce homophobia

Amnesty International today condemned the Lithuanian parliament, the Seimas, for voting to proceed with a bill that institutionalizes homophobia and violates the right to freedom of expression and the right to be free from discrimination.

Yesterday, the Seimas voted by an overwhelming majority to move forward to a final vote on an amendment to the "Law on the Protection of Minors against the Detrimental Effect of Public Information". If passed, the amendment would prohibit the discussion of homosexuality in schools and ban any reference to it in public information that can be viewed by children.

"By voting to move forward with this bill, the Seimas has reinforced discrimination based on a person's sexual orientation," said Nicola Duckworth, Europe and Central Asia Programme Director at Amnesty International.

The proposed amendment would class homosexuality alongside issues such as the portrayal of physical or psychological violence, the display of a dead or cruelly mutilated body of a person, and information that arouses fear or horror, or encourages self-mutilation or suicide.

"The amendment denies the right to freedom of expression and deprives students access to the support and protection they may need," said Nicola Duckworth. "The Lithuanian parliament must respect everyone's full rights and reject this amendment when it comes to the final vote."

If the amendment is passed into law, Lithuania would be in breach of its international obligations. Lithuania has an obligation to act in the best interests of the child – including its lesbian, gay, bisexual or transgender children.

Background

The new law is part of a growing climate of intimidation and discrimination in Lithuania against lesbians, gay men and bisexual and transgender people. In the past year, municipal authorities have issued derogatory statements and an EU initiative, the "For Diversity, Against Discrimination" touring truck, was banned in Vilnius and Kaunas. The Mayor of Kaunas said that "[the] homosexual festival may cause many negative emotions."

Yesterday was the first reading of the draft law in full plenary. Many parliamentarians were not present for the vote, but of those that were 57 voted in favour of the law, two against and eight abstained.

The proposed amendment goes against the joint statement that Lithuania signed at the UN General Assembly

in December 2008, which reaffirmed that human rights apply equally to every human being regardless of sexual orientation or gender identity.

The UN Committee on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights recently adopted a General Comment elaborating on the non-discrimination provision of that convention. The General Comment stated that parties should ensure that sexual orientation is not a barrier to realising Covenant rights, including the right to education.

In 2002, the UN Committee on the Rights of the Child expressed concern about similar legislation in the UK. The legislation was introduced in 1988 and finally taken off the statute book in September 2003.

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