

National minorities in Latvia

Discrimination and intolerance, aggressive nationalism and xenophobia

September 30th, 2008

Very briefly about the situation with national minorities in Latvia. We have reported for many times about the general situation, so it's no need to repeat it once more. Just few multiples from the last year:

- population of Latvia de facto is bilingual – for 40% of population Russian is their mother tongue and is used in families;

- the whole population of Latvia in 2008 is 2 millions 266 thousands persons. The number of non-citizens in 2007 was 400 thousands, it's 17,6 % of the whole population. But counting this percentage from the population of national minorities in Latvia it's 42% of all minorities' persons.

- in one of the Latvian regions Latgale more, than 50% of population are Russian-speaking, but in the main city of this region – Daugavpils 80% of population has Russian as the mother tongue.

Inspire of all this facts, as it was reported also in the previous years, schools with the education in Russian are forced by Educational law to redid 60% of teaching to Latvian language, it means that classes, such as mathematic, chemistry and other are teaching in Latvian, which is not mother tongue for pupils and usually for teacher as well. Also the final exams in these schools in the last year were passed in Latvian. As shows the independent monitoring of the results of examination in the year 2008, this educational and final exams system fast reduces the number of school leavers, successfully passing the examination, in Russian schools. The results of examination were compared with the examination results in schools with Latvian teaching language and with the results of examination in the same schools with teaching language in Russian in previous years.

The second main problem for national minorities, still are the rights of Latvian non-citizens. There are 80 differences in citizens and non-citizens rights, inter alia 30 restrictions for non-citizens for employment in different spheres, for example it's restricted for non-citizens to be employed in any state services, but there are restrictions for employment in private sphere as well: lawyer, marshal, patent rights specialist etc. are in the list of restricted professions for non-citizens. The main difference is that non-citizens are fully deprived of voting rights, even in the local elections.

Developments and changes of the situation in Latvia in 2008:

March 6: Saeima has voted on granting voting rights for non-citizens at local elections. 22 MPs have voted “for”, 51 against, 6 abstained. Amendments were

submitted by For Human Rights in United Latvia (PCTVL) and supported by „Harmony Center” (SC) fraction. One of the abstainers, ex-premier A. Bērziņš has shouted from his place „Right!” on commission’s disapproval with proposal, despite his party promises to support it.

<http://www.saeima.lv/steno/Saeima9/080306/Balsoj/007.htm>

The following are some from those international institutions which have recommended to Latvia granting voting rights for non-citizens at local elections (like it is made in Estonia): UN Committee on the Elimination of Racial Discrimination, European commission on Racism and Intolerance, UN Human Rights Committee, CoE Commissioner for Human Rights, Congress of Local And Regional Authorities of Europe, European Parliament, ESCO Parliamentary Assembly

On 16 March, annual march of Waffen SS Latvian Legion veterans and their supporters took place in the centre of Riga city, gathering between some hundreds and 1500 people, according to various countings we’ve found.

The difference from 2007 is, that counter-meeting of Latvian NGO “Anti-fascist Committee” was refused by Riga municipality “due to security reasons”; commenting this decision, Executive director of Riga A. Grīnbergs has called counter-meeting „obviously provocative”. Refusal was upheld by administrative court. The counter-meeting still took place, and police has separated its participants from march.

One should note that one of pro-SS applications for meeting in Riga on March 16 (from NSS party) was rejected, too. However, this happened due to formal grounds (NSS is in process of dissolution due to not submitting documents for re-registration). Nevertheless, NSS took part in procession, and has invited representatives of a well-known German NPD party.

Mayor of Riga J. Birks (deputy, head of TB/LNNK party, which is in the ruling coalition on the national level too) had promised to participate in procession, but has preferred to visit cemetery of legionnaires in rural area instead. Probably this has happened due to “Harmony Centre” promise to call for his demission otherwise. However, MP P. Tabūns of the same party has participated in the march.

Party „All to Latvia” (1,5% of votes in 2006 Parliamentary elections) asks to restore official commemoration of 16th March, which has existed in 1998 and 1999.

Simon Wiesenthal Centre has condemned allowing the events of March 16 as distorting history by Latvian government.

April 1 Government has supported draft of amendments to Administrative Violations Code prepared by Ministry of Justice. Amendments foresee, on one side, harsher fines for violations of language legislation: for employing people who don’t speak Latvian at required level and for not using Latvian in seals and on other side, provide possibility to use warning instead of fines in some cases.

July 17 – Parliament rejects proposal (ForHRUL) to allow local governments to introduce a co-official language in their territory if the amount of its speakers exceed than 50% of population.

For – 21, against – 65, abstained – 1.

June 5: Saeima rejects with 68 votes against 24 proposal by ForHRUL group to allow self-governments introducing minority language as working language alongside Latvian. During debates, former Minister of Justice, MP Dz. Rasnačs (TB/LNNK) accuses authors of proposal in breaching the promise of MP „to strengthen Latvian

language as the sole official language” and asks Commission on ethics to evaluate actions of opponents.

Legal commission of Saeima welcomes with 9 votes against 2 introducing punishments for illegal providing information in „foreign” languages in cases, when law requires use of Latvian only. On June 12 Saeima has adopted these amendments to Code of administrative violations.

One must stress that these punishments aren't foreseen for lack of use of Latvian (i.e., with a legitimate aim) – they work when somebody „illegally” provides information in minority language along Latvian, too. Criticism is heard not only from minorities, but also from former policemen's organization headed by J. Ādamsons (HC) and even from one of the ruling parties: member of LPP/LC R. Strode, mayor of Daugavpils (the second-biggest city of Latvia), has condemned amendments as incorrect. She points to rights of tax-payers to get information in a convenient language, especially in Daugavpils where majority is Russian-speaking.

June 9: Minority activist A. Kazakov, deported from Latvia in 2004, was refused a visa to Latvia despite getting a request to stand before court which has hear his deportation case. June 19 – Supreme Court has decided that Kazakov's case must be reviewed in a lower court due to violation of proceedings law.

June 19: Proposal of ForHRUL to calculate pensions for years worked outside Latvia not only for citizens, but also for non-citizens, is rejected with 22 „for”, 65 „against” and 3 „abstained”.

June 29: Saeima adopts amendments to Law on local elections in second reading, introducing 5 % threshold everywhere (during former elections, it was in capital only). ForHRUL proposal to grant voting rights in local elections for non-citizens and TB/LNNK proposal to re-introduce language requirement for candidats (cancelled after loss of Latvia in ECHR *Podkolzina* case and UN HRC *Ignatane* case) are rejected.

5% threshold will be a hit to minority representation, especially taking into account the reform of local self-governments, which ususally means merging towns with some rural self-governments (minorities are less represented in rural area)

September 11 – Parliament postpones ForHRUL proposal to grant voting rights to non-citizens with 20 votes for and 65 despite support by 18 NGOs and meeting held near the building of Parliament.

<http://www.saeima.lv/steno/Saeima9/080911/Balsoj/008.htm>

September 18 – Parliament rejects the proposal with 23 votes for, 63 against and 5 abstaining

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