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Gay education ban voted in

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The Baltics have developed a reputation for homophobia

VILNIUS - The Seimas (Lithuanian parliament) has voted to pass the amended Law on the Protection of Minors against the Detrimental Effect of Public Information, which would see information about homosexuality banned from schools and other places that can be accessed by youths.

“The subject of homosexuality is not welcome in our schools,” a Seimas worker who asked to remain anonymous told TBT after the June 16 vote.

A vote on June 11 saw a related law narrowly voted down. The law would have seen proponents of homosexuality fined or imprisoned for up to three years.

The law was strongly backed by the conservative ruling coalition, which favors a “traditional family model” that excludes people of different sexual orientation and single parent families, among others.

“The Seimas voted well. One aspect of propaganda of homosexuality for children is forbidden. It is also forbidden to discuss bad feelings about homosexuality – this is a good balance,” conservative coalition member Vilija Aleknaite-Abramikiene, who voted for the law, told TBT.

She said Lithuanians tolerated homosexuality, but didn’t want their children exposed to it in schools, adding that she also agrees with the ban against hate speech against homosexuals.

“We prefer a family model, the traditional family model, but of course if parents want to teach such propaganda they can, but according to our constitution, children are under protection,” she said.

Human rights workers and gay community representatives have slammed the bill, saying that on top of being discriminatory it is not well defined and leaves open many possibilities for abuse of the law.

“Everybody could be a victim of this law,” said Henrikas Mickevicius, director of the Vilnius-based Human Rights Monitoring Institute.

“There is no definition of this propaganda and how it works and what is punishable. Then there are ‘family values.’ We need to know what that is – it is open for interpretation and misinterpretation: these terms are value laden.”

“Whoever looks at this could see it differently and it could be propaganda or not – we are opening possibilities for abuses and misuses and punishments for people. This means [there are] restrictions on freedom of speech – it is a fundamental human right,” Mickevicius added.

Arturas Rudomanskis, chairman of the Tolerant Youth Association, told TBT that the gay community will suffer and homophobic tendencies will flourish, but that those who seek to protect gays would suffer also.

“Young people will not get information about homosexuals. If the teacher tried to help a homosexual pupil – if they were being bullied or ridiculed by their peers – if they told them that this child is okay and does not have a disease and it isn’t a problem, then they could get in trouble,” he said.

“This will make Lithuanians more homophobic because no one will want to talk about homosexuality.”

Rudomanskis said this law would be further reaching than the classroom. Gay Web sites are the gay community’s main medium of communication, and he said these could be shut down.

“Stopping the gay and lesbian Web sites is the best way to fight the LGBT,” he said, adding that films

such as “Brokeback Mountain” or “Milk” would be restricted to adult-only viewing.

Aleknaite-Abramkiene said the law would not discriminate, but ensure peace in the community.

“The public opinion is quite clear – they don’t want a demonstration of sexuality. People want to live under their rules and let one another be himself, but not to intervene in public life and influence youth.”

“This law will create a democratic balance between the majority and the minority – we want peace,” she said.

Mickevicius said lawmakers would need to prove to the European Court of Human Rights that there was a “pressing social need” to pass the law, or it would be deemed discriminatory and a violation of the right to freedom of speech.

The new law makes it illegal to discuss homosexuality in schools and bans any reference to it in public information that can be viewed by children.

Controversially, the amendment classes homosexuality alongside “the portrayal of physical or psychological violence, displaying a dead or mutilated body, [and] information that arouses fear or horror or that encourages self abuse or suicide.”

The gay community and supporters of it are planning to petition the president, who has 10 days to veto the law following its signing in the parliament by Seimas Speaker Arunas Valinskas.

“We are going to get a petition from the gay community and human rights organizations and student union others and take it to the president and ask for a veto. There is a possibility for a veto, but we need action from outside and it needs to be strong,” Rudomanskis said.

The Seimas adopted the law with 67 votes for and three against. Four Seimas members abstained from voting.

Human rights campaigners across Europe spoke out against the law when it was first mentioned, saying Lithuania had no right to belong to the European community if it passed the law.

“This legislation is homophobic discrimination. As such, it clearly violates the European Convention on Human Rights and the EU Charter of Fundamental Rights. It also violates the equality and anti-discrimination clauses of the UN Universal Declaration of Human Rights and the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child,” Human rights campaigner Peter Tatchell told PinkNews.co.uk.

“Lithuania has signed up to these international humanitarian declarations but it is now defying them. It wants the rights of EU and UN membership, but not the responsibilities.”

“I hope the EU will take swift and tough action. It must make it clear to Lithuania and other renegade homophobic member states that membership of the EU is conditional on adherence to EU laws and values. Member states cannot be allowed to pick and choose.”

The Lithuanian Gay League was not contactable at the time when TBT went to press.