

EC didn't stall initiative on penalties for downplaying Communist crimes — Lithuanian Justice Minister

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VILNIUS, Dec 22, BNS — The European Commission (EC) did not stall the initiative of Lithuania and other Eastern European countries to envisage penalties across the European Union (EU) for denial and downplaying of crimes committed by Communist regimes, Lithuania's Justice Minister Remigijus Šimašius said on Wednesday.

After studying the report, the minister said that the EC did not find unanimous support to the new legal act but pledged to continue debates in this respect.

"The report does not prevent but opens doors for further discussion. This is Lithuania's achievement. It is important that the issue has been taken to a relevant level," the minister told BNS.

Šimašius spoke in comment of the EC report on evaluation of crimes of totalitarian regimes on the EU level. The report should be published shortly, however, an official from the commission has already confirmed that there were no conditions for the legislative initiative at the moment and the Commission would continue analyzing the matter.

Lithuania and a group of Central and Eastern European countries want the EC to launch an initiative to criminalize denial and gross debasement of crimes committed by Communist regimes, not only the Nazis.

Some countries, including Lithuania, have already adopted relevant laws.

"It is wrong to divide things: more or fewer victims or murders for social status or on ethnic grounds. If a step was taken to punish for downplaying victims and vindication of crimes, it should be done with respect to all crimes because victims of all crimes deserve respect and all perpetrators should be condemned," Šimašius said.

In his words, the report in Britain's daily The Guardian about the EC's rejection

of the initiative launched by Lithuania and another five countries on equal evaluation of all totalitarian regimes was "just one of possible interpretations."

"The Guardian is a left-wing newspaper and it may not like the initiative of Lithuania and other countries," said the Lithuanian minister.

Ministers of Bulgaria, the Czech Republic, Hungary, Latvia, Lithuania and Romania recently urged the EC to give proper evaluation to totalitarian regimes and said they wanted proper amount of attention to crimes by Communist regimes as well.

"The principle of justice should assure a just treatment of victims of every totalitarian regime," the foreign ministers said in a joint letter to Viviane Reding, the European justice commissioner, earlier this month, a copy of which was obtained by BNS.

The Guardian cited the justice commissioner's spokesman Matthew Newman as saying: "There is no consensus on it. The different member states have wildly differing approaches."

"The comments from the office of European Commissioner Viviane Reding suggest there was no absolute and unified support for the need to draft a legal act in the European Union. Nevertheless, I am glad the Commission acknowledged the importance of this aspect in the educational and legal sense, and that it would examine the experience of countries and their legal potential to proceed," he, the Lithuanian justice minister, emphasized.

He said that the EU stance helped seek changes in the educational domain.

In the summer, Lithuania adopted changes to the Criminal Code that envisage up to two years in prison for public support to the Soviet or Nazi Germany's aggression against Lithuania, genocide or other crimes against the humanity committed in Lithuania or against Lithuania's population by the Soviet Union or the Nazi Germany, as well as denial or downplaying of these crimes.

Other European nations have different regulations for denial or downplaying of grave crimes.

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