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# Estonia expected to crack down on human trafficking to avoid US blacklisting

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By Associated Press, Updated: Tuesday, March 20, 10:28 AM

TALLINN, Estonia — Estonia is the only European Union country without a law about human trafficking, but legislators are expected to change that Wednesday in a vote largely prompted by concerns expressed by the United States.

Prostitution is legal in Estonia, but forced prostitution is not. Distinctions between the two are opaque in Estonian laws, according to activists, and the current penal code does not recognize sexual exploitation of a minor or forced labor as crimes.

The new legislative measures would make human trafficking a crime punishable by up to 15 years in prison.

“Despite previous commitments to pass an anti-trafficking law, the (Estonian) government and Parliament have failed to enact” such a law, Michelle Schohn, the spokeswoman for the U.S. Embassy in Estonia, said in an email to The Associated Press.

“Estonia is therefore the only country within the European Union to lack this legislation,” she said, adding that trafficking offenders are rarely sentenced to prison in the Baltic state.

For this reason the U.S. State Department last year put Estonia on its trafficking watchlist, with nations such as Belarus and Russia. That stung this tiny Baltic state of 1.3 million people, which is a close Washington ally and highly sensitive to its image abroad.

The Justice Ministry has fast-tracked legislation to meet an April deadline so that Estonia could avoid being watchlisted for another year.

Andres Anvelt, a lawmaker in the opposition Social Democratic Party, said the bill would facilitate better coordination among prosecutors, police and judges. “It should make their job easier and give a better understanding of the issue,” he said.

But Anvelt, a member of the judicial affairs committee drafting the legislation, also said

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some lawmakers believe current law is “adequate.”

He acknowledged that with such complicated legislation Estonia often needs “pressure from abroad” to expedite passage.

That admission angered Eda Molder, a therapist at MTU Eluliin, a support group for prostitutes and trafficking victims.

“We wish to see substantial changes in legislation, not cosmetic alterations. Are we writing this bill for the Americans or for the trafficking victims?” she said.

Molder is unhappy that some lawmakers have suggested milder punishments than the Justice Ministry.

Under existing law, parts of the human trafficking chain — recruiting, transporting and exploitation — are ignored in Estonia, and culprits walk away either with a mild sentence or a mere fine, Molder says.

The U.S. State Department report said “Estonia is a source, transit, and destination country for women subjected to forced prostitution.”

It said women from rural areas are particularly at risk of being forced into prostitution in the capital, Tallinn, and in countries such as Great Britain, Finland, Germany, Italy, and the Netherlands.

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