

Latvians to Hold Vote on Russian Language

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RIGA — Latvia will hold a referendum early next year on making Russian a second official language, a delicate issue that stirs ethnic tensions in the European Union member.

About a third of the 2.2 million population are native Russian speakers. Twenty years after the Baltic state regained independence as the Soviet Union collapsed, many feel their rights have been undermined or ignored by a Latvian ethnic majority keen to reassert its sovereignty.

Under the constitution, the calling of a referendum was forced after parliament on Thursday rejected a bill, prompted by a petition signed by 187,000 citizens or 12 percent of eligible voters, to make Russian an official language.

"There is no other country in the world where the Latvian language can develop," parliament speaker Solvita Aboltina told lawmakers before they voted, summing up the views of many Latvians about their language.

Electoral commission spokeswoman Kristine Berzina said the referendum was likely to be held on Feb. 11 or 18.

The result is almost a foregone conclusion as most ethnic Latvians will reject Russian as a second official language. But the push shows a more assertive stance from the Russian community, whose members have gradually and in increasing numbers gained citizenship and the right to vote.

Their vote has consolidated around the Harmony Center bloc, which came first in an election in September for the first time. Harmony said it also won votes from ethnic Latvians, fed up with three years of austerity from center-right ethnic Latvian government coalitions.

But Harmony was shut out of the new government, which was formed in October when Prime Minister Valdis Dombrovskis took office for a third term. Harmony blamed ethnic discrimination, but the government pointed to differences over policy.

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