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Staunton, January 8 – Estonian President Toomas Hendrik Ilves sharply criticized the Russian government yesterday for destroying the villages of the Vod, a numerically small Finno-Ugric people in Leningrad oblast, and for undermining the identity and promoting the assimilation to Russians of the more than 2.3 million Finno-Ugric peoples in Russia.

Speaking in Obinitsa, an Estonian village near the Russian border, on the occasion of its being declared the capital of Finno-Ugric peoples for 2015, Ilves pointed out that in the European Union, three Finno-Ugric languages – Estonian, Finnish and Hungarian – are recognized as official languages (m.lenta.ru/news/2015/01/08/finnougri/).

Moreover, in Sweden, Norway and Finland, the Estonian president continued, the Saami, another Finno-Ugric people, have their own parliaments; and in Latvia, the government is working to restore the language and culture of the Livs, a group that has been close to extinction for some time.

But the situation in the Russian Federation is very different, he said. Not only are the largest groups – the Mari, Mordvins and Udmurts who number more than 500,000 each – under pressure to assimilate, but the smallest groups, like the Vod who number fewer than 70, are at high risk.

At present, Ilves said, "we see how the construction of the Ust-Luga Port in northwestern Russia on the shores of the Gulf of Finland is destroying the villages of the Vods. Let us hope that [this will not destroy] the entire people." But there are reasons to fear exactly that because Moscow has severely restricted or stopped offering education in the Finno-Ugric languages."

That "accelerates their assimilation and the disappearance of their cultures," Ilves said.

Even more than the two other Finno-Ugric peoples who now have their own states, the Finns and the Hungarians, Estonia has spoken out on behalf of the Finno-Ugrics who are still occupied by Russia. Its statements have often come in response to pleas from these people to take up their defense. (See, for example, the case reported at lenta.ru/news/2005/06/08/estonia/).

Ilves' statement yesterday represents a response to appeals in recent months from Vod and Izhor activists to Tallinn concerning the violation of their rights in connection with the construction of a new port in Ust-Luga. (On that and for background on these two peoples, see windowoneurasia2.blogspot.com/2014/02/window-on-eurasia-cry-of-despair-from.html)

But President Ilves has taken the lead in defending these peoples even in the absence of such appeals. In 2008, he and the Estonian delegation at the World Congress of Finno-Ugric Peoples, which took place in Khanty-Mansiisk, left the meeting to protest a Russian parliamentarian's attacks on Russia's neighbors (lenta.ru/news/2008/06/30/leave/).

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