

# Nations in Transit 2024 - Estonia

## Author

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## Score changes in 2024

- No score changes in 2024.

## Executive Summary

Estonian politics became more polarized in 2023.<sup>1</sup> The nationalist opposition, including the far-right Conservative People's Party of Estonia (EKRE) and the Isamaa party, confronted the liberal governing coalition comprised of the Reform Party, Estonia 200, and the Social Democratic Party, on defense, military support for Ukraine, taxes, and LGBT+-rights. On foreign policy, the EKRE has pushed to decrease aid to Ukraine and instead focus the government's resources on strengthening Estonia's military. The governing coalition, however, has argued that Estonia can both support Ukraine and prioritize its own defense to deter Russian aggression. Nearly 60,000 Ukrainian refugees have fled to Estonia and been granted permission to stay,<sup>2</sup> which prompted municipal-level initiatives to enhance Ukrainian integration and facilitate a smooth process to receive refugees and returnees.<sup>3</sup>

Domestically, the adoption of a law in June to legalize same-sex marriage and adoption for same-sex couples highlighted the sharp political divisions. The coalition government has been a vocal proponent of liberal democracy and the rules-based international order, while painting the EKRE as antidemocratic due to the party's illiberal platform. At the same time, the Center Party, now in the opposition, has endured tumult since Jüri Ratas was outvoted in September by Mayor of Tallinn Mihhail Kõvart as Center chair. Several prominent members threatened to leave the party in response. Some observers have expressed concerns that the Center Party could shift from a centrist party that has attracted both ethnic Estonians and Russian speakers to a Russian minority party. Such a shift would make the Center Party the first ethnic party to emerge since the mid 1990s. Confrontations between pro-Kremlin and pro-West voices have emerged, particularly in Ida-Viru County in the northeast and the border city of Narva.

Russia's war in Ukraine continued to have a significant impact in Estonia and dominated the election campaign. Allegations that the EKRE had allowed the late Russian mercenary Yevgeny Prigozhin to influence the Estonian elections in 2019 also circulated during the campaign. Prime Minister Kaja Kallas said the coalition agreement had "the face of war."<sup>4</sup> The government has prioritized military defense to ensure that Estonia can deter

aggression on its own, even though the country has been a NATO member since 2004. Military spending will reach 3 percent of the state budget in the next two years, well above the required 2 percent, demonstrating the government's belief that "if the Baltics fall, Berlin will be next," as Minister of Defense Hanno Pevkur stated in November.<sup>5</sup>

During the year, Estonia took steps to strengthen democratic governance, fine-tune the political system, and protect human rights. For example, the government refined a new system that makes judicial documents more accessible and took steps to protect minority rights. Estonia introduced new tools to fight corruption, focusing on the intersection between the private sector and politics. The government rolled out a new regulation that requires public officials to wait six months before they can work for a private enterprise with any connection to their prior public sector work. Estonia continued to learn from other countries to refine its democracy, strengthen the rule of law, and protect fundamental rights.

While stronger rules and requirements are important to improve democratic governance, informal practices and norms and the political climate also affect the quality of governance. The growth of the far-right EKRE since 2015 has contributed to a more polarized, even at times antagonistic political climate. For example, the EKRE led opposition filibusters in 2023 that held up key legislation, including the national budget.<sup>6</sup> The parliament has therefore become less efficient in its decision-making processes, marked by recurring accusations of misconduct, while political parties have turned to the Supreme Court to intervene on for example if parliamentary procedures had been followed. The tone of political debate has also coarsened on all sides and political civility has declined. This contrasts with a political climate of consensus-building and low levels of antagonism that prevailed from the late 1990s until at least 2014.

Prime Minister Kallas has taken a strong stance on Russia since the Ukraine war began. "I do not see any room for compromise on this issue until Russia stops its military activities and the war criminals are brought to justice," Kallas wrote in January, referring to Russian participation in the Olympics.<sup>7</sup> In August, however, the public became aware that Kallas's husband, businessman Arvo Hallik, had maintained business relationships in Russia despite his wife's call for all Estonian businesses to cut their ties to Russia. Faced with immediate calls to resign, Kallas said she was unaware of her husband's actions and refused to take the blame for his mistakes. Although she has maintained her resolve and was re-elected as chair of the Reform party in November, the scandal damaged Kallas politically as her opponents branded her a hypocrite. Since a central part of Kallas's image has been as that of a sharp, honest, straightforward politician, the revelations of ethical misconduct of her husband hit extra hard. The Reform Party's popularity also declined because of the scandal, as Tartu Mayor Urmas Klaas mentioned at the Reform Party's Congress in November.<sup>8</sup>

## At-A-Glance

In Estonia, national governance remains democratic, but the political climate is polarized, and "Kallasgate" did not improve it. Elections are free and voting increasingly easy to perform, thanks to improvements of Estonia's world-leading e-voting system. Civil society organizes broadly, including sexual minorities who have managed to advocate their interests significantly. Media freedom persists, but media ownership concentration is high and the Freedom of Information Act is sometimes hard for journalists to claim. Local

governance remains democratic, however tensions between the Russian-speaking minority and the Estonian majority surfaced in the border-city of Narva, looking over to Russia. The judicial framework has improved through digitalization, and judicial independence is safeguarded through the appointment of several more judges and measures to secure their reasonable working conditions. Estonia is actively working to erase risks and practices of corruption, recently implementing a “revolving door” policy and lobbying regulations.

## National Democratic Governance 1.00-7.00 pts

**Considers the democratic character of the governmental system; and the independence, effectiveness, and accountability of the legislative and executive branches.**

**5.75 /  
7.00**

- During the national elections in March, the center-right Reform Party ran on support for Ukraine, the EU, robust environmental protections, and minority rights. The far-right EKRE criticized the acceptance of Ukrainian refugees and military support for Ukraine. The EKRE is also skeptical of European integration.<sup>9</sup> EKRE campaigned to lower electricity bills by partially abandoning Estonia’s shift to green energy.<sup>10</sup> The elections were seen as a referendum on the government’s support for Ukraine, engagement with the EU, and climate change policies. Six parties won seats in the parliament. Prime Minister Kallas’s Reform Party won with one-third of the vote, while the EKRE, led by Martin Helme, came in second. The Center Party saw the biggest decline in support, losing 10 seats and finishing third.<sup>11</sup> In September, Mikhail Kõlvart replaced Juri Ratas as leader of the Center Party, after a struggle over the position.<sup>12</sup> The liberal Estonia 200 party, founded in 2018 and led by Lauri Hussar, performed well and won 14 seats, while the Social Democratic Party maintained around the same level of support.<sup>13</sup> Support for the Isamaa party declined slightly.<sup>14</sup>
- Polarization between liberal parties and nationalist and conservative parties increased in 2023. The consensual political culture that was once Estonia’s hallmark has been replaced by a climate of confrontation, as demonstrated by the opposition’s filibustering and the coalition partners’ framing of ordinary legislative votes as high-stake general confidence votes.<sup>15</sup> In May, the opposition appealed to the Supreme Court to rule on whether the governing coalition had violated established parliamentary procedures, by presenting bills that they had no mandate for. The opposition then filibustered to prevent these of being voted upon, something explained by the EKRE’s Põlluaas: “We filibustered because a government of liars had come up with a whole range of different bills for which they had not requested a mandate. The filibuster was done in order to prevent an illegal procedure and in this way to prevent [these bills] from being pushed through by a vote of confidence, which is completely unprecedented,” he added. <sup>16</sup> The opposition also accused Prime Minister Kallas of using the speakers in the parliament, who enforce parliamentary rules, as her “extended arm” to make biased decisions in favor of the government instead of impartially leading parliamentary work.<sup>17</sup> The Supreme Court ruled against the opposition, stating that the case was not a legal issue, but one to be handled by the parliament itself. In response, the EKRE attacked the Supreme Court and said its judges should be replaced “with more competent ones.” <sup>18</sup> The EKRE’s charged language raised concerns that the party would politicize future judicial

appointments and threaten the independence of the judiciary. These incidents revealed the extent of tensions in the parliament, where the opposition is turning to an outside party as the Supreme Court to solve questions that are of parliamentary and political nature.

- The new government coalition that formed in April included the Reform Party, Estonia 200, and the Social Democratic Party. There are tensions within the coalition, with the Reform Party and Estonia 200 emphasizing economic liberalism, while the Social Democrats cater more to the middle class and young people across Estonia.<sup>19</sup> However, the coalition has mobilized around reforms such as same-sex marriage and taxes and support for Ukraine, and against the EKRE's illiberalism. The elections gave the three parties in the coalition government a stable majority in the parliament, with 60 out of 101 seats. The largest party in the coalition, the Reform Party, holds six ministries including finance, defense, and justice. Prime Minister Kallas is also a Reform Party member. The Reform Party and Estonia 200 each hold three ministries. The foreign minister, who also is the speaker of the parliament, is a member of Estonia 200.<sup>20</sup> Six ministers are women and seven are men.<sup>21</sup> The EKRE and Isamaa constitute the opposition. The EKRE's political approach is confrontational.<sup>22</sup> For example, EKRE leader Martin Helme said during a debate on national defense, "Her [Prime Minister Kallas] and her entire party's saber-rattling has been turned into a campaign ploy, which I find to be both cynical and irresponsible."<sup>23</sup> The party has openly tried to obstruct decision-making in the parliament through the filibuster. In May, for example, the EKRE filibustered a bill to cut family allowances and raise taxes.<sup>24</sup> These attempts to subvert legislation could lead to gridlock and dysfunction.<sup>25</sup>
- In August, reports emerged that Prime Minister Kallas's husband, Arvo Hallik, had continued doing business in Russia after his wife called for Estonian businesses to cut ties with Russia.<sup>26</sup> Kallas's strong stance against Russia since its invasion of Ukraine in 2022 (she has been called the "Iron Lady" due to her uncompromising position) has raised her international profile.<sup>27</sup> Kallas faced harsh criticism from the media and calls to resign as a result of the scandal. She sometimes refused to answer questions about her husband's ties to Russia after the scandal broke. Former prime minister Andrus Ansip stated in October that journalists should press her even harder on Hallik's Russian business, since "it does not ring very true."<sup>28</sup> The Isamaa party internally debated holding a no-confidence vote in the parliament.<sup>29</sup> However, Kallas refused to step down and has remained in her post. Nevertheless, opinion polls show that public support for the Reform Party had fallen to 15 percent by December while support for Isamaa increased from 19 percent in October to 25 percent in December.<sup>30</sup> Surprisingly, support for the EKRE did not increase following the scandal.<sup>31</sup>

## Electoral Process 1.00-7.00 pts

**Examines national executive and legislative elections, the electoral framework, the functioning of multiparty systems, and popular participation in the political process.**

**6.50 /  
7.00**

- National elections to the Riigikogu, Estonia's 101-seat parliament, were held in March. Turnout was 63 percent and 51 percent of votes were cast over the internet.<sup>32</sup> The national elections in 2023 saw the implementation of reforms introduced to facilitate voting. Voter identification procedures improved in 2021 so that all voters can be located electronically, enabling citizens to vote at any polling station in their electoral district. The new procedures also allowed people who voted in advance electronically to override their vote with a paper ballot cast on election day. A ban on outdoor advertising during the campaign was abolished in the 2023 elections, as was a ban on campaigning on election day.<sup>33</sup> The Reform Party won 31 percent of the vote and 37 seats, the EKRE captured 16 percent and 17 seats, the Center Party received 15 percent and 16 seats, Estonia 200 won 13 percent and 14 seats, the SDE captured 9 percent and 9 seats, and Isamaa won 8 percent and 8 seats.<sup>34</sup>
- Observers found that the election was conducted efficiently and fairly, and that minorities, including Russian speakers, were able to participate without restrictions. Candidates can campaign in minority languages, both orally and in writing. Candidates campaigned in Russian in areas such as Ida-Virumaa in the northeast and Lasnamäe in central Tallinn. No breaches of the language law were reported during the campaign.<sup>35</sup> However, Estonia has no specific quotas on minority representation and does not maintain statistics on the subject.<sup>36</sup>
- 5 percent of the population has an undetermined citizenship, meaning that they are neither Estonian nor Russian citizens. These individuals cannot vote or run for office, but their numbers are declining.<sup>37</sup> International organizations have urged Estonia to repeal its law that bars prisoners from voting.<sup>38</sup> Estonia instituted e-voting in 2005. During the 2023 elections, online voting dominated for the first time. Although there is room for improvement, online voting technology functioned adequately in 2023.<sup>39</sup> However, EKRE leader Martin Helme, without evidence, accused the Reform Party of manipulating the e-voting system to steal the elections.<sup>40</sup> The EKRE appealed to the Supreme Court to annul the election results, but the case was dismissed.<sup>41</sup>
- Political parties with representatives in the parliament get most of their funding from the government. The amount of funding they receive is proportional to the percentage of the vote that they receive. Parties that receive more than 2 percent of the vote (5 percent is the threshold for representation in the parliament) are entitled to some public funding. Parties that receive less than 2 percent of the vote, including newly established parties, do not receive any public funding, which violates the Venice Declaration.<sup>42</sup> Campaign finance laws are clear. Political parties report their incomes and expenditures quarterly. However, there is no limit on campaign spending, which again defies international good practice. Campaign advertising is very important to political parties, but some political parties receive discounts for political advertisements that are not openly reported, which contributes to an unequal playing field in which parties with business and media connections have an undue advantage.
- On March 5, 30 women won seats in the 101-person parliament, a new record. In 2019, 28 women were elected.<sup>43</sup> Among the coalition government parties, the Social Democrats had the highest proportion of women in the parliament, at 44 percent. 36 percent of Estonia 200 representatives and 35 percent of Reform Party legislators were women. Only 25 percent of Center Party legislators and 13 percent of Isamaa representatives were women.

**Assesses the organizational capacity and financial sustainability of the civic sector; the legal and political environment in which it operates; the functioning of trade unions; interest group participation in the policy process; and the threat posed by antidemocratic extremist groups.**

**6.25 / 7.00**

- Civil society organizations (CSOs) remain free to organize and promote their interests and ideas. CSOs advocate for underrepresented and marginalized groups and push for greater inclusivity. Four groups are of particular concern: the Russian-speaking minority that comprises 24 percent of the population, the LGBT+ community, Estonians struggling with mental health issues, and vulnerable Ukrainian refugees. Estonia has gradually integrated Russian speakers since the 1990s, the background of which is to find in the Soviet era. During the 50-year Soviet occupation of Estonia, many Russians, as well as some Belarusians and Ukrainians, moved to Estonia to become industrial workers. Under Soviet rule, these groups enjoyed a privileged position over Estonians and seldom learned the Estonian language. Many remained in Estonia after independence in 1991, but tensions often bubbled up due to lingering resentments stemming from Soviet favoritism. However, the government has softened citizenship requirements for minority groups, and children born to Russian-speaking noncitizen residents are automatically granted Estonian citizenship. However, social contact between different ethnic groups remains limited. The Ministry of Culture commissioned a new survey report on integration that was expected to appear by the end of the year. According to one of the authors, professor emeritus in sociology Marju Lauristin, the Russophone population's geopolitical orientation was divided between Russia and the West. Younger Russian speakers shared the majority's Western geopolitical orientation, indicating a generational westward shift.<sup>44</sup> Some older Russian speakers remained loyal to Estonia and preferred Estonian-produced Russian media to content from Russia. However, some Russian speakers retained loyalty towards Russia.<sup>45</sup> Since the Russian invasion of Ukraine, the government has passed reforms to exclusively teach in the Estonian language in schools and preschools. The reform is intended to strengthen integration and streamline communication between different groups. The coalition agreement has confirmed that this reform would be implemented by 2030 and would cost around €300 million (0.8 percent of GDP) over the next four years.<sup>46</sup>
- The LGBT+ community has organized in Estonia since 2008. In 2023, many employers in the private, public, and nonprofit sectors signed the Diversity Charter, which aims at preventing discrimination towards minorities and secure equal opportunity.<sup>47</sup> In June, the parliament passed legislation that legalized same-sex marriage and adoption by same-sex couples, which Prime Minister Kallas signed into law. The new law was scheduled to come into force in January 2024. Estonia is the first of the 15 former Soviet republics to pass same-sex marriage and LGBT+ adoption laws. <sup>48</sup> Moreover, a 2023 Estonian Human Rights Center survey showed that 56 percent of the population expressed acceptance towards homosexuality, an increase from the last survey conducted in 2021. However, ethnic minorities remained less tolerant of the LGBT+ community, although these groups have grown more tolerant over time.<sup>49</sup> The Estonian

Cooperation Assembly (EKK), a CSO that focuses on human development, has highlighted the challenges that individuals with mental health disorders face. In 2023, the third season of the ETV program Clear Picture focused on mental health. In the spring, the EKK and the Ministry of Social Affairs collaborated to launch the Mental Health Starts Here day tour.<sup>50</sup>

- CSOs often depend on government funding. Civil society leaders have voiced concerns about the criteria the government uses to distribute funds to CSOs and pushed for greater transparency regarding the financing of associations and organizations.<sup>51</sup>

## Independent Media 1.00-7.00 pts

**Examines the current state of press freedom, including libel laws, harassment of journalists, and editorial independence; the operation of a financially viable and independent private press; and the functioning of the public media.**

**6.25 /  
7.00**

- Media concentration is high in Estonia. Three companies—Delfi Meedia AS, Postimees Grupp AS, and Äripäev AS—own many of Estonia’s prominent media outlets, which dampens media pluralism.<sup>52</sup> However, media outlets’ ownership structures are disclosed transparently, which strengthens public confidence in the press. The media landscape is divided into Estonian and Russian spheres. Few outlets cater to the Russophone minority, particularly the older generation that has limited digital literacy. After the outbreak of the Ukraine war, many Russian-speaking broadcasts were terminated in Estonia for disseminating war propaganda.<sup>53</sup> Since the war began, media companies have worked to strengthen Russophone media outlets in Estonia in what allegedly is a more objective direction. The Kallas government has prioritized creating a more coherent public information space to strengthen security. “A divided society is a tempting prey for an aggressor. Unity is a deterrent that makes the aggressor hesitate, fear, and abandon their attack,” Kallas said.<sup>54</sup> This could potentially indicate a development that is not promoting pluralism in viewpoints, and thus dangerous to a democratic society.
- Media remains independent and does not face undue political pressure.<sup>55</sup> However, the preconditions for journalistic work is affected by that the Freedom of Information (FOI) Act, which guarantees the right to access materials intended for the public, has been unevenly followed by the government. The Freedom of Information Act is often misinterpreted by public servants who do not understand its intentions of the right to access public documents by the public as well as the media. This hampers investigative journalism since it can involve lengthy processes to get to necessary information to highlight decisions or power structures.<sup>56</sup> The Supreme Court has upheld the confidentiality of journalists’ sources in a verdict in January 2023, when the Court ruled that the fine against two Eesti Express journalists for publishing pretrial materials was unlawful.<sup>57</sup> However, the Supreme Court also ruled that journalists could not generally disclose pretrial materials but have to confer with the prosecutor. Urmas Soonvald, the editor-in-chief of the big Estonian daily *Eesti Päevaleht*, supported the verdict: “We think that the Supreme Court's decision is thorough. It very carefully considers everyone's interests, including

(those of) the press, and we are satisfied with the decision," Soonvald said.<sup>58</sup> Journalists sometimes face subtle threats and bullying in an increasingly polarizing media environment.<sup>59</sup> The spread of disinformation, for example on controversial and crucial issues on climate change and other key issues on social media platforms such as Facebook and Telegram is a problem, not least attributed to EKRE.<sup>60</sup> Since the government banned Russian television and official online sources, social media outlets like Telegram have been used to spread Russian propaganda about the Ukraine war. One important outlet is the The Voice of Mordor, one of the most popular pro-Russia Telegram channels, reaching around 170,000 people in the Baltic states.<sup>61</sup>

## Local Democratic Governance 1.00-7.00 pts

**Considers the decentralization of power; the responsibilities, election, and capacity of local governmental bodies; and the transparency and accountability of local authorities.**

**5.75 /  
7.00**

- Estonia's local government system continues to function well overall, but the central government has proposed reforms to simplify local government and make it more flexible. Since the parliament failed to pass local government reforms as planned before the March elections, the new coalition government is now focused on the issue.<sup>62</sup> The Association of Estonian Cities and Municipalities, which was created in 2018, began working on these reforms, and its role in supporting local democratic governance is now more recognized.
- The coalition government inaugurated a new Ministry of Regional Affairs and Agriculture in the summer, which signaled its commitment to local democracy and rural development.<sup>63</sup> Since government spending on family allowances, education, and tax-free income thresholds has been high in recent years, the government faces financial challenges in implementing local government reforms.<sup>64</sup> In practice, Estonia's system of government remains centralized. Local governments have some autonomy but remain financially dependent on the central government.<sup>65</sup> Consultation and dialogue between the central government and local governments should improve so that local governments have a real say on issues that directly affect citizens. Moreover, the division of competencies between the central government and local governments is sometimes unclear. When competencies are transferred to local governments, they sometimes lack the financial resources to take them on.<sup>66</sup> Since 2017, local government has been comprised of 79 units: 15 towns and cities and 64 rural municipalities. Regardless of their size, they must provide the same services to their constituents. Local governments vary significantly in their preconditions. Local governments have little autonomy in raising tax revenue, meaning that municipalities rely heavily on national allocations. Since Estonia is a low-tax country, local governments do not receive adequate funding.<sup>67</sup> The Council of Europe and the Congress of Local and Regional Authorities recommended passing legislation that would give local governments greater financial autonomy, which would also make them more independent.<sup>68</sup> The governing coalition agreement stated that the revenue base for local governments would increase, in an effort to reduce funding disparities across different regions.<sup>69</sup> The agreement did not provide detail on how this goal would be

achieved. The existing equalization fund, aimed at making conditions between municipalities more even, has not been effective in increasing local government funding.<sup>70</sup>

- In 2023, municipalities began to receive significant funding to manage integration for Estonians that return after working abroad, Ukrainian refugees, and the Russian-speaking minority, among other groups. These integration programs will be funded for six years by the EU's European Social Fund and the Estonian government, which is contributing €6.1 million to the program. The programs were created because municipalities have different levels of awareness about the needs of these groups. The Association of Estonian Cities and Regions will assist in creating concrete action plans to implement the programs.<sup>71</sup>
- The Russian-speaking minority is concentrated in Tallinn and the northeastern Ida-Virumaa region bordering Russia, an area the government closely monitors due to its geopolitical significance. The border between Narva, Ida-Virumaa's largest city, and the Russian city of Ivangorod has remained open. However, male Russian citizens who attempt to enter Estonia to avoid fighting in Ukraine are still not welcome, and are turned away.<sup>72</sup> Starting in February 2024, Russia plans to close the border crossing for construction, which will make only pedestrian crossings possible.<sup>73</sup> In Narva, ethnic tensions increased in 2023. A September vote of no confidence in the Narva City Council removed the incumbent Mayor Katri Raik from her position. A new political group simply called "Narva" pushed for the no-confidence vote, claiming that Raik acted against the wishes of Narva residents by planning to change Soviet-era street names. Raik responded by stating that "Narva must be faced towards Estonia."<sup>74</sup> The episode showed how debates over the Soviet past remain important in the border regions and have geopolitical implications. Mihhail Stalnuhhin, a former head of the Narva City Council and member of parliament, is a prominent example of a politician who has echoed the Kremlin's divisive and confrontational rhetoric. He has opposed the removal of a Soviet-era tank in Narva, called individuals who supported removing Soviet memorials "Nazis," and labelled the Estonian government fascist.<sup>75</sup>

## Judicial Framework and Independence 1.00-7.00 pts

**Assesses constitutional and human rights protections, judicial independence, the status of ethnic minority rights, guarantees of equality before the law, treatment of suspects and prisoners, and compliance with judicial decisions.**

**6.50 /  
7.00**

- Judicial independence is largely respected in Estonia. According to the 2023 EU Justice Scoreboard, the perceived level of judicial independence in Estonia has remained unchanged since 2016. However, public confidence in the independence of the judiciary has grown since 2022, with 65 percent of respondents saying the level of judicial independence was good or fairly good.<sup>76</sup>
- In 2023, the Supreme Court, which is the highest court in Estonia and reviews the constitutionality of laws, was drawn into political battles between the government and the opposition. In May, the EKRE appealed to the Supreme Court to rule on the constitutionality of the governing coalition's behavior in

presenting law bills to the parliament which they, according to EKRE, did not have the mandate to do. After the court refused to consider the EKRE's appeal, the party made vague threats to replace Supreme Court judges. However, the court protected its independence from political actors who attempted to disrespect it.

- Another positive development is the passage of a law that prohibits authorities from searching the offices of defendant's attorneys, a move meant to ensure the protection of lawyer-client confidentiality.<sup>77</sup> Moreover, for the judicial system to work soundly and maintain integrity and professionalism, courts must be well organized and judges must have good working conditions. To address these two issues, the parliament passed amendments to the Courts Act in February that reorganized the courts by shifting from a territorial system to a topical system in which each court addresses a specific area of the law. Individual departments will be led by judges. Some critics, including judges, have voiced concerns that the courts could become too specialized, arguing that Estonia has already moved aggressively in that direction and asserting that further specialization could be problematic, since it narrows down the general competence and judicial judgment. The number of judges in the entire judicial system has increased by 12 since 2022 to address the courts' high caseload and other measures have been implemented to lighten judges' workload.<sup>78</sup> Ongoing digitalization of judicial documents has also improved the responsiveness, accuracy, and transparency of the judiciary. A July European Commission report praised Estonia for the digitalization efforts, which has made the judicial system more efficient. The Document Delivery Portal created in 2022 allows for the seamless transfer of documents for different cases and reduces mistakes and delays in handling administrative and judicial documents.

## Corruption 1.00-7.00 pts

**Looks at public perceptions of corruption, the business interests of top policymakers, laws on financial disclosure and conflict of interest, and the efficacy of anticorruption initiatives.**

**5.00 /  
7.00**

- In June, the Council of Europe's Group of States Against Corruption (GRECO) delivered its second compliance report on Estonia. The report concluded that Estonia had implemented 11 of GRECO's recommendations from 2021, while four recommendations were partly implemented. In the latter category, anticorruption tools beyond parliamentary inquiries concerning officials suspected of corruption had not been implemented. The recommendation to revise appointment procedures for the director of border control to make the process fairer and more transparent was also partly implemented, as was the recommendation on the "revolving doors" policy (see below).<sup>79</sup> While Estonia has implemented more GRECO recommendations on anticorruption measures in recent years, authorities still rely on informal norms and social pressure to combat corruption, rather than the formal regulations that GRECO has demanded. The public also believes that corruption levels are high. The 2023 Eurobarometer found that 48 percent of Estonian respondents agreed that corruption was "widespread."<sup>80</sup>

- The 2021-2025 Anti-Corruption Strategy addresses several of GRECO's concerns and includes regulations to closely monitor lobbying activities. In addition, the government is preparing amendments to the Anti-Corruption Act. New rules have also been introduced that require public sector employees who leave the government to wait six months before they can work for private sector entities related to their governmental work. These rules are intended to prevent government officials from unfairly favoring businesses they want to work for.<sup>81</sup> In its report, GRECO said the six-month waiting period was too short and not in line with its recommendations.<sup>82</sup> GRECO also said that the regulations did not apply to enough government employees.<sup>83</sup>
- Political party financing is monitored by the Political Parties Financing Surveillance Committee (PPFSC).<sup>84</sup> The PPFSC has the power to warn a political party suspected of accepting illegal donations about the punishment it could face. Media and CSO scrutiny of party financing supplements the work of the PPFSC. In 2022, the Prosecutor's Office reported investigating 42 cases of suspected corruption, including seven high-level political or administrative cases. In 2023 22 corruption investigations were ongoing, many of which exposed more complex schemes than before. The healthcare sector is particularly vulnerable to corruption, with companies selling medical equipment attempting to influence public hospitals. Political party financing and local government procurement are also prone to corruption.<sup>85</sup> In May, for example, media reports revealed that the Internal Security Services (ISS) was investigating Tartu Mayor Priit Humal and local businessman Paavel Pruunsild for corruption. Pruunsild allegedly had Humal convince Tartu officials abandon the city's purchase of a building so that Pruunsild could buy it himself. Pruunsild and Humal allegedly had longstanding business ties that created a serious conflict of interest for Humal.<sup>86</sup>

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## Footnotes

- <sup>1</sup>Shanto Iyengar et al, "The Origins and Consequences of Affective Polarization in the United States," Annual Review of Political Science 22, no. 1 (2019): 129-146.
- <sup>2</sup>ERR 29.12.2023, "Nearly 60,000 Ukraine refugees granted temporary protection in Estonia since war began." <https://news.err.ee/1609207633/nearly-60-000-ukraine-refugees-granted-t...>
- <sup>3</sup>Liina Laanpere and Egert Rünne, "An update on developments regarding civic space in the EU and an overview of the possibilities for human rights defenders to enter EU territory," Estonian Human Rights Centre, 2023, p. 3, [https://fra.europa.eu/sites/default/files/fra\\_uploads/ee-civic\\_space\\_20...](https://fra.europa.eu/sites/default/files/fra_uploads/ee-civic_space_20...)
- <sup>4</sup>"PM candidate Kaja Kallas in parliament: Coalition agreement has the face of war," Postimees, 11 April 2023, <https://news.postimees.ee/7751574/pm->

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- 5ERR 13.11 2023, "Estonian defense minister: If the Baltics fall, Berlin will be next," <https://news.err.ee/1609163773/estonian-defense-minister-if-the-baltics...>
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