

Freedom in the World 2013 - Estonia

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2013 Scores

Status: Free
Freedom Rating: 1.0
Civil Liberties: 1
Political Rights: 1

Overview

In 2012, Estonia adopted new anticorruption legislation and became the last European Union member to criminalize human trafficking. In August, the parliament voted to ratify the European Stability Mechanism, Europe's new bailout fund for heavily indebted members of the eurozone. Also in August, the Justice Department released a draft of a new law that would allow same-sex couples some protections already granted to married couples.

Estonia gained independence from Russia in 1918, but was captured – along with Latvia and Lithuania – by Soviet troops during World War II. Under Soviet rule, approximately one-tenth of Estonia's population was deported, executed, or forced to flee abroad. Subsequent Russian immigration reduced ethnic Estonians to just over 60 percent of the population by 1989. Estonia regained its independence with the disintegration of the Soviet Union in 1991. It adopted a new constitution in July 1992 and held its first legislative elections in September of that year.

Estonia joined both NATO and the European Union (EU) in 2004. Prime Minister Andrus Ansip's center-right Reform Party won parliamentary elections in 2007 and formed a coalition with the Union of Pro Patria and Res Publica (IRL) and Social Democratic Party (SDE).

In parliamentary elections held in March 2011, the Reform Party won 33 seats, with its coalition partner, IRL, capturing 23 seats. The opposition Center Party, which drew much of its support from

Estonia's Russian-speaking population, took 26 seats, and the SDE, which had broken with the ruling coalition, won 19 seats. In August of that year, the parliament reelected President Toomas Hendrik Ilves to a second five-year term.

Estonia in 2012 continued its recovery from the global economic crisis of 2008. In 2009, the country had implemented an austerity program, increasing taxes and reducing public sector salaries, among other measures, which caused a dramatic spike in the unemployment rate in 2010. However, the country's gross domestic product (GDP) began growing again in 2010, and in 2011, GDP grew by more than 7 percent. Economic growth has since slowed, with GDP growing by 3.2 percent in 2012. Unemployment for 2012 stood at 10.2 percent.

Estonia adopted the euro currency in 2011. In August 2012, the parliament voted to ratify the €500 billion (\$666 billion) European Stability Mechanism, a new, permanent bailout fund for heavily indebted members of the eurozone. President Ilves approved it the following month, affirming Estonia's commitment to the currency. Following ratification, Estonia was required to pay €149 million (\$193 million) into the ESM, and could contribute some €1.15 billion (\$1.5 billion) more to the fund over coming years.

Intermittent tensions with Russia continued in 2012. In February, Aleksei Dressen, a senior official within Estonia's state security agency, was arrested on suspicion of spying for Russia's Federal Security Service. He was convicted of treason in July and sentenced to 16 years in prison.

Political Rights and Civil Liberties

Estonia is an electoral democracy. The 1992 constitution established a 101-seat, unicameral parliament, or Riigikogu, whose members are elected for four-year terms. A prime minister serves as head of government, and is chosen by the president and confirmed by the parliament. The president is elected by parliamentary ballot to a five-year term, filling the largely ceremonial role of head of state. Only citizens may participate in national elections; as a result, ethnic Russian residents of Estonia whose citizenship remains undetermined cannot vote in national polls. Resident noncitizens are permitted to vote in local elections, but may not run as candidates. Political parties organize freely, though only citizens may be members.

There are occasional problems with government corruption in Estonia. In February 2012, the parliament passed a new anticorruption law designed to increase public sector transparency and make requirements more stringent for politicians to declare their assets. In March, a former advisor to the Tallinn city government and an official in the Center Party were both sentenced to several years in jail after being convicted on bribery charges. In May, Silver Meikar, a former member of parliament with Prime Minister Andrus Ansip's Reform Party, claimed that he had personally funnelled thousands of dollars in illegitimate, anonymous donations to the Reform Party in 2009 and 2010 at the behest of Justice Minister Kristen Michal, who was the party's secretary general at the time. Meikar said dozens of party members, including members of the parliament, had participated in similar schemes. Although Ansip rejected the claims, prosecutors began an investigation, and President Toomas Hendrik Ilves called for Michal's resignation. Michal finally stepped down in December. In May, prosecutors reopened a case against two IRL members who in 2011 had been accused of improperly selling Estonian residency permits – and thus EU residency – to wealthy Russian citizens. Estonia was ranked 32 out of 176 countries surveyed in Transparency International's 2012 Corruption Perceptions Index.

The government respects freedom of the press. Both public and private television and radio stations operate in Estonia, and there are several independent newspapers, including at least one in Russian. In November 2010, lawmakers passed a measure authorizing fines for outlets that disseminated news deemed libellous, as well as for journalists who refused to reveal sources under certain circumstances, though no person or organization has been prosecuted under it. Legal guarantees for public access to government information are respected in practice. The government does not restrict access to the internet.

Religious and academic freedoms are respected in law and in practice.

The constitution guarantees freedoms of assembly and association, and the government upholds those rights in practice. Civil society is vibrant, and the government involves nongovernmental organizations in the drafting of legislation. Workers may organize freely, strike, and bargain collectively, although public servants at the municipal and state levels may not strike. The Confederation of Estonian Trade Unions has reported private sector violations of union rights, including workers being threatened with dismissal or pay cuts if they formed unions. There were a number of major strikes in Estonia in 2012, including a three-day strike by as many as 16,000 teachers in March over low pay; a 2013 draft budget submitted to the parliament in September contained a provision to raise teachers' salaries by an average of 11 percent, compared to an average wage increase of 4.4 percent for other public workers. In October, medical workers went on strike to protest low wages, as well as increasing workloads resulting from the departure of doctors and nurses for Finland, where salaries were significantly higher. Several major hospitals shut down outpatient services amid the strike, except for oncological patients, and those pregnant or under the age of 18. The strike was settled later in October after the hospitals agreed to increase pay for some medical workers and take measures to decrease workloads.

The judiciary is independent and generally free from government interference. Laws prohibiting arbitrary arrest and detention and ensuring the right to a fair trial are largely observed. However, the average length of pretrial detention is seven months, due to judicial extensions of the six-month legal limit. The country's prison system continues to suffer from overcrowding and prisoners have poor access to health care, though new prisons were being constructed in 2012.

In 2012, about 6.8 percent of the Estonian population was of undetermined citizenship, down from about a third in 1992. Ethnic Russians, many of whom had arrived in Estonia during the Soviet era and speak Russian as their first language, make up about a quarter of Estonia's population. These Russians were regarded as immigrants after Estonia's independence and were required to apply for citizenship, a process that included demonstrating knowledge of the Estonian language. A 2011 law mandated that public, Russian-language high schools must teach 60 percent of their curriculum in the Estonian language, with the intention of readying Russian-speaking students for Estonian jobs, many of which require command of the Estonian language. The Tallinn government, which was controlled by the Center Party, planned in February 2012 to establish a public school where primary and secondary students could attend classes in Russian at no cost.

Estonia's constitution allows citizens and noncitizens holding government-issued identity documents to travel inside Estonia and abroad. In August 2012, the Justice Ministry released a draft of a new law that would allow same-sex couples to register their cohabitation. The proposed law would allow same-sex couples some protections that married opposite-sex couples receive, but would not allow such couples to adopt children.

Though women enjoy the same legal rights as men, the World Economic Forum's 2012 Global Gender Gap Report found that Estonian women earn roughly 62 percent of an average man's salary for the same job. There are currently 20 women serving in the parliament. Violence against women, including domestic violence, remains a problem. Estonia is a source, transit point, and destination for women trafficked for the purpose of prostitution. Estonia criminalized human trafficking in March 2012, becoming the last EU country to do so; the first prosecution under the new law took place in April.

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