

ESTONIA 2021 HUMAN RIGHTS REPORT

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Estonia is a multiparty, constitutional democracy with a unicameral parliament, a prime minister as head of government, and a president as head of state. The prime minister and cabinet generally represent the party or coalition of parties with a majority of seats in the parliament. The most recent parliamentary elections took place in 2019, with a coalition government taking office the following month. The government coalition changed in January when then Prime Minister Juri Ratas's government resigned and Prime Minister Kaja Kallas's government took office on January 26. The coalition consists of the Reform Party and the Center Party. Observers considered the 2019 elections free and fair.

The Police and Border Guard Board and the Internal Security Service maintain internal security. The army is responsible for external security but also has some domestic security responsibilities. The Police and Border Guard Board and the Internal Security Service report to the Ministry of the Interior. The Defense Forces report to the Ministry of Defense. The Police and Border Guard Board and the Internal Security Service investigate civilian cases, while military police investigate defense force cases. Civilian authorities maintained effective control over the security forces. Members of the security forces committed some abuses.

There were no reports of significant human rights abuses.

The government had mechanisms in place to identify and punish officials who may commit human rights abuses or engage in corruption.

Section 1. Respect for the Integrity of the Person

a. Arbitrary Deprivation of Life and Other Unlawful or Politically Motivated Killings

There were no reports that the government or its agents committed arbitrary or unlawful killings.

b. Disappearance

There were no reports of disappearances by or on behalf of government authorities.

c. Torture and Other Cruel, Inhuman, or Degrading Treatment or Punishment

The law prohibits such practices, but there were reports that police used excessive physical force and verbal abuse during the arrest and questioning of some suspects. The number of cases brought against police officers for excessive use of force was similar to previous years. During the first half of the year, authorities filed five cases against police officers for excessive use of force.

Impunity was not a significant problem in the security forces.

Prison and Detention Center Conditions

There were no significant reports regarding prison or detention center conditions that raised human rights concerns.

Physical Conditions: The legal chancellor raised some concern regarding detention center conditions as part of her annual review of state-run institutions. The report noted some facilities failed to provide adequate medical care and proper medical documentation for detainees. The legal chancellor also reported that detainees did not have sufficient access to private telephone calls and that video surveillance was used excessively, in contravention of prisoners' privacy rights. In April 2020 the legal chancellor publicly criticized the government's COVID-related ban on prisoners' outdoor time and reduction of visits from relatives, characterizing the ban as impermissible treatment of prisoners under government guidelines. In her annual review of the year, she also noted the excessive use of solitary confinement in prisons.

The most recent visit by an international prison monitoring body was conducted in 2017 by the Council of Europe's Committee for the Prevention of Torture (CPT). In its 2019 report on the visit, the CPT expressed concern over "appalling material conditions" at the Parnu, Tallinn, Tartu, and Valga detention houses as well as at the Tallinn East Police Station and over the small size of some cells in various

police establishments. The report expressed the CPT's "serious misgivings" that remand prisoners were frequently held in deficient police detention houses for one to four weeks, and in some cases for several months, beyond the period of police custody (pending their transfer to a prison).

Regarding prisons, the CPT report noted that the use of solitary confinement as punishment appeared to be widespread in all three of the country's prisons and that the practice appeared to be particularly excessive at Viru Prison. Prisoners were placed in disciplinary solitary confinement continuously for more than 14 days, thus exceeding the maximum permissible time. At Viru Prison, multiple periods in solitary confinement were imposed on prisoners consecutively, which in several cases resulted in very long periods of solitary confinement (in one prisoner's case, 225 days). There were no major concerns in prisons regarding physical conditions or inmate abuse except for the excessive use of solitary confinement.

Administration: Authorities conducted investigations of credible allegations of mistreatment.

Independent Monitoring: The government generally permitted monitoring by independent nongovernmental observers, including human rights groups, media, and international bodies including the CPT.

d. Arbitrary Arrest or Detention

The constitution and laws prohibit arbitrary arrest and detention and provide for the right of any person to challenge the lawfulness of his or her detention in court, and the government generally observed these prohibitions.

Arrest Procedures and Treatment of Detainees

Apart from those arrested during the commission of a crime, the law requires that in making arrests, authorities must possess warrants issued by a court based on evidence and must inform detainees promptly of the grounds for their arrest. There is a functioning bail system and other alternatives for provisional release pending trial. Authorities may hold individuals for 48 hours without charge; further detention requires a court order. Police generally complied with these requirements. Criminal procedure rules provide for a maximum detention of two

months during preliminary investigations in cases where the accused is a minor and four months in cases of second-degree (less serious) crimes. Detainees are entitled to immediate access to legal counsel, and the government pays for legal counsel for indigent persons.

e. Denial of Fair Public Trial

The constitution provides for an independent judiciary, and the government generally respected judicial independence and impartiality.

Trial Procedures

The constitution provides for the right to a fair and public trial, and an independent judiciary generally enforced this right.

Defendants enjoy the right to: a presumption of innocence; prompt and detailed notification of the charges (with free interpretation if necessary); a fair and public trial without undue delay; be present at their trial; communicate with an attorney of their choice; have adequate time and facilities to prepare a defense; have free interpretation for a defendant who cannot understand or speak the language used in court; confront prosecution or plaintiff witnesses; and present one's own witnesses and evidence. Defendants cannot be compelled to testify or confess guilt and have the right to appeal. In criminal proceedings, an attorney is available to all defendants at public expense, although individuals often preferred to hire their own attorneys. In civil proceedings, the government provides an attorney for indigents. Authorities generally respected these rights and extended them to all residents regardless of citizenship.

Political Prisoners and Detainees

There were no reports of political prisoners or detainees.

Civil Judicial Procedures and Remedies

Individuals or organizations may seek civil remedies for human rights violations in domestic courts. They may appeal unfavorable decisions to the European Court of Human Rights after exhausting all domestic remedies.

Property Seizure and Restitution

The government has laws and mechanisms in place for property restitution, and nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) and advocacy groups reported no issues with the government's resolution of Holocaust-era claims, including for foreign citizens. According to the European Shoah Legacy Institute's restitution database, the government has met its commitments to the 2009 Terezin Declaration on Holocaust Era Assets and Related Issues.

The Department of State's Justice for Uncompensated Survivors Today (JUST) Act report to Congress, released publicly in July 2020, can be found on the State Department's website at: <https://www.state.gov/reports/just-act-report-to-congress/>.

f. Arbitrary or Unlawful Interference with Privacy, Family, Home, or Correspondence

The constitution prohibits such actions, and there were no reports that the government failed to respect these prohibitions.

Section 2. Respect for Civil Liberties

a. Freedom of Expression, Including for Members of the Press and Other Media

The constitution provides for freedom of expression, including for the press and other media, and the government generally respected this right. An independent media, an effective judiciary, and a functioning democratic political system combined to promote freedom of expression, including for members of the media.

Freedom of Expression: The law criminalizes activities that incite hatred, violence, or discrimination and result in danger to the life, health, or property of a person.

Internet Freedom

The government did not restrict or disrupt access to the internet or censor online

content, and there were no credible reports that the government monitored private online communications without appropriate legal authority.

Academic Freedom and Cultural Events

There were no government restrictions on academic freedom or cultural events.

b. Freedoms of Peaceful Assembly and Association

Freedom of Peaceful Assembly

The constitution provides for freedom of peaceful assembly, and the government generally respected these freedoms. Due to the COVID-19 pandemic, the government introduced several temporary restrictions on public assembly, which changed in proportion to the assessed risks throughout the year.

Freedom of Association

While the constitution provides for freedom of association, the law specifies that only citizens may join political parties. There were no restrictions on the ability of noncitizens to join other civil groups.

c. Freedom of Religion

See the Department of State's *International Religious Freedom Report* at <https://www.state.gov/religiousfreedomreport/>.

d. Freedom of Movement and the Right to Leave the Country

The constitution provides for freedom of internal movement, foreign travel, emigration, and repatriation, and the government generally respected these rights.

e. Status and Treatment of Internally Displaced Persons

Not applicable.

f. Protection of Refugees

The government cooperated with the Office of the UN High Commissioner for

Refugees (UNHCR) and other humanitarian organizations in providing protection and assistance to refugees, returning refugees, or asylum seekers, as well as other persons of concern.

Access to Asylum: The law provides for the granting of asylum or refugee status, and the government has established a system for providing protection to refugees. The NGO Estonian Human Rights Center and other NGOs provided legal and social assistance to asylum seekers in cooperation with authorities. Government officials indicated that access to legal aid was available at every stage of the asylum procedure.

Safe Country of Origin/Transit: The government has a policy of denying asylum to applicants from a “safe” country of origin or transit. Authorities asserted that they granted interviews to all individual asylum seekers.

Freedom of Movement: The government maintained a detention center for persons awaiting deportation in the Rae municipality outside Tallinn. The Estonian Human Rights Center continued to raise concerns regarding the prolonged detention of asylum seekers during adjudication of their cases.

Durable Solutions: The government accepted refugees for resettlement, offered naturalization to refugees residing on their territory, and assisted in their voluntary return to their homes. Naturalization is open to all permanent residents of the country after five years’ residence, provided they pass mandatory citizenship and language examinations.

Temporary Protection: The government provided temporary protection to individuals who may not qualify as refugees. Temporary protection includes the right to work, access to education, and health care. In 2020 the government granted temporary protection via residence permits to four persons; during the first eight months of the year, authorities granted a residence permit to one person.

g. Stateless Persons

UNHCR categorized 76,639 persons residing in the country as stateless in 2019. As of July 1, according to government statistics, there were approximately 69,100 residents of undetermined citizenship, or 5.2 percent of the population. Nearly all

were ethnic Russians, Ukrainians, or Belarusians. These persons are eligible to apply for naturalized citizenship, which is open to all permanent residents of the country after five years' residence, provided they pass mandatory citizenship and language examinations.

There are statutory procedures that offer persons older than 18 opportunities for obtaining citizenship by naturalization.

Section 3. Freedom to Participate in the Political Process

The law provides citizens the ability to choose their government in free and fair periodic elections held by secret ballot and based on universal and equal suffrage.

Elections and Political Participation

Recent Elections: Parliamentary elections in 2019 were considered free and fair and led to the formation of a three-party coalition government comprising the Center Party, the Estonian Conservative People's Party, and the Pro Patria party. The coalition led by Prime Minister Juri Ratas (Center Party) collapsed due to a corruption scandal involving Center Party members' misuse of state loans intended for coronavirus pandemic relief. On January 26, Kaja Kallas's Reform Party took office in coalition with the Center Party.

Participation of Women and Members of Minority Groups: No laws limit participation of women or members of minority groups in the political process, and they did participate. The law allows only citizens to organize or join political parties.

Noncitizens who are long-term residents may vote in local elections but cannot vote in national elections or hold public office.

Section 4. Corruption and Lack of Transparency in Government

The law provides criminal penalties for corruption by officials, and the government generally implemented these laws effectively. The government has effective mechanisms to investigate and punish abuse and corruption. There were isolated

reports of government corruption during the year.

Corruption: Criminal cases related to Edgar Savisaar, former mayor of Tallinn and leader of the Center Party, were resolved at the end of 2020. Although the cases against Savisaar ended in 2018 due to his deteriorating health, court proceedings continued against others involved in the case. In November 2020 the Supreme Court rejected those defendants' appeals, leaving the rulings of lower courts in place. As a result, former minister of the environment Villu Reiljan was found guilty of facilitating bribes for Savisaar in connection with illegal construction activities and was fined 33,320 euros (\$38,300). In addition, the person convicted of promising the bribe to Savisaar was fined 15,000 euros (\$17,250).

Edgar Savisaar was involved in an additional bribery case involving the financing of Center Party election advertisements with an illegal campaign donation. As with the previous case, charges against Savisaar were dropped due to his health, and the case against others involved was also resolved in November 2020. In an effort to hide the bribe, a businessman provided a 275,000-euro (\$316,000) loan to a company connected with the Center Party. The Center Party was found guilty of accepting an illegal campaign donation. The court punished the party with a 275,000 euro fine, 25,000 euros (\$28,800) of which was to be paid immediately, while the rest will remain unpaid if the party is not convicted of additional crimes. The businessman behind the illegal donation was fined 200,000 euros (\$230,000).

The number of corruption crimes in 2020 remained on par with 2019, and there were no new large-scale criminal cases involving allegations of government corruption.

Section 5. Governmental Posture Towards International and Nongovernmental Investigation of Alleged Abuses of Human Rights

Several domestic and international human rights groups operated without government restriction, investigating and publishing their findings on human rights cases. Government officials were cooperative and responsive to their views.

Government Human Rights Bodies: The legal chancellor, an independent official with a staff of more than 45, performs the role of human rights ombudsman. The chancellor reviews legislation for compliance with the constitution; oversees authorities' observance of fundamental rights and freedoms and the principles of good governance; and helps resolve accusations of discrimination based on gender, race, nationality (ethnic origin), color, language, religion, social status, age, disability, or sexual orientation. The legal chancellor also makes recommendations to ministries and local governments, requests responses, and has authority to appeal to the Supreme Court. The chancellor compiles an annual report for the parliament. Public trust in the office was high, and the government was responsive to its reports and decisions.

Section 6. Discrimination and Societal Abuses

Women

Rape and Domestic Violence: The law criminalizes rape, including spousal rape, and physical abuse, including domestic violence. The law was effectively enforced. The penalty for rape, including spousal rape, is imprisonment for up to 15 years. According to the NGO Sexual Health Union, 13 percent of women had suffered sexual violence, including rape.

According to NGOs and shelter managers, violence against women, including domestic violence, was a problem. During the first six months of the year, physical abuse crimes dropped 5 percent, including domestic violence cases. Women constituted more than 80 percent of the victims of domestic violence registered by police. Police registered 3 percent fewer reports of domestic violence in 2020 than in the previous year. Of domestic violence crimes, 85 percent were physical abuse cases, 11 percent were threatening cases, 3 percent were sexual offenses, and less than 1 percent were murders or attempted murders.

NGOs, local governments, and others could seek assistance for survivors from the national government. There is a network of shelters for women and women with children who were victims of gender-based violence as well as hotlines for domestic violence and child abuse. There are four treatment centers for survivors of sexual violence. Police officers, border guards, and social workers received

training related to domestic and gender violence from NGOs and the Ministries of Social Affairs, Interior, and Justice.

Sexual Harassment: The law prohibits sexual harassment, but there were reports of such harassment in the workplace and on public transport. By law, sexual harassment complaints may be resolved in court. The penalty for sexual harassment is a fine or detention for up to 30 days. In 2020 the number of sexual harassment cases did not materially change compared with the previous year; 97 percent of the victims in reported cases of sexual harassment were women. The number of registered stalking incidents in 2020 grew 11 percent compared to the previous year; 88 percent of reported stalking victims were women while 92 percent of alleged perpetrators were men.

Reproductive Rights: There were no reports of coerced abortion or involuntary sterilization on the part of government authorities.

The government provided access to sexual and reproductive health services for survivors of sexual violence. Emergency contraception was available as part of clinical management of rape.

Discrimination: The law provides the same legal status and rights for women as for men, including under family, religious, personal status, and nationality laws as well as laws related to labor, property, inheritance, employment, access to credit, and owning or managing businesses or property. The government generally enforced such laws. There were reports of discrimination in employment and occupation and unequal treatment due to gender, age, disability, and sexual preference (see section 7.d.).

Systemic Racial or Ethnic Violence and Discrimination

Discrimination is prohibited by the constitution. The law prohibits violence and discrimination against members of racial or ethnic minorities or minority groups. The government effectively enforced these prohibitions.

Human rights groups raised concern regarding the country's hate crimes law, which requires a victim demonstrate that his or her life, health, or property were endangered to pursue charges. Observers noted that this high bar resulted in very

few hate-crime charges. In addition, human rights NGOs noted that differentiations in antidiscrimination laws limited their effectiveness. Although gender discrimination and discrimination based on race or ethnicity are prohibited in employment, housing, health care, social welfare, education, goods and services, discrimination based on religion, age, disability, and sexual orientation is only prohibited for employment. For these other forms of discrimination there is no mechanism for affected individuals to receive state assistance or claim compensation.

Kristo Kivisto, who called for the establishment of an Estonian cell of the violent far-right Nordic Resistance Movement, was arrested for threats and defamation, including against young social democrats; lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer, and intersex (LGBTQI+) events; and the EU. On social media, Kivisto, who was 21 at the time of his arrest, threatened to use violence and posted photos of far-right terrorists and mass murderers, including photos of Anders Behring Breivik and Brenton Tarrant, who committed mass shootings in Norway and New Zealand, respectively. In February the Parnu County Court sentenced him to six months' imprisonment for threats and defamation of a foreign symbol (the EU flag). The discovery of prohibited objects in Kivisto's home, including knives and grenades, added weight to the state's case. In addition, in online conversations, Kivisto sought weapons and information on how manufacture them himself. In February the Parnu County Court sentenced him to six months' probation for those charges.

In 2020 police registered two cases of physical abuse, breach of public order, or threats that included hatred against persons from racial, religious, or ethnic minority groups. Roma, who numbered fewer than 1,000 persons, reportedly faced discrimination in several areas, including employment. The government took steps to emphasize the importance of education for Romani children, but their school dropout rate remained high.

Nonwhite residents reported discrimination in housing. The government faced difficulties finding housing for resettled refugees, which refugee advocates attributed to societal discrimination

The government took steps to mitigate conditions that could contribute to racial or

ethnic violence and discrimination. Under the Equal Treatment Act, the government established a commissioner for gender equality and equal treatment. In 2020 the Ministry of Social Affairs mounted a public-awareness campaign to promote understanding and solidarity between different social groups in the country. The “Settle in Estonia Program” is a free educational program provided by the government to help new immigrants better adapt to life in the country. In addition, the Police and Border Guard Board has a dedicated office to combating extremism, which, in concert with social support agencies, worked with minority and religious groups.

Children

Birth Registration: Citizenship derives primarily from the citizenship of at least one parent. Either citizen parent may pass citizenship to a child regardless of the other parent’s citizenship status. Children born to parents who are not citizens of Estonia or of any other country and have lived in the country for five years acquire citizenship at birth. Registration of births occurred in a timely manner.

The government also provides citizenship, without any special application by the parents, to persons younger than 15 who were born in the country and whose parents were not citizens of Estonia or of any other country and had lived in the country for five years at the time of the birth of the child.

Child Abuse: In 2020 the number of sexual crimes committed against persons younger than 18 dropped by 15 percent from the previous year. The Police and Border Guard Board worked to combat child abuse, including sexual abuse. The legal chancellor acted as children’s ombudsman. Police provided training to officers on combatting sexual abuse in cooperation with the justice, education, and social ministries and local and international organizations.

Child, Early, and Forced Marriage: The legal minimum age for marriage is 18. A court may extend the legal capacity of a person who is at least 15 for the purpose of marriage.

Sexual Exploitation of Children: The law prohibits the commercial sexual exploitation of children and child pornography, and authorities enforced the law. The minimum age for consensual sex is 14. Conviction of engaging in child

pornography carries punishment ranging from a fine to three years in prison. Girls were more frequently exploited than boys.

International Child Abductions: The country is a party to the 1980 Hague Convention on the Civil Aspects of International Child Abduction. See the Department of State's *Annual Report on International Parent Child Abduction* at <https://travel.state.gov/content/travel/en/International-Parental-Child-Abduction/for-providers/legal-reports-and-data/reported-cases.html>.

Anti-Semitism

The Jewish community numbered an estimated 2,000 to 2,500 persons.

On April 2, individuals desecrated the site of the Holocaust Memorial in Rahumae Jewish Cemetery in Tallinn. Police identified the individuals involved and filed charges under the penal code's section on desecration of graves.

In August unknown persons defaced with anti-Semitic graffiti a poster promoting vaccination. Local government officials denounced the incident, but as of October 1, no perpetrators had been identified or formal charges filed.

On January 27, the government held an annual memorial event on Holocaust Remembrance Day at the Rahumae Jewish Cemetery. Schools participated in commemorative activities throughout the country. The Education and Research Ministry, in cooperation with the country's Jewish community, the International Holocaust Remembrance Alliance, the Estonian Memory Institute, and the Museum of Occupation, organized an essay-writing competition for schoolchildren on topics related to the lessons of the Holocaust.

Trafficking in Persons

See the Department of State's *Trafficking in Persons Report* at <https://www.state.gov/trafficking-in-persons-report/>.

Persons with Disabilities

Persons with disabilities can access education, health services, public buildings, and transportation on an equal basis with others. The law provides that new or

renovated buildings must be accessible to persons with disabilities. Few older buildings were accessible, but new or renovated ones generally were. Persons with disabilities may avail themselves of government assistance in accessing information and may request individual personal assistants when necessary. The government generally enforced these provisions.

According to the legal chancellor, measures to safeguard the fundamental rights of individuals in mental-health facilities remained inadequate, including protections against the use of unauthorized restraint measures in psychiatric care institutions. The legal chancellor also raised concerns regarding movement restrictions on residents of homes for persons with disabilities during the COVID-19 emergency.

NGOs complained that, while services typically were accessible in the capital, persons with disabilities in some rural areas had difficulty receiving appropriate care. For persons with disabilities outside of major population centers, access to local government social services (such as a personal assistant, support persons, and transportation) depended on that person's own ability to seek assistance.

There were reports of discrimination against persons with disabilities in occupation or employment. Between 2015 and 2021, the share of employers who hired persons with disabilities rose from 29 percent to 33 percent. During the year the legal chancellor and the commissioner for gender equality and equal treatment received 36 claims of discrimination based on disability (also see section 7.d.).

Acts of Violence, Criminalization, and Other Abuses Based on Sexual Orientation and Gender Identity

The law prohibits discrimination based on sexual orientation and gender identity. While the law is not specific regarding the forms of sexual orientation and gender identity covered, the general understanding is that it encompasses LGBTQI+ individuals. In 2020 police registered one case that included expression of hatred against LGBTQI+ persons. Advocacy groups reported that societal harassment and discrimination against LGBTQI+ persons remained common but noted improving public attitudes towards LGBTQI+ persons. A 2021 survey of citizens showed that more than half of the respondents considered same-sex sexual orientation completely or somewhat acceptable (53 percent), a 12-point increase

since the same question was posed in 2019.

Section 7. Worker Rights

a. Freedom of Association and the Right to Collective Bargaining

The law, related regulations, and statutory instruments provide workers with the right to form and join independent unions of their choice, bargain collectively, and conduct legal strikes. The government generally respected these rights. The law allows unions to conduct their activities without interference and prohibits antiunion discrimination. Both employees and employers have the right to request that labor dispute committees, consisting of representatives of unions and employers, or the courts resolve individual labor disputes. The law prohibits discrimination against employees because of union membership and requires the reinstatement of workers fired for union activity. Public-sector employees do not have the right to strike, but they can negotiate their salaries and working conditions directly with their employers.

The government generally enforced applicable laws. Resources, inspections, and remediation were usually adequate to achieve compliance with the law. In most cases, violators incurred fines that were sufficient to deter violations. Criminal proceedings and civil claims were also available, and penalties were commensurate with those for other laws involving denials of civil rights. The penalties employers had to pay were related primarily to workplace accidents and occupational illnesses. Administrative and judicial procedures were not subject to lengthy delays.

The government and most employers generally respected freedom of association and the right to bargain collectively. Parties freely engaged in collective bargaining, and there were no reports that the government or other parties interfered in the functioning of workers' organizations.

b. Prohibition of Forced or Compulsory Labor

The law prohibits forced or compulsory labor, and the government effectively enforced the law. Authorities prosecuted and convicted two persons for labor-related trafficking crimes during the year through September. Penalties for human

trafficking and forced labor offenses were commensurate with those for other analogous serious crimes, but sentences often failed to reflect the seriousness of the crime.

See also the Department of State's *Trafficking in Persons Report* at <https://www.state.gov/trafficking-in-persons-report/>.

c. Prohibition of Child Labor and Minimum Age for Employment

The law prohibits the worst forms of child labor. In most cases the legal minimum age for employment is 18. Minors who graduated from basic school may work full time. Children ages 15 to 17 may work, depending on whether they are still at school. Seven- to 12-year-old children may engage in light work in the areas of culture, art, sports, or advertising with the consent of the Labor Inspectorate. Minors may not perform hazardous work, such as handling explosive substances or working with wild animals. The law limits the hours that children may work and prohibits overtime or night work. The Labor Inspectorate is responsible for enforcing these laws. The government effectively enforced laws and policies to protect children from exploitation in the workplace. Penalties were commensurate with those for analogous serious crimes. The Labor Inspectorate monitored whether the conditions for child workers were appropriate.

d. Discrimination with Respect to Employment and Occupation

The law prohibits discrimination in employment and occupation. The government generally enforced the law, and penalties were commensurate with those under laws related to civil rights. If workers claimed discrimination and turned to the courts, and the Labor Inspectorate or gender equality commissioner and the appropriate institution found the suit justified, workers were indemnified by employers. Labor laws and regulations require employers to protect employees against discrimination, follow the principle of equal treatment, and promote equal treatment and gender equality. Nevertheless, discrimination in employment or occupation occurred with respect to age, gender, disability, ethnicity, and language, and there were complaints to the gender and equal treatment commissioner, the legal chancellor, and the Labor Inspectorate. Although women have the same rights as men under the law and are entitled to equal pay for equal work, employers

did not always respect these rights. Despite having a higher average level of education than men, according to government statistics, women's average earnings per hour were 17.1 percent lower than those of men. In recent years the salaries of women increased faster than those of men. There continued to be female- and male-dominated professions. Women constituted one-third of mid-level managers.

Fewer than 25 percent of persons with disabilities had jobs. During the year the legal chancellor and the commissioner for gender equality and equal treatment received claims of discrimination based on disability. Persons with disabilities faced discrimination in employment and access to the workplace.

Russian speakers stated that Estonian language requirements resulted in job and salary discrimination. The government continued to provide free and subsidized opportunities for learning Estonian. Russian speakers worked disproportionately in blue-collar industries and continued to experience higher unemployment than ethnic Estonians.

e. Acceptable Conditions of Work

Wage and Hour Laws: The national monthly minimum wage was higher than the poverty income level. Authorities generally enforced minimum wage laws, and penalties were commensurate with those for similar violations.

The standard workweek is 40 hours. The law requires a rest period of at least 11 hours in sequence for every 24-hour period. Reduced working time is required for minors and for employees whose work is underground, poses a health hazard, or is of an otherwise special nature. The law provides for paid annual holidays and requires overtime pay of not less than 150 percent of the employee's hourly wage. The government effectively enforced these requirements, and penalties were commensurate with those for similar crimes. There is no prohibition against excessive compulsory overtime.

The Labor Inspectorate is responsible for the enforcement of wage and hour laws and had an adequate number of inspectors to enforce compliance. Inspectors have authority to make unannounced inspections and initiate sanctions.

Occupational Safety and Health: The government sets occupational health and

safety standards. Authorities generally enforced occupational health and safety standards in all sectors. The Labor Inspectorate, the Health Board, and the Consumer Protection and Technical Regulatory Authority were responsible for enforcing these standards and made efforts to do so in both the formal and informal sectors. Inspections for compliance with occupational safety and health standards were conducted by the same inspectors under the same authorities as wage and hours. Violations of health and safety standards were more common in the construction and wood-processing industries. Penalties for violations were commensurate with those for similar crimes. Men from Ukraine experienced labor exploitation, particularly in the construction sector, where “envelope wages” (nontaxed cash payments) were sometimes paid. Officials reported 11 fatal workplace accidents during the year and 980 other accidents that led to serious injuries during the same period, which was a 6.8 percent increase over 2020.

Informal Sector: An estimated 8 percent of wage payments during the year were informal. According to Tax and Customs Board data, fewer companies paid informal wages in 2020 than in previous years, approximately 3 percent of all companies. Informal wages were more common in the construction sector and in retail and wholesale companies.