



Freedom in the World 2020

Estonia

94
/100

FREE

<u>Political Rights</u>	38 /40
<u>Civil Liberties</u>	56 /60

LAST YEAR'S SCORE & STATUS

94 /100 **Free**

Global freedom statuses are calculated on a weighted scale. [See the methodology.](#)



Overview

Democratic institutions are strong, and political and civil rights are widely respected in Estonia. However, about 6 percent of the population remains stateless, and thus may not participate in national elections. Corruption remains a challenge, as does discrimination against ethnic Russians, Roma, LGBT+ people, and others. Right-wing and Eurosceptic populist forces are becoming increasingly vocal.

Key Developments in 2019

- In March, five parties gained seats in the parliamentary elections, with the Reform Party gaining a plurality. However, failed efforts to form a government by the Reform Party left space for the Center Party to create a coalition with the Conservative People’s Party of Estonia (EKRE) and Isamaa, enabling Prime Minister Jüri Ratas to reenter his post.
- In August, EKRE ministers attempted to illegally dismiss the police and border guard chief but were overruled by the prime minister. Controversies involving EKRE leaders, including verbal attacks against the media, minorities, and the presidency, along with their anti–European Union stance, have undermined political stability.

Political Rights

A. Electoral Process

A1 0-4 pts

Was the current head of government or other chief national authority elected through free and fair elections?

4 / 4

The prime minister is head of government and is nominated by the president and approved by the parliament. Prime Minister Jüri Ratas of the Center Party was reappointed in 2019 following parliamentary elections and the

formation of a coalition between the centrist-populist Center Party, far-right and Eurosceptic EKRE, and the conservative Isamaa party (formerly “Pro Patria and Res Publica Party”). This coalition broke Ratas’s preelection promise to not to make a coalition with EKRE.

The president is elected by parliamentary ballot to a five-year term, filling a largely ceremonial role. Current president Kersti Kaljulaid was elected as a nonpartisan consensus candidate in a sixth round of voting in 2016. Although the overall election process was free and fair, it was criticized as lengthy and not entirely transparent.

A2 0-4 pts

Were the current national legislative representatives elected through free and fair elections?

4 / 4

The constitution establishes a 101-seat, unicameral parliament, called the Riigikogu, whose members are elected for four-year terms.

Parliamentary elections, held in March 2019, were free and fair. Like in previous elections in 2015, the voter turnout was around 64 percent. Five parties gained seats in the elections, with the main opposition center-right Reform Party grabbing a plurality (34 seats). Electoral support for the far-right EKRE party more than doubled, which translated into 19 deputies. Meanwhile, the incumbent Center Party headed by Prime Minister Jüri Ratas won 26 seats, down one. The number seats won by the conservative Isamaa and the left-wing Social Democratic Party (SDE) dropped to 12 and 10, respectively.

A3 0-4 pts

Are the electoral laws and framework fair, and are they implemented impartially by the relevant election management bodies?

4 / 4

The legal framework for conducting elections is clear and detailed. Online voting is widespread and is increasingly popular. The last parliamentary elections in 2019 witnessed record turnout online, with around 44 percent of participating voters using this method, thus demonstrating strong public confidence in the online voting (e-voting) system. In reaction to various complaints regarding transparency of e-voting, the Supreme Court, however, recommended the government clarify its regulations.

B. Political Pluralism and Participation

B1 0-4 pts

Do the people have the right to organize in different political parties or other competitive political groupings of their choice, and is the system free of undue obstacles to the rise and fall of these competing parties or groupings?

4 / 4

Estonia's political parties organize and operate freely, and the system is open to the rise and fall of various parties. Five parties, all of which were represented in the 2015 parliament, gained seats in the 2019 elections.

B2 0-4 pts

Is there a realistic opportunity for the opposition to increase its support or gain power through elections?

4 / 4

The system is open to the rotation of power. In the 2019 elections, the Center Party did not win the largest percentage of the vote yet was still able to form a coalition with the antiestablishment EKRE and the Isamaa party.

B3 0-4 pts

4 / 4

Are the people’s political choices free from domination by forces that are external to the political sphere, or by political forces that employ extrapolitical means?	
--	--

People’s political choices are generally not influenced by undemocratic forces. However, there were increasing concerns about the influence of online disinformation ahead of and after the 2019 elections.

While the governing Center Party has not fully renounced its cooperation agreement with United Russia, the main political party in Russia, this has not led to foreign interference with Estonians’ political rights.

B4 0-4 pts

Do various segments of the population (including ethnic, religious, gender, LGBT, and other relevant groups) have full political rights and electoral opportunities?	3 / 4
---	--------------

About 6 percent of the country’s population—mostly ethnic Russians—remain stateless and thus may not participate in national elections. Resident noncitizens are permitted to vote in local and European elections but may not run as candidates or join political parties. The authorities have adopted policies to assist those seeking naturalization. President Kersti Kaljulaid is the first woman in the country’s history to hold her office. While a total of 29 women were elected to the 101-seat Riigikogu in 2019, which is the most since 1992, representation of women in government remains an issue.

The EKRE’s entry into a coalition government raised concerns from domestic and international observers about the party’s history of racist, sexist, anti-LGBT+, and white nationalist sentiments. During their swearing-in ceremony in May 2019, newly appointed interior minister Mart Helme and his son, newly appointed finance minister, celebrated their appointments by simultaneously flashing a white nationalist symbol with their hands. Also in May, Helme called President Kaljulaid an “emotionally heated woman,” after

Kaljulaid had walked out of the swearing-in ceremony of a cabinet official who was accused of domestic violence. In December, Helme referred to the newly elected Finnish president Sanna Marin as a “shop girl.” Several EKRE ministers have expressed a variety of extremist views—including an admiration for “Nazi economics” and the belief that Estonia should be “a white country”—and have peddled conspiracy theories, discriminatory falsehoods about immigration and refugees, antisemitic sentiments, and anti-LGBT+ policy goals.

C. Functioning of Government

C1 0-4 pts

Do the freely elected head of government and national legislative representatives determine the policies of the government?

4 / 4

Both the government and the parliament are freely elected and function without interference from external or nonstate actors.

C2 0-4 pts

Are safeguards against official corruption strong and effective?

3 / 4

Recent years have seen heavily publicized allegations of corruption within the main political parties, as well as in the public sector. The trial of Edgar Savisaar, former leader of the Center Party and Tallinn city mayor, on charges of bribery, money laundering, and embezzlement, had been ongoing since 2017. While Savisaar himself was freed from trial due to bad health in December 2018, several government officials and businessmen were still awaiting their verdicts throughout 2019. The Center Party itself and other defendants were sanctioned with various fines. Other trials concerning recent corruption scandals in Tallinn and Tartu municipalities and Tallinn seaport

were still ongoing in 2019. In most cases, defendants were acquitted or released due to bad health.

While the government has taken some steps to curb private-sector corruption, little progress has been observed. In 2018, it was revealed that up to €200 billion (US\$230 billion) had been laundered through Danske Banks' Estonian branch between 2007 and 2015. Later, it emerged that Swedbank's Estonian branch was also allegedly involved in illicit transactions. While questions about the performance of Estonia's regulatory and supervisory bodies arose, the Estonian authorities took steps to remediate the situation.

The government also announced further measures to strengthen its fight against money laundering such as raising penalties and boosting funding for police and legal structures, and enhancing coordination at state and international levels. While serious concerns were raised that the laundered money, which is thought to have originated in Russia, could have been used to influence elections elsewhere in Europe, no clear connections with Estonian politicians were detected.

C3 0-4 pts

Does the government operate with openness and transparency?

4 / 4

Estonia is well-known for its transparency and well-developed e-governance services. Recently, however, several security flaws in these systems were revealed. While the government announced a plan to remedy the situation, additional resources to support the maintenance and further expansion of the e-governance program are needed.

Public access to government information and asset declarations of officials is provided for both in law and in practice. According to the latest European Union (EU reports), Estonia stands out as one of best performers in the EU in ensuring a transparent and effective public procurement system.

Civil Liberties

D. Freedom of Expression and Belief

D1 0-4 pts

Are there free and independent media?	4 / 4
--	--------------

The government generally respects freedom of the press, although the EKRE has verbally attacked journalists, which has increased concerns of self-censorship. In May 2019, prominent political commentator Vilja Kiisler resigned from her post at the newspaper *Postimees*, after the editor in chief had told her to tone down what he had deemed was aggressive rhetoric criticizing the EKRE. Kiisler said that EKRE media portals verbally attacked her, and she received threats of violence through email and Facebook. This was the first instance in over two decades of political commentary where she had been told to censor her writing. Another prominent state radio journalist also left his position for similar reasons.

Public and private television and radio stations operate in Estonia, and there are a number of independent newspapers. However, observers have noticed a trend towards media concentration and commercialization in recent years.

D2 0-4 pts

Are individuals free to practice and express their religious faith or nonbelief in public and private?	4 / 4
---	--------------

Religious freedom is respected in law and in practice.

D3 0-4 pts

--	--

Is there academic freedom, and is the educational system free from extensive political indoctrination?

4 / 4

Academic freedom is generally respected. However, by law, public Russian-language high schools must teach 60 percent of their curriculum in the Estonian language. The opposition Reform Party advocates introduction of Estonian-only language education at all school levels.

D4 0-4 pts

Are individuals free to express their personal views on political or other sensitive topics without fear of surveillance or retribution?

4 / 4

Individuals are free to express political views without fear of surveillance or retribution.

E. Associational and Organizational Rights

E1 0-4 pts

Is there freedom of assembly?

4 / 4

The constitution guarantees freedom of assembly, and the government upholds this right in practice.

E2 0-4 pts

Is there freedom for nongovernmental organizations, particularly those that are engaged in human rights– and governance-related work?

4 / 4

The government honors the civic rights of associations and does not restrict or control the activities of nongovernmental organizations (NGOs).

E3 0-4 pts

Is there freedom for trade unions and similar professional or labor organizations?

4 / 4

Workers may organize freely, strike, and bargain collectively, although public servants at the municipal and state levels may not strike.

F. Rule of Law

F1 0-4 pts

Is there an independent judiciary?

4 / 4

The judiciary is independent and generally free from government or other interference.

F2 0-4 pts

Does due process prevail in civil and criminal matters?

4 / 4

Legal processes in civil and criminal matters are generally free and fair. Laws prohibiting arbitrary arrest and detention and ensuring the right to a fair trial are largely observed.

F3 0-4 pts

Is there protection from the illegitimate use of physical force and freedom from war and insurgencies?

3 / 4

While Estonia is generally safe and peaceful, it has still one of the highest intentional homicide rates in the EU. There have been reports of law enforcement officials using excessive force when arresting suspects. Some inmates reportedly have inadequate access to health care. Estonia has a relatively high incarceration rate, with the latest Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) data showing that 187 per 100,000 residents are in Estonian prisons.

F4 0-4 pts

Do laws, policies, and practices guarantee equal treatment of various segments of the population?

3 / 4

Russian-speakers continue to face societal discrimination, which is reinforced by laws such as the Equal Treatment Act, which does not consider Estonian linguistic requirements for public officials discriminatory. Women in Estonia earn on average 26 percent less than men according to 2017 Eurostat data. Roma face employment discrimination and drop out of school at high rates, suggesting that Estonian schools fail to meet their needs.

Achieving gender equality remains a challenge in Estonia, despite improvements in recent years according to the European Union's Institute for Gender Equality index. Women do not earn the same amount as men for equivalent work and are in positions of power far less often.

Discrimination based on sexual orientation is legally prohibited, though harassment of LGBT+ people is reportedly common. While the social acceptance of LGBT+ people is slowly increasing, only a little more than half of Estonia's population think that they should have the same rights as heterosexual people, according to a 2019 European Commission Eurobarometer survey. The government coalition's far-right EKRE and the conservative Isamaa continue to block implementation of same-sex partnership legislation and attempt further suppression of LGBT+ organizations. However, in June 2019, the Supreme Court declared

unconstitutional provisions of the Aliens Act preventing registered same-sex partners of Estonian citizens from obtaining residence permits.

The language and ideological beliefs of many active members of the EKRE has raised concerns about the prominence and encouragement of many extremist views toward Jewish communities, LGBTQ+ people, and Muslims, as well as other marginalized groups.

G. Personal Autonomy and Individual Rights

G1 0-4 pts

Do individuals enjoy freedom of movement, including the ability to change their place of residence, employment, or education?

4 / 4

Citizens and residents enjoy free movement inside Estonia and freedom to leave the country.

In July 2018, Estonia introduced the free use of public buses across the country. Transit in Tallinn on public buses, trains, trams, and trollies has been free since 2013.

G2 0-4 pts

Are individuals able to exercise the right to own property and establish private businesses without undue interference from state or nonstate actors?

4 / 4

Estonian residents enjoy strong property rights and can freely establish private businesses.

G3 0-4 pts

--	--

Do individuals enjoy personal social freedoms, including choice of marriage partner and size of family, protection from domestic violence, and control over appearance?

3 / 4

Gender-based violence, including domestic violence, remains a serious problem in all parts of society. Reports of domestic violence to police increase dramatically in winter months around the holidays. Mechanisms and services to support and provide counsel to survivors receive support and are administered by the government and NGOs. However, in 2019, while police were notified of domestic violence nearly 16,000 times, they investigated only a third of these cases. Approximately 65 percent of people committing abuse were visibly inebriated. In May, Marti Kuusik, an EKRE minister of the newly formed coalition government, was controversially accused of domestic violence and resigned from his post, days after being sworn in. In November, the minister of population Riina Solman was widely criticized for comments she made that suggested physical abuse in the home was not necessarily domestic violence.

At the end of 2019, the parliament had yet to adopt necessary amendments for the implementation of a 2014 law permitting same-sex civil unions. Moreover, the ruling right-wing parties aim to repeal the legislation.

G4 0-4 pts

Do individuals enjoy equality of opportunity and freedom from economic exploitation?

3 / 4

Estonia is a source, transit point, and destination for human trafficking. Although the government makes serious and sustained efforts to prosecute traffickers and provide services to victims, in recent years the number of victims has increased, and the number of investigations and prosecutions of people involved in human trafficking has decreased.

Estonia's unemployment rate was relatively low in 2019. However, according to Eurostat, almost a quarter of the population was at risk of poverty or social

exclusion in 2018. Lawmakers raised the monthly minimum wage again in December 2019 to combat this issue.



On Estonia

See all data, scores & information on this country or territory.

[See More >](#)

Country Facts

Global Freedom Score

94/100 Free

Internet Freedom Score

94/100 Free

Other Years

2019

**Be the first
to know
what's
happening.**

Email

Join the Freedom
House monthly
newsletter

Subscribe

ADDRESS

1850 M St. NW Floor 11
Washington, DC 20036
(202) 296-5101

GENERAL INQUIRIES

info@freedomhouse.org

PRESS & MEDIA

press@freedomhouse.org

@2020 FreedomHouse