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## I. Executive Summary of the fourth cycle of Estonia



The fourth Universal Periodic Review (UPR) of Estonia took place during the 52nd session of the United Nations Human Rights Council in May 2026. The review examined Estonia's progress in promoting and protecting human rights since its previous UPR cycle in 2021, while also identifying ongoing issues and areas requiring further reform. The dialogue was conducted in a respectful atmosphere, with numerous States recognizing Estonia's strong democratic institutions, digital innovation, and commitment to international cooperation.

During the review, Estonia highlighted reforms in education, integration policy, digital governance, social inclusion, and victim support services. The State highlighted its efforts to strengthen inclusive education through individualised learning approaches, expanded support for children with special educational needs, and the transition toward a unified Estonian-language education system. Estonia also presented initiatives related to digital transformation, including integrating artificial intelligence and digital competencies into the education sector, as well as lifelong learning and retraining programmes.

The delegation further stressed the importance of social cohesion and integration policies under the framework of the "Cohesive Estonia 2030" strategy. Estonia described integration as a two-way process based on democratic values, participation, and mutual respect, while also presenting measures supporting refugees, particularly those displaced by the war in Ukraine. At the same time, the State acknowledged existing challenges, including teacher shortages, regional disparities, integration difficulties in predominantly Russian-speaking regions, and increasing demand for language learning services.

Member States broadly welcomed Estonia's progress but raised concerns regarding several human rights issues. Recommendations focused heavily on strengthening anti-discrimination

protections and combating hate speech and hate-motivated crimes. Many delegations urged Estonia to expand legal protections against discrimination beyond employment and to improve enforcement mechanisms. Gender equality and violence against women emerged as central issues throughout the review, with repeated calls for stronger measures to address domestic violence, reduce the gender pay gap, and adopt a consent-based definition of rape in line with international standards and the Istanbul Convention.

Additional recommendations addressed the rights of migrants, refugees, stateless persons, persons with disabilities, and minority communities. States encouraged Estonia to improve integration policies, ensure equal access to public services, strengthen disability inclusion, and enhance protections for vulnerable groups. Concerns were also raised regarding surveillance, data protection, and the balance between national security policies and fundamental freedoms.

Overall, the fourth UPR cycle reflected recognition of Estonia's significant institutional progress and modernisation efforts, while underlining the need for continued reforms to address structural inequalities, strengthen the implementation of existing protections, and ensure equal enjoyment of rights for all individuals within the country.

## II. Background of the reviewed State's political and social situation



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The political and social situation in Estonia is characterised by a consolidated liberal democratic system with strong institutional resilience, high administrative capacity, and consistently high performance in rule of law, electoral integrity, and digital governance. Over the past decade, Estonia has been widely recognised by international monitoring organisations, including Freedom House, the Economist Intelligence Unit, and the Bertelsmann Transformation Index, as one of the most stable democracies in Central and Eastern Europe. Core democratic institutions such as the judiciary, electoral administration, and public broadcasting remain independent and effective, while political pluralism is well established and competitive elections are regularly conducted under conditions of fairness and transparency.

At the same time, assessments by Freedom House (including Nations in Transit 2021) indicate that while Estonia's democracy remains strong overall, its political environment has experienced increasing volatility in recent years. The period around 2020–2021 was marked by government instability, largely linked to tensions within coalition governments that included the far-right Conservative People's Party of Estonia (EKRE). EKRE's confrontational political style, combined with ideological conflicts inside the governing coalition, contributed to repeated cabinet reshuffles, resignations of ministers, and a general decline in governmental cohesion. This instability slightly reduced Estonia's governance performance score in comparative democracy indices, even though the country's institutional framework remained fundamentally stable.

Indeed, back in 2019-2021, the COVID-19 pandemic constituted a major external stress test for the political system. In the early phase of the crisis, the government responded quickly and decisively, introducing emergency measures such as school closures, restrictions on public gatherings, and border controls. Estonia's advanced digital infrastructure played a crucial role in maintaining continuity of governance and public services, with widespread use of e-government systems enabling remote education, healthcare access, and administrative functioning. This digital capacity is frequently highlighted in international governance assessments as a key factor supporting Estonia's institutional resilience.

However, the pandemic period also temporarily strengthened executive power, as decision-making became more centralised and parliamentary oversight was partially constrained. While such concentration of authority was broadly accepted as necessary in the context of emergency management, it also created space for politically controversial legislative initiatives. Some reforms introduced during this period, particularly in migration and labour policy, were criticised by domestic actors, employers, universities, and human rights groups for extending beyond immediate public health needs. These changes raised concerns about the instrumental use of emergency legislation for advancing broader ideological objectives.

International human rights organisations, including Amnesty International, have generally assessed Estonia as respecting fundamental freedoms, including freedom of expression, assembly, and association. Courts are independent, torture and ill-treatment are not systemic concerns, and civic space remains open. However, such organisations have periodically raised issues related to discrimination and social inclusion, particularly affecting ethnic minorities, migrants from outside the European Union, and vulnerable groups such as refugees and asylum seekers. The Russian-speaking population, concentrated in regions such as Ida-Viru County, has at times faced socioeconomic inequalities and lower levels of trust in state institutions, although overt discrimination is not considered systemic.

Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine in 2022 significantly influenced Estonia's political and social environment during the period under review. Due to its geographic proximity to Russia, historical experience of Soviet occupation, and historically large Russian-speaking minority, the war intensified national security concerns and further shaped public debates on integration, language policy, media influence, and social cohesion. Estonia emerged as one of Ukraine's strongest supporters within Europe, providing political, military, humanitarian, and refugee assistance. At the same time, the regional security situation contributed to heightened political polarisation and reinforced government efforts to strengthen national identity, resilience against disinformation, and Estonian-language integration policies. While these measures were broadly framed within the context of democratic security and social cohesion, some domestic and international actors expressed concerns regarding their potential impact on minority inclusion, civic participation, and the protection of fundamental freedoms.

During the period under review, political discourse also became increasingly polarised due to the growing influence of socially conservative and nationalist narratives. Debates promoted by EKRE and related actors intensified divisions over issues such as migration, gender equality, and family policy. Initiatives such as proposals for a referendum on the constitutional definition of marriage contributed to heightened societal polarisation, even though institutional checks, opposition parties, the presidency, and civil society actors limited their policy impact. These developments reflected a broader regional trend of cultural polarisation rather than a breakdown of democratic governance.

Despite political tensions, Estonia's civil society sector remains active and diverse, although it continues to rely significantly on public funding, which can create vulnerabilities in terms of financial independence. Media freedom is strong by international standards, with both public and private outlets operating independently, although media ownership concentration has increased over time. Journalists generally work without state interference, and critical reporting on government actions remains common and influential in shaping public accountability.

Corruption remains a recurring concern in governance assessments, particularly in relation to political financing, lobbying influence, and the allocation of state resources during the pandemic period. While Estonia has strong formal mechanisms for transparency and oversight, including independent supervisory bodies, some controversies involving emergency economic support and politically connected beneficiaries have raised concerns about the consistency of anti-corruption safeguards in practice.

In more recent years, additional assessments (including Sustainable Governance Indicators (SGI) 2024-type analyses) suggest that Estonia continues to face structural challenges linked to increasing political polarisation, parliamentary confrontation, and growing legislative inefficiency. The rise of obstructive opposition tactics and executive reliance on confidence votes has contributed to tensions in parliamentary culture. Nevertheless, independent institutions, freedom of expression, and judicial oversight continue to function effectively, and societal resilience remains high even in the context of external pressures such as the war in Ukraine and regional security concerns.

Overall, Estonia represents a case of a highly successful digital liberal democracy that remains institutionally robust and internationally well regarded, but which is increasingly affected by political fragmentation, ideological polarisation, and periodic governmental instability. These dynamics have not fundamentally weakened democratic consolidation, but they have introduced greater unpredictability into the functioning of Estonia's political system and its policy-making process.

### III. Background and Critical Perspective on the subsisting issues across the second, third and fourth UPR cycles



Across the second and third Universal Periodic Review (UPR) cycles, Estonia presented itself as a democratic state strongly committed to the promotion of human rights, the rule of law, and international cooperation. During both review periods, the Estonian government emphasised its active participation in the United Nations human rights system, its ratification of major international and regional human rights instruments, and its cooperation with treaty bodies and special procedures of the Human Rights Council. Estonia also highlighted its growing role in promoting digital governance, cybersecurity, freedom of expression online, and democratic participation through technological innovation, including the development of electronic voting systems and digital public services.

At the same time, the reviews demonstrated that Estonia's human rights situation continued to be shaped by several unresolved social and political tensions. One of the most persistent issues across both cycles concerned the position of the Russian-speaking minority and persons with undetermined citizenship. Estonia repeatedly underlined that integration policies and language reforms were intended to strengthen social cohesion and ensure equal participation in society. Government representatives referred to national integration programmes, Russian-language media initiatives, free Estonian language courses, and amendments to the Citizenship Act aimed at reducing statelessness and simplifying naturalisation procedures, especially for children and elderly residents.

However, many States and international organisations continued to raise concerns about the long-term impact of these policies on minority communities. Across both UPR cycles, recommendations consistently point to unequal socioeconomic outcomes, language barriers in education and employment, and limited political participation for non-citizens. While

Estonia presents its language policy as a tool for integration and equal access, many delegations continue to link strict language requirements in schools and the labour market to ongoing disadvantages in practice, particularly in regions like Ida-Viru County.

Further concerns are raised about the transition to Estonian-language education and the role of the Language Inspectorate, which some see as creating additional pressure on students and workers. Although Estonia defends these measures as necessary for social cohesion and equal opportunity, the repetition of similar concerns across multiple UPR cycles suggests that these issues remain unresolved and continue to affect minority communities in a meaningful way.

Another major theme throughout both review cycles was discrimination, racism, xenophobia, and hate speech. Estonia acknowledged growing tensions linked to migration and broader European debates surrounding refugees and asylum seekers. Government representatives emphasised efforts to improve refugee reception conditions, integration programmes, and public awareness campaigns promoting tolerance and cultural diversity. Estonia also referred to educational initiatives, anti-racism policies, and amendments to the Criminal Code aimed at addressing hate speech and hate-motivated offences.

Despite these efforts, many delegations expressed concern about the persistence of xenophobic rhetoric, racist incidents, and discrimination targeting migrants, refugees, Muslims, Roma communities, and ethnic minorities. Several states criticised what they considered insufficient legal protections against hate speech and racist organisations, while others highlighted stigmatising discourse in politics and the media. Repeated recommendations calling for stronger criminal legislation, more effective investigations, and greater accountability for hate crimes indicated that existing responses are perceived as limited by many international observers.

One reason often implied in the State's approach is concern about maintaining a balance with civil and political rights, especially freedom of expression. As a result, stronger criminalisation of hate speech and hate crime can be politically and legally sensitive, as governments must ensure that new measures do not overly restrict legitimate speech or public debate. However, the continued repetition of similar recommendations across UPR cycles suggests that this balance has not fully resolved concerns about protection in practice, and that enforcement and legal thresholds for hate-related offences remain a contested issue.

Gender equality and violence against women also represented recurring concerns during both review cycles. Estonia emphasised the adoption of action plans to reduce the gender pay gap, promote women's participation in decision-making, and implement international commitments related to women, peace, and security. The government described awareness-raising campaigns targeting gender stereotypes, reforms expanding the mandate of labour authorities to address equal pay issues, and measures aimed at improving protection for victims of domestic violence and trafficking in persons.

Nevertheless, international actors continued to identify serious challenges in this area. Recommendations repeatedly focused on persistent gender inequality in employment, unequal remuneration between men and women, and the prevalence of domestic violence and violence against women. Many States encouraged Estonia to strengthen legislation criminalising domestic violence, improve institutional support systems, increase funding for gender equality institutions, and ratify or fully implement relevant international conventions such as the Istanbul Convention. The repetition of these concerns across both cycles demonstrated that legal reforms and policy initiatives had not fully resolved underlying structural inequalities and gender-related social attitudes, including patterns such as the persistent concentration of women in lower-paid care and service sectors compared to male-dominated higher-paying fields like ICT and engineering.

The reviews also highlighted gradual but significant developments regarding LGBTQ+ rights in Estonia. The adoption and later implementation of the Registered Partnership Act were widely welcomed as an important step toward recognising same-sex relationships and improving legal equality. Estonia increasingly positioned itself as supportive of non-discrimination based on sexual orientation and gender identity, including within its broader international human rights policy.

However, several delegations argued that legal protections remained incomplete. Recommendations across UPR cycles called for stronger anti-discrimination legislation, recognition of hate crimes motivated by sexual orientation or gender identity, and fuller implementation of partnership rights. These discussions reflected broader tensions between progressive legal developments and the persistence of discrimination and social prejudice affecting LGBTQ+ individuals within Estonian society.

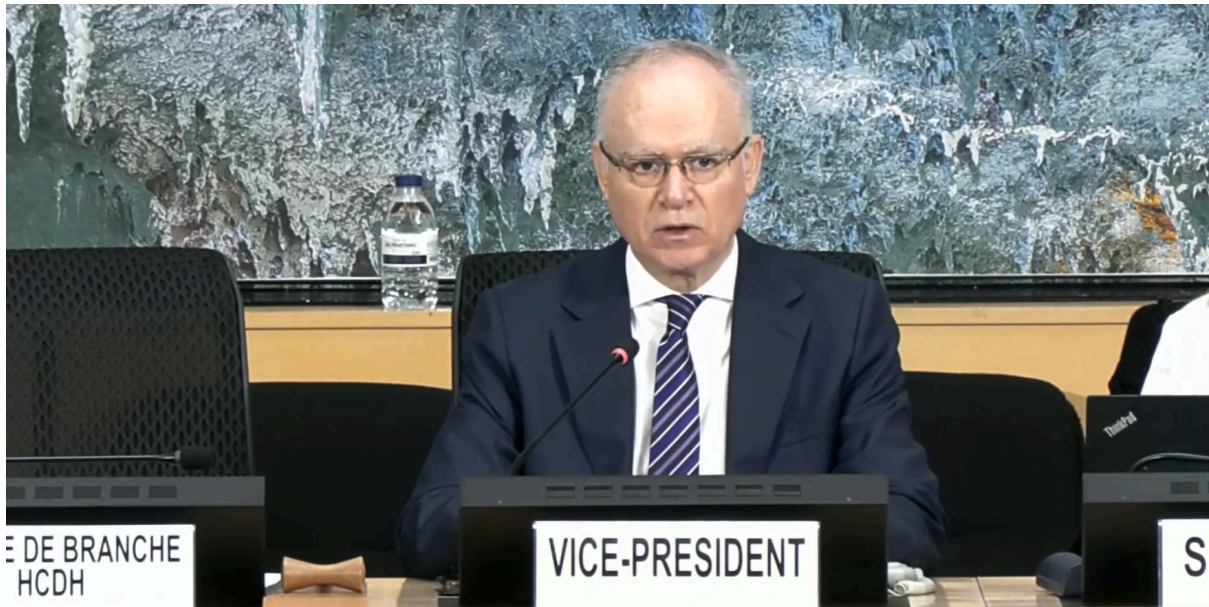
Another recurring issue throughout both UPR cycles concerned Estonia's institutional human rights framework. Although Estonia pointed to the role of the Chancellor of Justice, the Ombudsman for Children, and the Gender Equality and Equal Treatment Commissioner, many States argued that the country still lacked a fully independent national human rights institution compliant with the Paris Principles. Numerous recommendations called for the establishment of such an institution with sufficient independence, resources, and authority to monitor and protect human rights comprehensively. The repeated nature of these recommendations demonstrated continued international concern regarding the adequacy of Estonia's institutional protection mechanisms. One likely reason is that Estonia already relies on several existing bodies, such as the Chancellor of Justice and other sector-specific commissioners, which may reduce the perceived need for a separate NHRI and reflect a preference for a "distributed" oversight model rather than creating a single central institution.

The reviews additionally addressed issues related to detention conditions, trafficking in persons, children's rights, disability rights, and access to justice. Estonia described prison modernisation programmes, reforms to juvenile justice, anti-trafficking legislation, and

welfare reforms designed to improve services for persons with disabilities and vulnerable groups. While many delegations acknowledged these reforms positively, concerns remained regarding prison overcrowding, ill-treatment by law enforcement, trafficking for labour and sexual exploitation, and the need for stronger protections for vulnerable populations.

Overall, the second and third UPR cycles presented a complex image of Estonia's human rights situation. Estonia was frequently recognised for democratic governance, technological innovation, engagement with international institutions, and gradual legislative reforms in several human rights areas. At the same time, the persistence of recommendations related to minority rights, statelessness, discrimination, hate speech, gender inequality, and institutional protection mechanisms revealed continuing structural challenges. The repeated appearance of many of the same concerns across both review cycles suggests that while Estonia made measurable progress in adopting legal and policy reforms, significant gaps remained between formal commitments to human rights and the practical experiences of marginalised and vulnerable groups within society. While these shortcomings did not necessarily indicate an absence of political will at the institutional level, they reflected the growing influence of broader political, social, and security-related pressures, particularly in areas connected to minority integration, migration, language policy, and public order, where regional tensions and domestic polarisation increasingly complicated the consistent implementation of human rights standards in practice.

#### IV. Exhaustive Summary of the State’s 4th UPR Cycle



The fourth UPR of Estonia, held during the 52nd session of the Human Rights Council in 2026, assessed the country’s overall human rights situation, recent reforms, and remaining challenges. Estonia presented an overview of its domestic developments, emphasising reforms in education, digital governance, social inclusion, and integration policies. The dialogue that followed with Member States reflected a broadly constructive tone, with recognition of Estonia’s institutional strength and democratic resilience, alongside a wide range of concerns and reform-oriented recommendations.

Estonia highlighted its commitment to inclusive public education, presenting its national curriculum-based school system as a tool for ensuring equal standards across the country. The delegation emphasised individualised learning approaches, expanded support services for children with special needs, and ongoing reforms aimed at strengthening inclusive education in mainstream schools. Particular attention was given to the transition toward Estonian-language education, which the State framed as a measure to ensure equal participation in public life while maintaining support for minority language learning.

Digital transformation and future-oriented education were also central to Estonia’s presentation. The State emphasised the integration of artificial intelligence tools, digital competencies, and lifelong learning programs to enhance adaptability in a rapidly changing labour market. Estonia also underscored its investment in teacher recruitment and retention, acknowledging persistent shortages, particularly in rural areas.

On integration and cultural policy, Estonia presented a long-term strategy (“Cohesive Estonia 2030”) aimed at strengthening social cohesion through shared democratic values and inclusive participation. The State highlighted improvements in Estonian-language proficiency

among non-native speakers and described integration as a mutual, society-wide process supported by state institutions and civil society. The government also highlighted measures supporting Ukrainian refugees, including access to education, healthcare, and employment.

At the same time, Estonia acknowledged several ongoing challenges, including regional disparities in education quality, teacher shortages in rural areas, fragmented media environments among linguistic communities, and increased demand for language training services. The State also noted the importance of addressing integration challenges in regions with high concentrations of Russian-speaking populations.

Member States welcomed Estonia's progress in governance, education, and digital innovation, but raised concerns across multiple human rights areas, including discrimination, gender equality, violence against women, minority rights, asylum and migration policies, statelessness, and disability inclusion. The overall dialogue reflected broad engagement with both structural and emerging human rights issues. The discussion also reflected growing international concern over how regional security pressures, social polarisation, and integration policies may increasingly influence the balance between national security objectives, social cohesion, and the protection of fundamental rights and freedoms.

## V. Recommendations Section

During the Interactive Dialogue, Member States issued a wide range of recommendations aimed at strengthening Estonia's compliance with international human rights standards. These recommendations can be grouped into several key thematic areas.

A substantial number of States recommended that Estonia strengthen its legal and institutional framework on equality and non-discrimination. Many delegations urged the State to extend anti-discrimination protections beyond the employment sphere to cover all areas of life and to ensure that discrimination is prohibited on all grounds, including race, ethnicity, religion, language, age, disability, sexual orientation, gender identity, and sex characteristics. Several States further recommended harmonising existing equality legislation into a comprehensive legal framework and strengthening enforcement mechanisms to ensure effective access to justice for victims of discrimination.

Another major cluster of recommendations concerned gender equality and violence against women. Member States repeatedly urged Estonia to address the persistent gender pay gap, including through structural labour market reforms and targeted measures to reduce occupational segregation and unequal caregiving burdens. Many delegations recommended strengthening institutional responses to domestic violence and gender-based violence, including improved coordination between law enforcement, judiciary bodies, and social services, as well as increased funding for victim support services. Several States also called for the adoption of a consent-based legal definition of rape aligned with international standards, particularly the Council of Europe Istanbul Convention.

Several countries raised concerns about unequal access to quality education in Estonia, particularly between regions and different socio-economic groups. The main calls were for Estonia to invest more in rural schools, tackle teacher shortages — through better training, pay, and working conditions — and make sure the quality of education is not compromised. Inclusive education also came up repeatedly: many delegations stressed the need for stronger support for children with disabilities and better integration of personalised learning into mainstream classrooms. Countries also encouraged Estonia to expand pre-primary education and distribute educational resources more fairly across the board.

Some recommendations focused on protecting children, especially those in vulnerable situations. Countries urged Estonia to strengthen its child protection systems, make it easier to report violence against children and respond to it effectively, and ensure that children have access to proper psychosocial and legal support when they need it. Children with disabilities were highlighted as a particular priority, with calls for better inclusion, improved access to services, and more joined-up support across education, health, and social care.

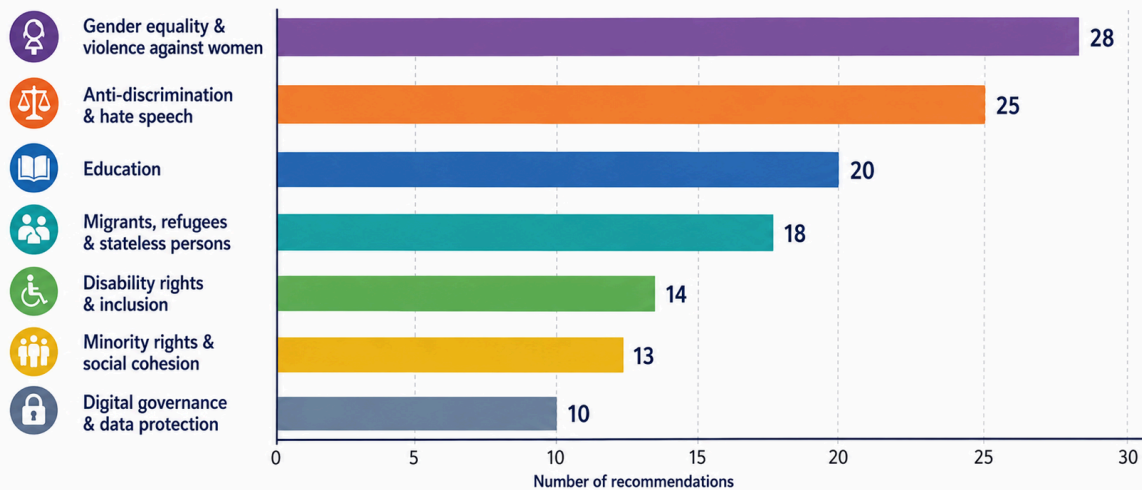
On migration and asylum, countries asked Estonia to guarantee fair, non-discriminatory access to asylum procedures and put stronger protections in place to prevent asylum-seeking and refugee children from being detained. Improving family reunification processes was also flagged as a priority. Several delegations additionally encouraged Estonia to do more to reduce statelessness - for example, by creating clearer pathways to naturalisation and reforming laws to make it easier for people to acquire citizenship.

In relation to persons with disabilities, States recommended strengthening accessibility in all areas of life, including justice, education, employment, and public services. Several delegations urged Estonia to adopt a rights-based approach to disability policy, reform guardianship systems, and ensure supported decision-making mechanisms. Improved access to healthcare and community-based services was also emphasised.

Finally, several recommendations addressed institutional governance, including the need to ensure data protection safeguards, strengthen oversight of surveillance measures, and reinforce the capacity and independence of national human rights institutions. States also encouraged Estonia to ensure effective implementation of human rights policies at both national and local levels, supported by adequate financial and human resources.

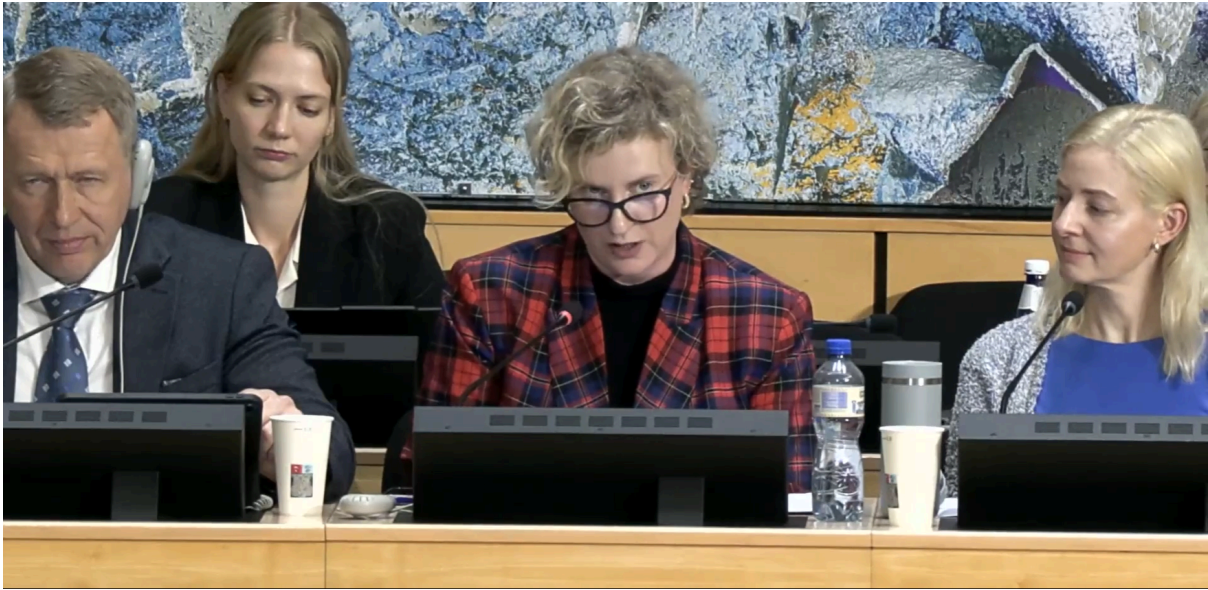
### Main Themes of Recommendations to Estonia – 4th UPR Cycle (2026)

The graph below shows the distribution of recommendations received from UN Member States across key human rights themes.



Note: The numbers reflect the frequency of recommendations raised by Member States during the 2026 UPR dialogue.

## VI. Remarks by the representative of the State under review



The delegation of Estonia expressed appreciation for the constructive engagement of Member States during the review and welcomed the wide range of recommendations received. Estonia emphasised that the UPR remains an important mechanism for reflecting on national progress and identifying areas for further improvement.

The delegation reiterated that Estonia has undertaken substantial reforms in recent years to strengthen social inclusion, digital governance, and equal access to public services. Particular emphasis was placed on developments in education policy, including inclusive education reforms, modernisation of curricula, and measures to support children with special educational needs. Estonia also highlighted progress in integrating digital technologies and artificial intelligence into education and public administration as part of broader efforts to enhance efficiency and accessibility.

Regarding minority integration, Estonia reaffirmed its commitment to fostering a cohesive society based on shared democratic values while respecting cultural diversity. The State highlighted ongoing efforts to improve Estonian-language proficiency, expand integration programs, and support newcomers through structured adaptation initiatives. Estonia also underscored its continued support for Ukrainian refugees, emphasising access to essential services and integration pathways.

On human rights protection, Estonia pointed to ongoing legal and policy reforms addressing gender equality, violence against women, child protection, and the rights of persons with disabilities. The delegation noted improvements in victim support services and acknowledged continued efforts to align national legislation with international human rights obligations.

Estonia reaffirmed its commitment to combating discrimination and promoting equality, while stressing that existing legal frameworks already provide strong protections in this regard. The delegation also highlighted its engagement with international human rights mechanisms and its willingness to examine and consider all recommendations received during the review carefully.

In conclusion, Estonia expressed its readiness to continue working with international partners, civil society, and national institutions to further strengthen the protection and promotion of human rights. The State reiterated that the UPR process is a valuable platform for dialogue and continuous improvement, and confirmed its intention to follow up on the recommendations in accordance with national priorities and capacities.

## VII. Looking Forward: New Priorities of the International Community and Commitments of Estonia



*Source: pexels.com*

Estonia entered its fourth UPR cycle having accepted over 75% of the 274 recommendations received in 2021, and its delegation reported that the majority of those commitments have since been translated into national law and policy. Among the most significant developments was the legalisation of same-sex marriage following amendments to family law, the regaining of A-status accreditation by the Chancellor of Justice as the national human rights institution, and accession to several key international instruments, including the Optional Protocols to Convention on the Elimination of Discrimination Against Women and the Convention on the Rights of the Child on communications procedures, and the International Convention for the Protection of All Persons from Enforced Disappearance. On gender equality, Estonia reported its gender pay gap reaching its lowest level ever in 2025, supported by retraining and education programs with a particular focus on women in technology. On the Draft Gender Equality and Equal Opportunities Act - a flagship legislative reform Estonia acknowledged that parliamentary proceedings were paused following a change of government in 2024, but confirmed that work is ongoing and the policy objectives remain in place. In education, Estonia is midway through a major reform transitioning all schools to Estonian-language instruction, designed to ensure equal opportunities for all children regardless of linguistic background, supported by updated curricula, targeted teacher training, and regional support measures, particularly in Ida-Viru County. On integration, the Ministry of Culture launched a long-term community participation project in 2025 and announced a new public awareness

campaign for 2026 aimed at strengthening positive attitudes toward cultural diversity. Estonia also acknowledged teacher shortages as a national challenge and committed to salary increases, workload reform, and improved career models to attract and retain teachers, especially in rural areas.

Looking ahead, several issues are likely to carry over into the fifth UPR cycle. The most persistent is the gap between legal frameworks and practical outcomes, a pattern visible across multiple review cycles. Gender-based violence and domestic violence continue to draw strong recommendations despite existing action plans, and numerous delegations raised the absence of a consent-based definition of rape in the Penal Code, which remains unaddressed. Hate speech and hate crime legislation were flagged repeatedly, with many states pointing to inconsistent enforcement and gaps in criminalisation. The situation of stateless persons, a structural issue tied to Estonia's post-Soviet history, remains unresolved, with calls for clearer naturalisation pathways likely to continue. Disability rights also remain a work in progress, particularly the shift from guardianship models toward supported decision-making and full legal capacity. Finally, the long-term social effects of the language transition reform on Russian-speaking communities will almost certainly attract continued scrutiny, not least because the reform's outcomes will only become measurable over time. These are not issues Estonia is ignoring; they are issues where meaningful progress takes longer than one review cycle, and where the fifth UPR will likely measure whether commitments made in 2026 have translated into real change.

What emerges from Estonia's fourth UPR is a portrait of a state that is genuinely engaged with the international human rights system — not merely going through the motions. The high-level delegation and detailed ministerial responses all point to a country that takes this process seriously. Yet the review also reflects a broader tension that many advanced democracies face: the gap between well-designed institutions and the lived experience of those who fall outside the mainstream. For Estonia, that gap shows up most clearly in the situations of stateless residents, Russian-speaking communities, persons with disabilities, and women affected by gender-based violence — groups whose rights are formally protected but whose access to those protections remains uneven in practice. The fifth cycle, expected around 2030, will be a critical test — not of Estonia's willingness to reform, but of whether the reforms already underway have made a measurable difference in people's lives.

## VIII. Personal Critical Analysis

The fourth cycle of Estonia's UPR presents a very mixed picture. On one hand, Estonia clearly demonstrates the characteristics of a consolidated liberal democracy with strong institutions, high administrative capacity, and an advanced digital governance system. The State also shows consistent engagement with international human rights mechanisms and has developed a wide range of national action plans and policy frameworks addressing equality, inclusion, and social protection.

But despite all of the above, when we compare the fourth cycle with previous UPR cycles, the overall pattern suggests that progress in key human rights areas remains slow or even stagnant. In particular, issues such as the gender pay gap, domestic violence, hate speech and hate crime continue to appear repeatedly in recommendations from multiple States, across different review cycles. This repetition indicates that while Estonia has adopted relevant legal frameworks and policy strategies, the practical outcomes in these areas have not significantly improved at the pace expected by the international community.

Nevertheless, Estonia appears to be a State with a strong formal commitment to human rights and a well-developed institutional capacity, but with continuous gaps between policy design and real-world outcomes in certain social equality areas. This indicates not so much a lack of willingness to address these issues, but rather limitations in the effectiveness, if not a systematic weakness of implementation. From an outside perspective, Estonia could be expected to achieve much more substantial progress in these areas, given its high administrative capacity and international reputation.

Furthermore, some sensitive issues may remain underrepresented in both State and international discussions. In Estonia's case, the long-term social effects of language and integration policies on Russian-speaking minorities appear politically sensitive and are often framed primarily through security or integration narratives rather than through a deeper discussion of structural inequality and exclusion. This also exposes a deeper structural weakness of the UPR process itself: serious and politically sensitive human rights concerns are often drowned in cautious diplomatic language to preserve consensus and avoid confrontation between States. As a result, systemic problems linked to discrimination, minority exclusion, securitisation, or restrictions justified by national security are frequently addressed through vague recommendations that lack accountability mechanisms, allowing states to present, in a purely formal sense, limited reforms as substantial progress without confronting the root causes of lingering violations.

## IX. GICJ position

**Geneva International Centre for Justice (GICJ)** welcomes Estonia's active and constructive participation in its fourth cycle of the UPR. The State demonstrated openness to dialogue and a generally positive engagement with the international human rights system. Estonia should be commended for its continued commitment to democratic governance, rule of law, and institutional transparency, as well as its willingness to present both achievements and challenges fully. GICJ acknowledges significant progress achieved by Estonia in several key areas. In particular, the country has taken important steps in strengthening its legal and policy framework on gender equality, including improvements in family law and the recognition of marriage equality regardless of gender. Positive developments are also noted in the areas of LGBTIQ+ rights, where recent regulatory reforms have improved legal gender recognition procedures and opened space for further policy development.

At the same time, GICJ notes that important challenges remain and require sustained attention. Despite existing legal protections, gaps in implementation continue to affect the enjoyment of rights in practice, particularly in relation to gender-based violence, discrimination, and social inequality. The persistence of a significant gender pay gap, as well as reported shortcomings in the consistent enforcement of anti-discrimination legislation, highlights the need for stronger institutional mechanisms and improved accountability. GICJ is also concerned by continued reports of hate speech and hate-motivated incidents, as well as the limited scope of existing legal protections outside the employment sector. The organisation stressed the importance of ensuring that equality legislation is comprehensive, effectively enforced, and accessible to all individuals without discrimination. Similarly, while Estonia has made progress in the protection of LGBTIQ+ persons, further reforms are needed to fully align legal frameworks with international human rights standards, including the prohibition of conversion practices and the adoption of self-determination-based legal gender recognition.

Overall, GICJ considers that Estonia is on a positive trajectory in terms of human rights development. The country demonstrates a strong institutional foundation, a willingness to engage with international mechanisms, and a generally progressive approach to social policy. GICJ encourages Estonia to continue its cooperation with the Human Rights Council and to actively implement the recommendations received during this review cycle. The organisation stands ready to support efforts aimed at strengthening human rights protection, enhancing equality, and ensuring that all individuals in Estonia can fully enjoy their fundamental rights without discrimination.

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