



REPUBLIC OF ESTONIA
MINISTRY OF FOREIGN AFFAIRS

Human Rights Diplomacy Bases and Action Plan

Protection and advancement of human rights,
including via technological solutions, as well
as mainstreaming human rights in external
communication and relations

Tallinn 2021

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I. Starting point, bases of human rights policy

The bases and action plan of human rights diplomacy set out the foreign policy actions of Estonia in protecting human rights and advancing democracy. Protecting human rights and advancing democracy are a priority for Estonia's foreign policy, supporting also Estonia's security policy.

The protection of human rights and dignity form the basis for continuous intranational development as well as for peaceful relations between countries. Therefore, respect of human rights, democratic values, and the principles of rule of law are in constant need of protection. Behind all these principles are values the importance of which cannot be underestimated, and which are interdependent of each other. In various parts of the world, however, authoritarian regimes are extending their reach and violating human rights with impunity, thereby threatening global peace and security. Additionally, the COVID-19 pandemic has amplified human rights issues across the world, affecting primarily those already in vulnerable situations.

Estonia's human rights diplomacy has been consistent and stayed on a similar course for decades, focusing on protecting the rights of women, children, and indigenous peoples; freedom of speech and expression, including online; and upholding the principles of civil society, rule of law, and democracy, as well as on fighting impunity.

The consistency of our actions has enabled us to focus our attention on established priorities.

However, the area of human rights is also constantly developing, to which we would like to contribute — for example, human rights in the context of artificial intelligence, business, healthcare, or climate. Therefore, this pioneering human rights diplomacy action plan allows us to include new focus areas, especially those concerning technological solutions and human rights, in addition to reinforcing our current priorities.

Bases for human rights policy

- Values, including respect for democracy, human rights, the rule of law, included in the Constitution of the Republic of Estonia and international law.
- National legislation, international agreements and obligations, which Estonia is a part of, and policy documents — including the UN Sustainable Development Goals, conclusions of the Council of the European Union, guidelines of the European Union (EU), and resolutions of the Council of Europe and the UN, which Estonia has supported.
- The Universal Declaration of Human Rights adopted in 1948 by the UN General Assembly, and the legal documents deriving therefrom.
- European Convention for the Protection of Human Rights and Fundamental Freedoms and the protection of rights deriving therefrom.

II. Thematic priorities

The Estonian human rights policy focuses on three areas: 1) protection of the rights of groups in the most vulnerable situations, primarily women, children, and indigenous peoples, as they are more often the victims of discrimination and violence; 2) freedom of speech and expression, including online, and freedom of the media; 3) advancing democracy, including supporting civil society and combating impunity. We are working for the advancement of these rights through international organisations, bilateral relations as well as through development cooperation and humanitarian aid. All hitherto activities are listed in the appendix 'Main activities of human rights diplomacy so far' to this document, and we will continue these activities.

Rights of women and children

We focus on achieving equality, empowering women and girls, and on fighting against sexual and

gender-based violence. We participate in the open debates of the UN Security Council resolution 1325 on Women, Peace and Security (WPS). We are in the final stages of preparing our third national action plan on women, peace, and security. Estonia is a member of the UN Commission on the Status of Women in 2017–2021.

Further actions:

- continue the implementation of current priorities in foreign communication and cooperation (appendix);
- counter movements against gender equality and consistently support the consideration of the principles of gender equality and the use of the term 'gender equality' in international cooperation;
- pay more attention to the advancement of

women's rights and protection of women's rights in cyber space;

- combat violence against and harassment of women, including online (e.g. the work of the web constable in Estonia);
- prioritise the Action against violence against women and domestic violence (i.e. the Istanbul Convention)¹;
- support sexual and reproductive health and ensuring the rights related thereto, including taking part in the core group of the UN Human Rights Council resolution on maternal mortality;
- support women's possibilities in participating in policymaking and decision-making processes made possible by internet freedom;
- increase the e-inclusion of women and decrease the gender-based digital divide, among other things, via digital education policy (based on the example of Estonia's experience);
- support female human rights advocates, especially by way of our activity in the European Human Rights Ambassadors network;
- support the objectives of the UN Security Council resolution 1325 as both a thematic and a horizontal priority, contribute €200,000 per year to the UN Women's Peace and Humanitarian Fund from the budget of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs;
- join the Action Coalition on Technology of the UN gender equality agency UN Women;
- apply to the executive board of the agency UN Women for the years 2027–2029 and to the UN Commission on the Status of Women for the years 2030–2034.

Children's rights

Estonia stands for the protection of children's rights, focusing on the accessibility of education, combating violence, prohibiting the corporal punishment of children in all settings, and on the protection of children's rights in the digital society.

Further actions:

- continue the implementation of current priorities in foreign communication and cooperation (appendix);
- combat serious violations against children in armed conflict and, as president of the UN Security Council in June 2021, organise an open debate on children affected by armed conflict;
- support children's rights in the digital environment, taking into consideration that education and innovation is Estonia's priority in the UN Children's Fund (UNICEF);
- contribute to improving the cyber security of children, including submitting proposals regarding the wording of resolutions.

Rights of indigenous peoples

Advocate for the rights of indigenous peoples to contribute to the preservation of their language, culture, and living environment and thereby to the protection of the cultural diversity of the world.

Further actions:

- continue the implementation of current priorities (appendix), focusing primarily on the situation of the Finno-Ugric peoples, as well as on the situation of the Crimean Tatars in the occupied Ukrainian territories;
- focus on everything related to the rights of indigenous peoples and the protection of indigenous languages in the digital environment;
- continue to apply to become a member of the UN Permanent Forum on Indigenous Issues;
- support the organisation of the Decade of Indigenous Languages in 2022–2032.

Freedom of speech and media both online and offline

Freedom of speech and expression is an integral part of human rights that must also be advanced and protected online. We will focus on the freedom of the media, an important outlet of the freedom of speech.

Further actions:

- in late 2021, Estonia will hold the third annual conference² of the Media Freedom Coalition

1 Istanbul Convention, ratified by Estonia in 2017, is the most important framework document in combating violence against women and domestic violence. The Convention focuses on protecting the victim and implementing the idea that the victim is not at fault in what has occurred.

2 The first Media Freedom Coalition was held in London in the summer of 2019 by the United Kingdom and the second one was held virtually in the autumn of 2021 by Canada

(MFC³) — important topics include the fight against false information, protection of journalists, and freedom of expression online and offline;

- continue contributing to the Global Media Defence Fund of the Media Freedom Coalition from the budget of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs. We first contributed to the fund in 2020 in the amount of €20,000;
- submit proposals for cooperation between the MFC and the Freedom Online Coalition, as freedom of the media and of the internet are increasingly interconnected;
- support the successful operation of the Platform to Promote the Protection of Journalism of the Council of Europe.

Freedom of the internet

Estonia is a founding member as well as a member of the core group of the Freedom Online Coalition (FOC⁴). The objective of FOC is to promote and protect an open, free, and secure internet. It is important for Estonia for the same rights that apply offline to also apply online. In addition to the freedom of speech and expression, freedom of assembly and association, and right to privacy online (i.e. digital rights in general) are also important.

Further actions:

- focus on the topic of blocking, filtering, and accessibility on the Internet;
- contribute to increasing the visibility of FOC and support faster response to violations of internet freedom across the world;
- support the Finnish Presidency of the Freedom Online Coalition in 2021;
- participate in the FOC Silicon Valley working group, the aim of which is the improved advancement of human rights online by involving the private sector;
- continue to financially support the Digital Defenders Partnership, related to the Freedom Online Coalition, from the budget of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs.

New technological solutions and human rights

As a new topic, our priorities now include innovative technological solutions which have the potential

to significantly improve people's health and living conditions; however these might also entail threats to human rights. The Council of Europe is focusing increasingly on the protection of human rights in the digital space; Estonia is the Thematic Coordinator on Information Policy of the Council of Europe.

Further actions:

- contribute to the transparent and ethical use of new technological solutions, primarily artificial intelligence;
- be actively involved in international policies and processes shaping the future of artificial intelligence;
- continue in the leading role of the Council of Europe in developing a framework for how artificial intelligence relates to human rights.

Civil society and democracy

By way of development cooperation, we support activities that advance civil society and thereby a strong, coherent, and democratic society. We support the participation of Estonian non-governmental organisations in international forums. Estonia is a member of the UN Committee on Non-Governmental Organisations in 2019–2022.

Further actions:

- we are prepared to join new initiatives that advance democracy;
- we will join the International Institute for Democracy and Electoral Assistance (IDEA) led by Sweden;
- join the Democracy Alliance initiative of the USA;
- participate in international processes advancing e-democracy and e-involvement, such as in the working group of the Community of Democracies on democracy and technology.
- focus on supporting human rights advocates, which is also a priority of the European Human Rights Ambassadors network that Estonia is a part of.

Fight against impunity

Estonia is a Contracting Party and an active supporter of the International Criminal Court (ICC). ICC's activity and Estonia's support thereof are guided by the idea that the most serious international crimes

3 Members of the Media Freedom Coalition: Afghanistan, United States, Argentina, Australia, Austria, Belize, Botswana, Bulgaria, Costa Rica, Estonia, Ghana, Spain, Netherlands, Honduras, Croatia, Iceland, Italy, Japan, Canada, Republic of Korea, Kosovo, Greece, Cyprus, Lithuania, Lebanon, Luxembourg, Latvia, the Maldives, Montenegro, France, North Macedonia, Germany, Seychelles, Serbia, Slovakia, Slovenia, Finland, Sudan, Switzerland, Denmark, Czech Republic, Chile, Ukraine, Uruguay, United Kingdom

4 Members of the Freedom Online Coalition: United States, Argentina, Australia, Austria, Costa Rica, Estonia, Ghana, Georgia, Spain, Netherlands, Ireland, Japan, Canada, Kenya, Lithuania, Latvia, the Maldives, Mexico, Moldova, Mongolia, Norway, Poland, France, Sweden, Germany, Finland, Switzerland, Denmark, Czech Republic, Tunisia, New Zealand, United Kingdom

should not go unpunished.

Further actions:

- Estonia wishes to support the strengthening of the court's digital capabilities;
- we consider the cooperation of the UN Security Council and ICC important, including efforts to end conflicts and prosecute perpetrators;
- we cooperate with and financially contribute to the ICC Trust Fund for Victims from the budget of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs.

Freedom of religion and belief

Estonia remains an active member of the International Religious Freedom or Belief Alliance and, as part of the Alliance, to lead a working group on the

protection of safe places of worship;

Further actions:

- Estonia continues to remain an active member of the International Religious Freedom or Belief Alliance and, as part of the Alliance, to lead a working group on the protection of safe places of worship;
- Estonia will introduce the Declaration on Safe Places of Worship in broader terms so that countries not a part of the International Religious Freedom or Belief Alliance would also join;
- The objective is to include the principles of protecting safe places of worship in various resolutions on conflict.

III. Other human rights topics, new topics

In addition to the human rights topics (part II) that Estonia prioritises and consistently, internationally, bilaterally and, via development cooperation and humanitarian aid, advances, there are other topics that Estonia focuses on in the area of human rights.

Right to life, abolition of the death penalty

Along with the EU and other likeminded states, Estonia stands for the complete abolition of death penalty across the world and, as a first step, for the imposition of a moratorium.

LGBTI rights

Along with other likeminded states, Estonia stands for ensuring the rights of sexual minorities, i.e. people in the LGBTI community, and for their equal treatment. We condemn discrimination based on sexual orientation or gender identity and violence against people in the LGBTI community, we actively participate in the protection of these rights, including in likeminded groups.

Abolition of torture and ill-treatment

Along with the EU and other likeminded states, Estonia stands against torture and ill-treatment across the world. Our efforts in this domain include taking part in the supervision proceedings of the execution of judgements of the European Court of Human Rights (ECHR), where many cases concern infringements of the obligation to abolish torture or inhumane and degrading behaviour.

Migrant rights

Along with the EU and other likeminded states, Estonia stands for the treatment of migrants in accordance with international law and human rights standards.

Rights of people with disabilities

Estonia has joined the UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities and its Optional Protocol. We call on other states to join the Convention and its Optional Protocol. We are committed to the protection and advancement of the rights of people with disabilities and to ensuring their equal opportunities. It is important to ensure the equal participation of people with disabilities in society.

Business and human rights

Along with the EU and other Member States, Estonia participates in the relevant UN debates, including the UN working group on compiling a new legally binding document.

Climate and human rights

The objective is a safe, clean and healthy living environment for everyone, which should include taking the disproportionate effect of climate change on the rights of the most vulnerable groups — women and children — into consideration.

IV. National approach to human rights

Opposition to European values is on the rise. Values based on democracy, market economy, human rights, and the rule of law are under increased pressure worldwide. In several parts of the world, there are concerning trends in the area of human rights. For some time now, the UN has focused on the situation of human rights in Syria, Myanmar, North Korea, and Iran. Lately, more attention has been paid to the situation in China, as well as on Venezuela, Nicaragua, the Philippines, Saudi Arabia, and Ethiopia, and the situation of human rights in Russian-occupied territories. In broader terms, Estonia considers it important to ensure access to occupied territories, among other things, for the purpose of monitoring the situation of human rights.

Estonia supports country-specific debates and resolutions in UN human rights forums. In its speeches in the UN Human Rights Council and Universal Periodic Review (UPR), Estonia primarily focuses on the countries and territories where the protection of Estonia's human rights priorities is not efficient enough. In the Review, Estonia's choice of speeches is based on seven criteria: 1) countries where we have the capacity to assess the situation; 2) countries with serious human rights violations; 3) countries that are relevant with regard to human rights topics important to us; 4) countries where progress has been made in the advancement of human rights; 5) countries who need to be supported by our questions and statements; 6) countries who spoke about us in the previous cycle and 7) geographical balance.

We are constantly striving towards ensuring that serious human rights violations would receive due attention and judgment. More specifically, we focus on countries where we have the capacity to assess the situation. Estonia prioritises the human rights situation in the Crimean Peninsula that is occupied by the Russian Federation. The occupants of the Crimean Peninsula are subject to systematic human rights violations; monitoring the situation of human

rights is significantly hindered by the fact that Russia does not allow human rights monitors of international organisations access to Crimea.

- Estonia prioritises the human rights situation in the Crimean Peninsula that is occupied by the Russian Federation. The inhabitants of the Crimean Peninsula are subject to systematic human rights violations; monitoring the situation of human rights is significantly hindered by the fact that Russia does not allow human rights monitors of international organisations access to Crimea.
- In addition, Estonia prioritises the situation of human rights in the occupied territories of South Ossetia and Abkhazia in Georgia, where Russia is carrying out ethnic cleansing and destroying Georgian cultural heritage. With regard to Ukraine and Georgia, we are making sure that the wording in texts of regional and international organisations accurately depicts the situation on the ground.
- We call attention to the situation of human rights in Russia, especially with regard to the deteriorating situation of human rights advocates.
- We call attention to the disregard for democracy and rule of law, as well as to human rights violations in Belarus, especially with regard to violence at peaceful demonstrations, and to the lack of cooperation by Belarusian authorities in international investigations.
- We express concerns about human rights violations in China.
- In addition, Estonia has actively spoken up about human rights issues in, for example, Syria (humanitarian access, children in situations of armed conflict), Myanmar (Rohingya people), and the Democratic Republic of the Congo (e.g. sexual violence).

V. Advancing of Estonia's principles of human rights diplomacy in international organisations and cooperation formats

Estonia extensively works on protecting and advancing the above-mentioned human rights priorities both in international organisations — the UN, Council

of Europe, EU, and the Organisation for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE) — and by way of bilateral relations and development cooperation, and

within the framework of humanitarian aid. We also call attention to topics important to us via unofficial diplomatic cooperation formats.

The **UN** primarily handles human rights topics in the UN Human Rights Council located in Geneva and in the UN General Assembly Third Committee located in New York. In addition, Estonia deems it important to raise human rights issues in the UN Security Council — serious human rights violations often indicate potential armed conflict and thereby function as warning mechanisms. We deem it important to allow victims of human rights violations and human rights organisations to speak at the Security Council. Estonia has applied to the UN Human Rights Council located in Geneva for the years 2026–2029 (elections in 2025). In 2013–2015, Estonia was a member of the UN Human Rights Council for the first time. In May 2021, the third Universal Periodic Review by Estonia will take place in the UN Human Rights Council in Geneva.

The **Council of Europe** is Europe's most important international organisation that works on the protection and advancement of human rights. Its 47 member states are committed to following the obligations set out in the Convention for the Protection of Human Rights and Fundamental Freedoms and complying with the judgements of the European Court of Human Rights. Estonia supports the actions of the Council of Europe in strengthening its leading role in the area of human rights and is an active supporter of a future-oriented approach to human rights in both topical and innovative issues. Additionally, Estonia is an active participant in monitoring the execution of judgements of the European Court of Human Rights, where, in addition to methods taken to ensure the rights of individuals, it is also important to ensure a general method for preventing such violations in the future. Currently, more than 220 conventions and legal documents have been adopted based on the Convention for the Protection of Human Rights and Fundamental Freedoms. Estonia also supports the EU's current accession to the convention to ensure a coherent approach to human rights across Europe.

Member States of the **European Union** are constantly working on human rights topics; this is also an important part of the Common Foreign and Security Policy; the Working Party on Human Rights of the Council of the European Union (COHOM) also convenes regularly. In November 2020, the EU Action Plan on Human Rights and Democracy was adopted for the years 2020–2024. This document provides guidelines for common activities of the EU outside of the EU in both the protection of the rights of individuals and developing democratic societies.

More so than ever before, the action plan focuses separately on the sub-topic of new technological solutions, including artificial intelligence. The EU High Representative, EU Special Representative for Human Rights, EU delegations, and EU Member States will cooperate to implement the action plan. Civil society as well as international and regional organisations are also involved in this cooperation. In December 2020, the EU Global Human Rights Sanctions Regime was approved. Thereby, the EU adopted another tool for the protection of human rights across the world. The Sanctions Regime provides possibilities for responding to serious human rights violations across the world and implementing restrictions for natural and legal persons. Policies closely related to Estonia's human rights diplomacy priorities are also carried out in the EU via different regional strategies and cooperation formats. The comprehensive approach to security of the **Organisation for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE)** is, among other things, based on the principle that it is not possible to achieve lasting security without respect for human rights and without functioning democratic institutions. One of OSCE's three major dimensions is the human dimension, which includes the following topics: strengthening democratic institutions, honest, free, and democratic elections, gender equality, human rights, freedom of the media, rights of minorities, rule of law, tolerance and non-discrimination. This dimension is monitored by and the fulfilment of OSCE's obligations is supported by independent organisations: Office for Democratic Institutions and Human Rights, High Commissioner on National Minorities, and the Representative on Freedom of the Media. OSCE has several methods for the protection of human rights, for example, it is possible to establish an independent expert mission to assess the situation of human rights. Every year, the Human Dimension Implementation Meeting is held in Warsaw. In Vienna, human rights are regularly discussed in the Human Dimension Committee. Estonia is responsible for the EU's topic on children's rights and is an active member of the OSCE Group of Friends on the Safety of Journalists. Estonia is putting itself forward as a candidate to hold the Chairmanship of the OSCE in 2024.

The **Media Freedom Coalition** (currently, 47 members), the **Freedom Online Coalition** (currently, 32 members), and the **International Religious Freedom or Belief Alliance** (currently, 32 members) provide opportunities for amplifying, via their formats, topics that are important to Estonia among other likeminded countries, for example, by joint statements and organising events.

In addition to the Estonian Human Rights Ambassador, who took office in the Ministry of Foreign Affairs for the first time in September 2020, the **European Human Rights Ambassadors group** includes Ambassadors of Spain, Netherlands, Lithuania, Luxembourg, France, Sweden, Germany, Finland, and the United Kingdom. The group meets every two weeks and prepares joint statements and social media posts, organises joint events and meetings with human rights advocates and non-governmental organisations from various countries.

The **activities of Estonian bilateral embassies** supports the implementation of our human rights priorities.

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