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Estonia

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B-1049 Brussels*

Country report

Non-discrimination

Transposition and implementation at national level of
Council Directives 2000/43 and 2000/78

Estonia

Mari-Liis Sepper

Reporting period 1 January 2025 – 1 January 2026

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

1. Introduction

Estonia is a multi-party parliamentary democracy. The Estonian Republic declared its independence in 1918, but due to almost half a century of Soviet occupation (1944-1991), modern equality law came into existence only in 1992 with the adoption of the new Constitution.¹ Estonia became a member of the European Union (EU) in 2004. The non-discrimination principle was further defined by the adoption of the Equal Treatment Act² in 2009, which transposed the EU Directives 2000/78/EC³ and 2000/43/EC⁴ into the Estonian legal system.

According to the 2021 national census, there were representatives of 211 nationalities residing in Estonia, but only 14 ethnic groups had more than 1 000 members.⁵ The biggest ethnic groups beside Estonians (69.1 %) are Russians (23.7 %) and Ukrainians (2.1 %). The Roma community is very small. In 2021 there were 676 people who identified themselves as Roma. Regardless of the small size of the community, the Roma have two associations who actively work on various social and cultural issues relevant for the Roma population.⁶

The key areas of ethnic inequality in terms of socio-economic indicators are: unemployment – in the 15–74 age group in 2025, this was 6.1 % among Estonians and 10.3 % among non-Estonians;⁷ at risk of poverty by ethnic origin – in 2023, 27 % of non-Estonians and 18 % of Estonians were at risk of poverty, while 4 % of non-Estonians and 2 % of Estonians faced absolute poverty.⁸

In 2024, a study on racial discrimination and racism in Estonia was published,⁹ according to which microaggressions against black people and other people of colour are widespread. Nearly a third (29 %) of respondents are frequently or always concerned about being stared at inappropriately or having derogatory gestures made towards them. Harassment or discrimination are most often experienced in public spaces (on the street, on public transport, etc.), as well as when renting accommodation, applying for a job and in the workplace.

According to 2025 data, there are 101 017 persons with disabilities (7.4 % of the population) in Estonia.¹⁰ The disability movement in the post-occupation era dates back to 1989 and is currently well institutionalised with the umbrella organisation, the Estonian Chamber of Disabled People, with representation across Estonia, via 16 county boards, and 36 disability-specific unions and 300 organisations as members. The key social issue for persons with disabilities is unemployment. In 2024, just 26 % of persons with disabilities aged 15 to 74 years were employed in Estonia (versus 72 % of persons without a disability). The at-risk-of-poverty rate was especially high in 2024 among persons with

¹ Constitution of the Republic of Estonia (*Eesti Vabariigi põhiseadus*), Riigi Teataja 1992, 26, 349. Riigi Teataja (hereinafter RT) – Official State Gazette.

² Equal Treatment Act (*Võrdse kohtlemise seadus*), RT I 2008, 56, 315.

³ Council Directive 2000/78/EC of 27 November 2000 establishing a general framework for equal treatment in employment and occupation (Employment Equality Directive).

⁴ Council Directive 2000/43/EC of 29 June 2000 implementing the principle of equal treatment between persons irrespective of racial or ethnic origin (Racial Equality Directive).

⁵ Statistics Estonia data at: <https://rahvaloendus.ee/et/tulemused/rahvastiku-demograafilised-ja-etno-kultuurilised-naitajad>.

⁶ Balti Uuringute Instituut (2014), *Ülevaade romade olukorrast Eestis*.

⁷ Statistics Estonia data at: https://andmed.stat.ee/et/stat/sotsiaalelu_tooelukvaliteet_tooturu-lehed/TKL01.

⁸ Data from Statistics Estonia online dashboard on equality, available at: <https://juhtimislaud.stat.ee/en/equal-treatment-715> (26.02.2026).

⁹ Veske, C. (2024), *Racial discrimination in Estonia*, The Gender Equality and Equal Treatment Commissioner, available at: <https://www.volinik.ee/en/information-materials/report-racial-discrimination-estonia.html>.

¹⁰ Social Insurance Board data, available at: <https://epikoda.ee/sihtgrupid/uhiskonnale/statistika/>, (26 February 2026).

disabilities aged 65 or over, almost half of whom were at such risk (46 %). In 2022, half of women whose everyday activities are limited by their disability had experienced violence by their intimate partner. Among men whose everyday activities are limited by their disability the figure was 36 %.¹¹

Estonia is a society with an ageing demographic. One of the social issues that especially concerns older people is poverty. The demographic group most at risk of poverty has been those aged 65 years and older who live alone. In 2024, 62.3 % of this age group were at risk of poverty.¹²

More than half the population of Estonia consider themselves non-religious (58 %) according to the 2021 census data. The largest religious group is Orthodox (16 %), followed by Lutherans (8 %), which was previously the largest religious community. The Constitution stipulates that everyone may freely belong to churches and religious societies. Freedom to practise religion may be restricted only if it is detrimental to public order, health or morals. There is no state church.¹³

In recent years there has been increasing discussion of vegans' rights and, with regard to the employment context, there have been articles claiming that the ground of belief protects vegans from discrimination under the Equal Treatment Act.¹⁴ Situations in which vegans' rights require protection usually relate to food offered in hospitals and children's institutions (kindergartens and schools), where the responsibility for providing a vegan diet for their children lies primarily with vegan parents.¹⁵ Currently, these situations of unequal treatment do not fall under the equality law in force, except for the non-discrimination clause in the Constitution.

LGBTQI+¹⁶ people's rights and equality issues have been an important part of the public debate for the last 15 years. Since 2012, the Estonian Human Rights Centre has monitored the population's attitudes towards LGBT topics. The 2023 survey showed that 64 % of the Estonian-speaking population and 39 % of speakers of other languages regard homosexual attraction as acceptable. People aged 20-29 are the most open-minded: 83 % of them think that this type of attraction is a normal part of society. The survey also found that 53 % of people support gay and lesbian marriages.¹⁷ The law currently in force allows gays and lesbians, as well as heterosexual couples, to enter into registered partnerships as well as to marry. In 2023 a law was passed in the Estonian Parliament that established marriage equality for all people including lesbian, gay and queer couples.¹⁸ The law entered into force on 1 January 2024. In 2025, a qualitative study identified no significant discriminatory issues concerning rainbow families. Instead, a consensus emerged among all interviewees that adoption of marriage equality in 2023 and related amendments to relevant laws has effectively addressed all the known fundamental concerns of rainbow families.¹⁹

¹¹ All data from Statistics Estonia online dashboard on equality, available at: <https://juhtimislaud.stat.ee/en/equal-treatment-715> (26 February 2026).

¹² Statistics Estonia data at: <https://stat.ee/en/avasta-statistikat/valdkonnad/heaolu/sotsiaalne-torjutus-ja-vaesus/risk-poverty-rate>.

¹³ The commentary on the Constitution (Art 40). Available at: <https://pohiseadus.ee/sisu/3511>.

¹⁴ Sepper, M.-L. (2018), 'Vabadus olla vegan' ('The freedom to be vegan'), Sirp, 27 October 2018, <https://kultuur.err.ee/872391/mari-liis-sepper-vabadus-olla-vegan>.

¹⁵ Aavik, K. (2024), '„Kui teie otsustasite teistmoodi elada, siis kannatage“: institutsioonide valmisolek toetada kestlikumat eluviisi veganitest lapsevanemate vaatest' ('If you chose to live differently, then you must suffer': Institutions' readiness to support a more sustainable lifestyle from the perspective of vegan parents'). Eesti Vegan Selts (Estonian Vegan Society), https://vegan.ee/wp-content/uploads/Veganvanemad_uuringuraport_2024.pdf.

¹⁶ The report uses the acronym LGBTQI+ unless the study or the source cited uses a different acronym.

¹⁷ Comparative results of 2012, 2014, 2017, 2019, 2021 and 2023 surveys available at: <https://humanrights.ee/en/topics-main/equal-treatment/attitudes-towards-lgbt-topics-estonia/>.

¹⁸ The law provides that a marriage is contracted between two natural persons.

¹⁹ Sepper, M.-L. (forthcoming), *Regulating the status of rainbow families in EU Member States – the case of Estonia*, Gender Studies Centre Dike.

2. Main legislation

According to Article 123 of the Estonian Constitution,²⁰ the ratified international treaties have priority over domestic legislation if the latter is in conflict with international treaties ratified by the *Riigikogu* (Estonian parliament). Estonia has signed and ratified the vast majority of international human rights instruments aimed at combating discrimination.

Article 12 of the Estonian Constitution includes an open-ended list of grounds of prohibited discrimination. The commentary on the Constitution regards this provision as a protection of each person's human dignity by prohibiting discrimination regardless of the identity of the person. This Article is directly applicable to both natural persons and public and private legal persons.²¹

In addition to generally worded anti-discrimination provisions in the Constitution, the essence of Estonian equality law is contained in two separate laws: the Gender Equality Act²² of 2004 and the Equal Treatment Act²³ of 2009. The second of these laws was specifically adopted to transpose the EU anti-discrimination Directives 2000/43 and 2000/78.

The Equal Treatment Act is designed to ensure the protection of persons against discrimination on the grounds of ethnic origin, race, colour, religion or other beliefs, age, disability or sexual orientation. The scope of its application is identical with that in Directives 2000/43 and 2000/78 for the respective grounds. The Act widened the mandate of the existing equality body – the Gender Equality Commissioner (established in 2005 under the Gender Equality Act) – whose name was altered and became the Gender Equality and Equal Treatment Commissioner. The equality body, which had been designated to give opinions in cases of discrimination on the ground of gender, was now also able to receive discrimination complaints on the grounds of ethnic origin, race, colour, religion or other beliefs, age, disability and sexual orientation.

The Gender Equality Act²⁴ prohibits discrimination on the basis of gender, pregnancy and childbirth, parenting, performance of family obligations and other circumstances related to gender (e.g. transgender identity). The material scope of the Gender Equality Act is wider than the Equal Treatment Act. It covers all spheres of life with very few exceptions (e.g. situations between family members).

When the EU anti-discrimination Directives 2000/43 and 2000/78 were transposed the Chancellor of Justice Act²⁵ was amended to give the Chancellor the mandate of an equality body. However, in 2025, the Ministry of Economic Affairs and Communications drafted a bill transposing into Estonian law Directives 2024/1499 and 2024/1500 on standards for equality bodies. Once adopted, the law will change the landscape of Estonian equality bodies. The explanatory note to the draft law states that, in Estonia, the national equality body within the meaning of the directives is the Gender Equality and Equal Treatment Commissioner, and not the Chancellor of Justice.²⁶

The Chancellor of Justice scrutinises legislative instruments to ensure conformity with the law. The Chancellor also has the duties of an ombudsman to guarantee the protection of constitutional rights and freedoms. It can also deal with cases of discrimination on any

²⁰ Constitution of the Republic of Estonia (*Eesti Vabariigi põhiseadus*), RT 1992, 26, 349.

²¹ Commentary on the Constitution of the Republic of Estonia, https://pohiseadus.ee/sisu/3483/paragrahv_12.

²² Gender Equality Act (*Soolise võrdõiguslikkuse seadus*), RT I 2004, 27, 181.

²³ Equal Treatment Act (*Võrdse kohtlemise seadus*), RT I 2008, 56, 315.

²⁴ Gender Equality Act (*Soolise võrdõiguslikkuse seadus*), RT I 2004, 27, 181.

²⁵ Chancellor of Justice Act (*Õiguskantsleri seadus*), RT I 1999, 29, 406; the Chancellor of Justice became an equality body from 1 May 2004.

²⁶ File No. 2-2/2025, containing the draft law and the accompanying explanatory memoranda (Act Amending the Equal Treatment Act and Related Legislation). Available in Estonian at: <https://eelnouud.valitsus.ee/main/mount/docList/8b9d571f-c4d1-425f-b3d2-3385629d2337#7AvMx2tu>.

grounds by public bodies and institutions. In January 2004, the Chancellor of Justice's Office acquired powers to carry out conciliation procedures in disputes regarding discrimination by natural persons and private legal entities on the grounds of gender, race, ethnic origin, colour, language, origin, religious, political or other belief, property or social status, age, disability, sexual orientation or other grounds of discrimination provided for in the law.

Under the Penal Code,²⁷ the violation of the principle of equal treatment constitutes a crime (Article 152 on violation of equality), and Article 151 criminalises public incitement to hatred, violence or discrimination on the basis of ethnic origin, race, colour, gender, language, origin, religious belief (*usutunnistus*), sexual orientation, political opinion, financial or social status.²⁸ These provisions are rarely, if ever, applied.

3. Main principles and definitions

The general principle of non-discrimination in Estonian law can be found in the Constitution (primarily in Article 12). The Equal Treatment Act includes detailed definitions of direct and indirect discrimination, and harassment.

In the Equal Treatment Act, provisions regarding victimisation, instructions to discriminate, genuine occupational requirements, reasonable accommodation of persons with disabilities, burden of proof, positive action measures, and exceptions for associations and other public or private organisations the ethos of which is based on religion or belief, are almost identical with those in the directives.

The Act contains no explicit prohibition of discrimination by association or based on an assumption of a person's characteristics.

The Equal Treatment Act does not exclude preferences to be granted on the following grounds: representation of the interests of employees or membership of an association representing the interests of employees (if preferential treatment is appropriate and necessary); pregnancy; giving birth; caring for children, adult children or parents in need of care.

The Act permits positive action measures to prevent or compensate for disadvantages linked to ethnic origin, race, colour, religion or other beliefs, age, disability or sexual orientation. The Equal Treatment Act Article 6 allows positive measures in line with Article 7(1) of the Directive 2000/78. The Act provides that such measures must be proportional to the objective sought. The measures are seldomly used. There are, for example, special labour market services and incentives for unemployed persons with disabilities and for young people.

The previous drafts of legislative proposals to amend the Equal Treatment Act have been informed by the concepts of intersectionality and multiple discrimination. One of the bills that was subject to public consultation in 2024 but later dropped included an explicit provision to this end. In addition, the 2025 bill transposing Directives 2024/1499 and 2024/1500 on standards for equality bodies plans to introduce into equality law the notion of intersectional discrimination (in Estonian *põimdiskrimineerimine*).²⁹ The law in force does not stipulate a prohibition on multiple discrimination.

²⁷ Penal Code (*Karistusseadustik*), RT I 2001, 61, 364, RT I 2002, 86, 504.

²⁸ The term 'social status' is not defined in the text of the law. In practice, it can mean, for example, property status, the fact of being married, etc.

²⁹ File No. 2-2/2025, containing the draft law and the accompanying explanatory memoranda (Act Amending the Equal Treatment Act and Related Legislation). Available in Estonian at: <https://eelnouud.valitsus.ee/main/mount/docList/8b9d571f-c4d1-425f-b3d2-3385629d2337#7AvMx2tu>.

4. Material scope

Article 12 of the Constitution bans discrimination in all spheres of life that are regulated and protected by the state.

The material scope of the Equal Treatment Act is identical with that of the directives for the following grounds: ethnic origin, race, colour, religion or other beliefs, age, disability or sexual orientation in employment-related areas; and ethnic origin, race and colour in social welfare, social security, healthcare, education, and access to and supply of goods and services including housing.

In the context of conciliation procedures between private parties, the Chancellor of Justice's mandate does not extend to discrimination complaints that concern the following: the professing and practising of faith or working as a person conducting religious services in religious organisations, relations in family or private life and the exercise of the right of succession.³⁰ In the public sector, the Chancellor, acting as an ombudsman, may deal with any questions if it is appropriate to do so.

The scope of activities of the Gender Equality and Equal Treatment Commissioner is limited to the scope of application of the Equal Treatment Act and the Gender Equality Act.

5. Enforcing the law

In Estonia, the following procedures exist for enforcing the principle of equal treatment:

- Judicial procedures

A victim of discrimination can use *criminal* procedures (by reporting a crime to the police), *administrative court* procedures (e.g. complaints against the action of an official or state/local government institution, including disputes between a public official and their employer) or *civil court* procedures (e.g. labour disputes in the private sector and the award of non-pecuniary damages).

Discrimination cases are solved on the basis of general procedural rules and standards. The only exception is the application of provisions regarding a shift in the burden of proof as defined by the Equal Treatment Act, which is almost identical to that in the directives.

The Equal Treatment Act entitles a victim of discrimination to demand, on grounds of any of the five main protected characteristics, an end to the discrimination and compensation for the damage caused to them by the violation. Importantly, a victim may also demand that 'a reasonable amount of money' be paid as compensation for non-patrimonial damage. Claims for compensation for damage expire within one year of the date when the victim becomes aware or should have become aware of the damage caused. Upon determination of the amount of compensation, a court or a labour dispute committee must take into account, among other things, the scope, duration and nature of discrimination. There are no specific provisions, however, to guarantee that sanctions applicable to infringements of the anti-discrimination provisions are effective, proportionate and dissuasive.

- Non-judicial procedures

- Quasi-judicial procedures at labour disputes committees

The labour dispute committees are established within the local labour branches of the Labour Inspectorate. The committees solve discrimination disputes and issue legally binding decisions.

³⁰ Participation in the conciliation procedure requires the consent of both parties. As of March 2026, the Chancellor was able to approve the agreement between the parties in only one conciliation procedure.

- Quasi-judicial procedure of giving a legal opinion by the Gender Equality and Equal Treatment Commissioner

The Gender Equality and Equal Treatment Commissioner carries out an investigation into whether discrimination has occurred. The outcome of the procedure is a legally non-binding opinion.

- Conciliation by the Chancellor of Justice

Conciliation procedures may be conducted by the Chancellor of Justice in relation to discrimination in the private sector. If the conciliation procedure fails, a victim may seek the protection of their rights in court.

- Ombudsman-like procedures

The Chancellor of Justice (in relation to the public sector) is entitled to conduct ombudsman-like procedures, the results of which are not legally binding.

- Challenge proceedings at administrative authorities

A person may file a challenge if their rights are violated or their freedoms are restricted by an administrative act or measure.

In conciliation procedures, a person who has a legitimate interest in monitoring compliance with the requirements for equal treatment is guaranteed the legal right to act as a representative of a victim of discrimination. A similar rule applies in procedures of the Equality Commissioner. The Commissioner will provide opinions to victims of discrimination or to persons who have a legitimate interest in monitoring compliance with the requirements for equal treatment. However, no similar rules have been introduced regarding discrimination disputes before the labour dispute committees or courts.

6. Equality bodies

The body responsible for the promotion of equal treatment is the Gender Equality and Equal Treatment Commissioner, who, from January 2009 has had a mandate to deal with other grounds in addition to gender. From 2004 to 2009, this role was played only by the Chancellor of Justice, which still has some obligations relating to the promotion of the principles of equality and non-discrimination in Estonia.

The Gender Equality and Equal Treatment Commissioner is an independent expert appointed for a five-year period by the Minister for Economic Affairs and Communications. The Commissioner's activities, supported by the office, are funded by the state budget. The office of the Commissioner is governed under statute enacted by the Government of the Republic.³¹ The Commissioner deals with discrimination on the grounds of gender and the grounds applicable in the context of the Equal Treatment Act, i.e. ethnic origin, race, colour, religion or other beliefs, age, disability or sexual orientation.

The Chancellor of Justice is appointed to office by the Parliament, on the proposal of the President of Estonia, for a term of seven years. In directing their office, the Chancellor has the same rights that are granted by law to a minister in directing a ministry. The Chancellor is independent in their decision-making and the office has a budget of its own.

The Chancellor of Justice and the Commissioner are entitled to analyse the effect of the implementation of legislation on the condition of members of society and to make proposals

³¹ See <https://www.riigiteataja.ee/akt/129122024018>.

to governmental bodies for amendments to legislation. Both institutions are obliged to promote equal treatment, to inform the official bodies about relevant principles and to enhance cooperation in the field. However, only the Commissioner has an explicit duty to advise and provide assistance to people pursuing their complaints about discrimination. The Commissioner was also made responsible for drafting specific reports dedicated to gender equality and equal treatment.

7. Key issues

In general, Estonian law and practice are in line with the directives.

There are some issues that should be addressed in the context of future revision of relevant laws. In broader terms the equality laws need an assessment of their applicability, as there have been very few court cases. There may be different reasons for this, including that people do not know their rights, hiring a lawyer is expensive, in the event of losing at court some of the legal costs of the defendant may be imposed on the claimant, and the laws may not encourage the enforcement of equality rights.

First, the scope of the Equal Treatment Act, although in line with the directives, creates a hierarchy of grounds, which is not in line with the Estonian Constitution. There have been debates in the Riigikogu (Estonian Parliament) and among the lawyers working in the public sector since 2009 over widening the scope to include the same areas of application (e.g. provision of goods and services, education, health, etc.) to all the protected grounds listed in the Equal Treatment Act. The idea to widen the scope has also been advocated by the human rights non-governmental organisations. Three legislative proposals (in 2016, 2022 and in spring 2024) have been prepared to this end but there has been no political will to pass these amendments to the Equal Treatment Act. All three proposals were dropped. Work on a fourth proposal was started in autumn 2024 by the Government; as at 1 January 2026 the bill had not reached the parliament.

Second, in addition to circumstances that relate to genuine and determining occupational requirements or positive action measures, the Equal Treatment Act permits, exceptionally, direct discrimination on the grounds of race and ethnicity in order to ensure public order and security, to prevent criminal offences, and to protect the health and the rights and freedoms of others. Those provisions are not in line with the Racial Equality Directive (Directive 2000/43).

Third, there are no specific provisions regarding the right to act as a representative of a victim of discrimination outside the procedure before the Gender Equality and Equal Treatment Commissioner and the conciliation procedure at the Chancellor of Justice. Relevant regulation could be enhanced to better meet the requirements of the directives.

Fourth, there are no detailed provisions to guarantee that sanctions applicable to infringements of the national anti-discrimination provisions are effective, proportionate and dissuasive.

Fifth, an analysis conducted as part of the EquiTech project carried out by the Equality Bodies of Estonia and Lithuania, the Ministry of Economic Affairs and Communications of Estonia, the Ministry of Justice of Estonia and Tallinn University of Technology identified numerous regulatory challenges regarding the use of artificial intelligence (AI) and preventing discrimination. The four main challenges identified were: the intersectional nature of algorithmic discrimination, the lack of transparency for ensuring effective enforcement in cases of algorithmic discrimination, the difficulty in codifying and measuring

what constitutes algorithmic fairness, and insufficient risk management obligations in developing and operating algorithms.³²

³² Gender Equality and Equal Treatment Commissioner's Office of Estonia et al. (2024), *Legal analysis on non-discrimination regulation and regulatory gaps concerning algorithmic systems in Estonia and Lithuania*, 25 November 2024, available at: https://www.vollinik.ee/vollinik-live-web-prd/s3fs-public/2024-12/Equitech_Legal-Analysis_25.11.2024.pdf.

INTRODUCTION

The national legal system

The Estonian national legal system is typical for continental Europe. The main sources of normative legal rules are provisions of the Constitution, laws and by-laws (secondary legislation). Case law (court decisions) cannot be regarded as a source of normative legal rules³³ in the way that legislation of general application can. However, the decisions of the Supreme (National) Court³⁴ do influence local legal practice to a considerable extent.

At the top of the Estonian legal system is the Constitution,³⁵ which includes the most important legal provisions, including provisions regarding fundamental human rights and freedoms and general principles of non-discrimination. The next level consists of the laws adopted by the Riigikogu – the Parliament. The third level comprises other legal acts adopted by competent authorities on the basis of laws (e.g. decrees of the Government of the Republic). Additionally, there are normative acts of local self-government, which are valid in the respective territories.

According to Article 123 of the Constitution, Estonia cannot enter into international treaties that are in conflict with its Constitution. Furthermore, '[i]f laws or other legislation of Estonia are in conflict with international treaties ratified by the Parliament, the provisions of the international treaty shall apply'. Additionally, at a referendum held in 2003, the Constitution was amended with the following provision:³⁶ 'As of Estonia's accession to the European Union, the Constitution of the Republic of Estonia applies taking account of the rights and obligations arising from the Accession Treaty'. Furthermore, 'generally recognised principles and rules of international law are an inseparable part of the Estonian legal system' (Article 3(1)). Estonia has signed and ratified the vast majority of international instruments aimed at combating discrimination (see annex 1 to this report).

In Estonia, justice is administered by the courts solely in accordance with the Constitution and the law (Article 146 of the Constitution). The court will not apply any law or other legislation that is in conflict with the Constitution. The Supreme Court will declare invalid any law or other legislation that is in conflict with the provisions and spirit of the Constitution (Article 152).

A request to review the constitutionality of legislation of general application or international treaties may be filed with the Supreme Court by the President of the Republic, the Chancellor of Justice,³⁷ the Parliament or a local council. Additionally, a court may initiate proceedings by delivering its judgment or ruling to the Supreme Court (Article 4 of the Constitutional Review Court Procedure Act).³⁸

To sum up, provisions of the Constitution and international treaties (including those against discrimination) are directly applicable in Estonian courts and other legislation should not violate these provisions.

³³ The exception to this is decisions of the Supreme Court in issues that are not regulated by other sources of criminal procedural law, but which arise in the application of law – Article 2(4) of the Code of Criminal Procedure (*Kriminaalmenetluse seadustik*), 12 February 2003, RT I 2003, 27, 166, RT I 2004, 65, 456). For texts of Estonian legal acts and English translations of most of them, see: <http://www.riigiteataja.ee>.

³⁴ Riigikohus, the court of highest instance in Estonia.

³⁵ Constitution of the Republic of Estonia (*Eesti Vabariigi põhiseadus*), 28 June 1992, RT 1992, 26, 349.

³⁶ RT I 2003, 64, 429. Valid since 14 December 2003.

³⁷ *Õiguskantsler* (Chancellor of Justice).

³⁸ Constitutional Review Court Procedure Act (*Põhiseaduslikkuse järelevalve kohtumenetluse seadus*), 13 March 2002, RT I 2002, 29, 174.

List of main legislation transposing and implementing the directives**Title of the law: Constitution of the Republic of Estonia (*Eesti Vabariigi põhiseadus*)**

Abbreviation: CRE

Date of adoption: 28 June 1992

Entry into force: 3 July 1992

Latest amendments: 26 March 2025

Web link: <https://www.riigiteataja.ee/en/eli/530102013003/consolide>

Grounds covered: unlimited (ethnic origin, race, colour, gender, language, origin, religion, political or other opinion, property or social status, or other grounds)

Civil/administrative/criminal law: Administrative law

Material scope: Not specified

Principal content: Equality before the law; prohibition of discrimination

Title of the law: Equal Treatment Act (*Võrdse kohtlemise seadus*)

Abbreviation: ---

Date of adoption: 11 December 2008

Entry into force: 1 January 2009

Latest amendments: 21 May 2025

Web link: <https://www.riigiteataja.ee/en/eli/530102013066/consolide>

Grounds covered: ethnic origin, race, colour, religion or other beliefs, age, disability or sexual orientation

Civil/administrative/criminal law: Civil/administrative law

Material scope: identical with Directives 2000/43 and 2000/78 for respective grounds

Principal content: definitions of direct and indirect discrimination, harassment, provisions regarding victimisation, instruction to discriminate, genuine occupational requirements, reasonable accommodation, burden of proof, positive action measures, exceptions for associations and other public or private organisations the ethos of which is based on religion or belief. Detailed provisions regarding one of the specialised bodies (Gender Equality and Equal Treatment Commissioner)

Title of the law: Chancellor of Justice Act (*Õiguskantsleri seadus*)

Abbreviation: ---

Date of adoption: 25 February 1999

Entry into force: 1 June 1999

Latest amendments: 13 May 2020

Web link: <https://www.riigiteataja.ee/en/eli/505012015001/consolide>

Grounds covered: not specified (public sector); gender, race, ethnic origin, colour, language, origin, religious, political or other belief, property or social status, age, disability, sexual orientation or other ground of discrimination provided for in the law (conciliation procedure, private sector)

Civil/administrative/criminal law: Administrative (with elements of civil) law

Material scope: Not specified (public sector); the Chancellor will ignore discrimination-related complaints that concern 1) the professing and practising of faith or working as a minister of religion in religious associations with registered articles of association; 2) relations in family or private life; 3) the exercising of the right of succession (private sector)

Principal content: Procedure in cases of discrimination by 1) state agency, local government agency or body, legal person in public law, natural person or legal persons in private law performing public duties; 2) a natural person or a legal person in private law; responsibilities of the Chancellor as a body for the promotion of equality

1. GENERAL LEGAL FRAMEWORK

Constitutional provisions on protection against discrimination and the promotion of equality

The Estonian Constitution includes the following Article dealing with non-discrimination:

‘Article 12.

Everyone is equal before the law. No one shall be discriminated against on the basis of ethnic origin, race, colour, gender, language, origin, religion, political or other opinion, property or social status, or on other grounds.

The incitement of ethnic, racial, religious or political hatred, violence or discrimination shall, by law, be prohibited and punishable. The incitement of hatred, violence or discrimination between social strata shall, by law, also be prohibited and punishable.’

These provisions apply to all areas covered by the directives. The Constitution provides an open-ended list of grounds of discrimination. Therefore, Estonian courts have repeatedly addressed the issue of discrimination on the grounds of age,³⁹ disability,⁴⁰ sexual orientation,⁴¹ etc. in the context of Article 12 of the Constitution.

The material scope of the constitutional provisions is broader than those of the directives. In one of its judgments, the constitutional review chamber of the Supreme Court claimed that the general principle of equality is applicable to ‘all spheres of life’.⁴²

The constitutional anti-discrimination provisions are directly applicable.

The constitutional equality clauses can be enforced against private actors as well as against the state.

³⁹ E.g. Supreme Court, constitutional review chamber, Judgment of 1 October 2007, case 3-4-1-14-07.

⁴⁰ E.g. Supreme Court *en banc*, Judgment of 10 December 2003, case 3-3-1-47-03.

⁴¹ E.g. Supreme Court, constitutional review chamber, Judgment of 18 December 2019, case 5-19-42.

⁴² Supreme Court, constitutional review chamber, Judgment of 6 March 2002, case 3-4-1-1-02, point 13; published in RT III 2002, 8, 74.

2. THE DEFINITION OF DISCRIMINATION

2.1 Definition of the grounds of unlawful discrimination within the directives

a) Racial or ethnic origin

The explanatory note that was attached to the draft Equal Treatment Act included the following clarifications regarding the protected grounds:⁴³

- race (*rass*) – a group of people with certain hereditary features;
- ethnicity (*rahvus*) – ethnic origin (*etniline kuuluvus*); not to be confused with nationality/citizenship (*kodakondsus*).

In Estonia, 'race' is normally associated with a particular skin colour (nevertheless, 'colour' was added to the Equal Treatment Act as a separate ground of prohibited discrimination).

There is no case law to highlight differences between 'race' and 'ethnicity' or to define the term 'race'. Tallinn District Court has defined 'ethnicity' as being, for example, Russian or Finnish or any other nationality, and stated that the question of whether, in the assessment of a candidate in a recruitment procedure, the fact that they have not lived permanently close to the place of employment can be considered does not fall under the scope of the Equal Treatment Act.⁴⁴ There is no case law that would shed light on what the criteria are to establish a particular ethnic group, such as the criteria listed in the CJEU rulings of *CHEZ Razpredelenie Bulgaria* and *Jyske Finans*, and as reiterated in the *Slagelse Almennyttige Boligselskab, Afdeling Schackenborgvænge* case.⁴⁵

b) Religion or belief

The explanatory note that was attached to the draft Equal Treatment Act included the following clarifications regarding religious, political and other beliefs (*usutunnistus, poliitilised või muud veendumused*): 'religious beliefs refer to a religious "world view"; political and other beliefs are all non-religious beliefs'.⁴⁶

In Estonian law and in everyday practice, religion and belief are understood as covering both the *forum internum* and the *forum externum* similarly to the interpretation by the Court of Justice of the European Union (CJEU, *Achbita* C-157/15).⁴⁷ According to Article 40(3) of the Constitution:

'Everyone is free to practise his or her religion, alone or in community with others, in public or in private, unless this is detrimental to public order, public health or public morality.'

There is no case law related to the definition of the term 'religion' or the term 'belief'.

⁴³ See explanatory note attached to the draft No. 384 SE (11th Riigikogu); available at: <http://www.riigikogu.ee>.

⁴⁴ Judgment of Tallinn District Court (Tallinna Ringkonnakogus) of 7 October 2024 in administrative case 3-22-1337, para. 45, available at: <https://www.riigiteataja.ee/kohtulahendid/fail.html?id=382585983>.

⁴⁵ CJEU, judgment of 16 July 2015, *CHEZ Razpredelenie Bulgaria* C-83/14, ECLI:EU:C:2015:480, para. 46; judgment of 6 April 2017, *Jyske Finans* C-668/15, EU:C:2017:278, para. 17; and judgment of 18 December 2025, *Slagelse Almennyttige Boligselskab, Afdeling Schackenborgvænge* C-417/23, ECLI:EU:C:2025:1017, paras 72–86.

⁴⁶ See explanatory note attached to draft No. 384 SE (11th Riigikogu); available at: <https://www.riigikogu.ee/tegevus/eelnoud/eelnou/cc5e0cc0-2620-3f44-e381-071e238b4195/V%C3%B5rdse%20kohtlemise%20seadus>.

⁴⁷ CJEU, judgment of 14 March 2017, *Achbita* C-157/15, ECLI:EU:C:2017:203, para. 28.

c) Disability

The Equal Treatment Act (Article 5) provides a definition of disability:

‘For the purposes of this act, disability is the loss of or a deviation in an anatomical, physiological or mental structure or function of a person which has a substantial and long-term adverse effect on the performance of everyday activities.’

Unlike the definition cited above, the definition of disability in Article 2(1) of the Social Benefits for Disabled Persons Act makes a clear reference to the social model of disability:⁴⁸

‘Disability is the loss of or a deviation in an anatomical, physiological or mental structure or function of a person which in conjunction with different attitude related and environmental restrictions prevents participation in social life on equal basis with the others.’

Regardless of this reference to attitudes and the environmental restrictions, the subsequent provisions of the Social Benefits for Disabled Persons Act on establishing the severity of disability that gives access to various services and benefits focus on the degree of assistance and supervision that the person needs. The Committee on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities has noted with regard to Estonia that ‘the use, in laws and policies, of derogatory concepts and terminology concerning persons with disabilities, including the use of words such as “abnormalities”, “helpless persons” and “mental disorders”, which emphasise persons’ impairments, reflect the medical and paternalistic approaches to disability’.⁴⁹

Since there are no court interpretations that would elaborate on the definition of disability as provided in the Equal Treatment Act, the grammatical reading of the provision lends itself to the conclusion that the definition is not compatible with the concept of disability as worded in CJEU *HK Danmark (Ring and Skouboe Werge)*, C-335/11 and C-337/11.⁵⁰

In a 2022 case investigated by the Gender Equality and Equal Treatment Commissioner⁵¹ (the national equality body), Decree No. 51 on the health requirements, procedure for medical examination and forms of medical certificates of persons applying for entry into seafarers’ employment contracts, crew members, students at maritime educational institutions and persons commencing studies at maritime educational institutions was analysed since it considers schizophrenia as a condition that ‘absolutely excludes’ someone from working in any maritime job. The Commissioner found that the explanatory note of the decree should have explained why certain psychiatric diagnoses are considered as absolute obstacles to working at sea and since it did not contain such an explanation it is not known whether such a ban is proportional. The Commissioner relied on the expert opinion by a commission of psychiatrists, which stated that it is justified to ban people with a diagnosis of schizophrenia from all seafarers’ jobs and therefore concluded that there is no discrimination on ground of disability.

The Commissioner did not seem to ponder whether schizophrenia must be considered ‘a curable or incurable illness’ entailing ‘a limitation which results in particular from physical,

⁴⁸ Social Benefits for Disabled Persons Act (*Puuetega inimeste sotsiaaltoetuste seadus*), 27 January 1999, RT I 1999, 16, 273.

⁴⁹ UNCRPD (2021), *Concluding observations on the initial report of Estonia*, 5 May 2021, <https://www.ohchr.org/en/documents/concluding-observations/crpdcestdco1-concluding-observations-initial-report-estonia>.

⁵⁰ Judgment of 11 April 2013, *HK Danmark (Ring and Skouboe Werge)*, joined cases C-335/11 and C-337/11, ECLI:EU:C:2013:222. The Estonian definition was adopted much earlier than these cases and the explanatory note refers only to the judgment of 11 July 2006, *Chacón Navas*, C-13/05, ECLI:EU:C:2006:456. However, the environmental aspect has always been implied.

⁵¹ There is no case no. reference, the overview of the case was provided by the Commissioner’s Office in correspondence with the expert on 1 May 2023.

mental or psychological impairments which in interaction with various barriers may hinder the full and effective participation of the person concerned in professional life on an equal basis with other workers' as did the CJEU in *HK Danmark (Ring and Skouboe Werge)*. Instead it was presumed that the diagnosis of schizophrenia amounts to disability as a protected ground.

d) Age

The explanatory note to the draft Equal Treatment Act does not define the term 'age'. No definition of this ground of unlawful discrimination can be found in case law.

e) Sexual orientation

The explanatory note to the draft Equal Treatment Act does not define the term 'sexual orientation'.

No definition of this ground is provided in case law.

2.2 Multiple and intersectional discrimination

In Estonia, multiple discrimination is not explicitly prohibited in national law.

It is, however, taken into account by the Equality Commissioner when deciding on discrimination cases.

In Estonia, intersectional discrimination is not explicitly prohibited in national law. It is, however, taken into account by the Equality Commissioner when deciding on discrimination cases.

The previous two drafts of legislative proposals to amend the Equal Treatment Act have been informed by the concepts of intersectionality and multiple discrimination, however, none of the bills has included an explicit provision to this end. The Ministry of Economic Affairs and Communications has drafted a bill transposing into Estonian law Directives 2024/1499 and 2024/1500 on standards for equality bodies. The bill was sent to all ministries and stakeholders for comments in November 2025. It introduces the concept of intersectional discrimination (*põimdiskrimineerimine*), defining it as a special form of discrimination, whereby a person is treated less favourably, or they are in a more disadvantaged situation, because of two or more protected grounds listed in the Equal Treatment Act and the Gender Equality Act, and the impact of these grounds on the treatment or situation of a person is inextricably linked.⁵²

There has been no court case regarding multiple and/or intersectional discrimination. The Gender Equality and Equal Treatment Commissioner has given several opinions where the combination of several protected grounds were at the heart of the complaint.⁵³ However, the number of cases is not sufficient to observe any patterns. For example, for the years 2020 and 2021 the document registry of the Commissioner's Office did not allow users to count complaints where several grounds of discrimination were invoked.⁵⁴ For 2023 such statistics exist – there were five complaints concerning multiple discrimination, all of them combining gender or family obligations with either disability, nationality or sexual

⁵² File No. 2-2/2025, containing the draft legislation developed by the Ministry of Economic Affairs and Communications, together with the accompanying explanatory memoranda (Act Amending the Equal Treatment Act and Related Legislation). Available in Estonian at: <https://eelnoud.valitsus.ee/main/mount/docList/8b9d571f-c4d1-425f-b3d2-3385629d2337#7AvMx2tu>.

⁵³ For example, the opinion No. 32 from 14 May 2013 (recruitment case concerning the grounds of age, disability, and gender).

⁵⁴ This information is from the author's correspondence with the Commissioner's Office, 29 March 2022.

orientation,⁵⁵ but the statistics for 2024 and 2025 included no data on multiple discrimination cases.

2.3 Assumed and associated discrimination

a) Discrimination by assumption

In Estonia, discrimination based on a perception or assumption of a person's characteristics is not explicitly prohibited in national law.

No case law addresses this issue. However, it is quite probable that the courts could decide that discrimination by assumption is covered by the definition of direct discrimination as provided in Article 3(2) of the Equal Treatment Act (see Section 2.4 below).

b) Discrimination by association

In Estonia, discrimination based on association with persons with particular characteristics, is not explicitly prohibited in national law.

There is no case law addressing this issue, either. However, it is quite probable that the courts could decide that discrimination by association is covered by the definition of direct discrimination as provided in Article 3(2) of the Equal Treatment Act (see Section 2.4 below). At present, there is no indication in case law that Estonia is not in line with the judgments in *Coleman*, C-303/06; *CHEZ Razpredelenie Bulgaria*, C-83/14; and *Bervidi*, C-38/24.

2.4 Direct discrimination (Article 2(2)(a))

a) Prohibition and definition of direct discrimination

In Estonia, direct discrimination is prohibited by law. The definition is identical with that in the directives.

According to the Equal Treatment Act direct discrimination occurs where, on the basis of an attribute specified in Article 1(1) of the Act (i.e. ethnic origin, race, colour, religion or other beliefs, age, disability or sexual orientation), one person is treated less favourably than another is, has been or would be treated in a comparable situation (Article 3(2)).

There is no case law clarifying whether the term 'one person' limits the scope of protection to individuals or not.

The case law indicates that courts are sometimes confused about whether to apply provisions of direct discrimination or those of indirect discrimination.⁵⁶ In administrative case no 3-19-504 the court claimed that statistics can be used to prove that no discrimination on the ground of age has taken place.⁵⁷ The court made a reference to CJEU *Meister*, C-415/10⁵⁸, where the court claimed that statistics can be used to prove that

⁵⁵ Author's correspondence with the Commissioner's Office, 6 February 2024.

⁵⁶ Sepper, M.-L. (2024), *Soolise võrdõiguslikkuse seaduse ja võrdse kohtlemise seaduse rakendamise. Kohtute ja võrdõigusvoliniku praktika analüüs (Implementation of the Gender Equality Act and the Equal Treatment Act. Analysis of the practice of the courts and the Gender Equality Commissioner)*, Mõttekoda Praxis, available at: <https://www.praxis.ee/uploads/2025/01/SoVS%20ja%20V%C3%B5rdKS%20rakendamise%20anal%C3%B5C%C3%BCs.pdf>.

⁵⁷ As referenced in *Tartu Ringkonnakohus* (Tartu District Court), decision no 3-19-504 of 19 November 2020, p. 42.

⁵⁸ Court of Justice of the European Union, C-415/10, *Galina Meister v Speech Design Carrier Systems GmbH*, 19 April 2012, <https://curia.europa.eu/juris/document/document.jsf?text=&docid=121741&pageIndex=0&doclang=EN&mode=lst&dir=&occ=first&part=1&cid=61833>.

indirect discrimination has taken place. The claimant in the case in question claimed that they had experienced both direct and indirect discrimination and provided proof that the Tartu city government employed very few people aged over 60 years, which suggested, in the claimant's opinion, the possibility that indirect discrimination had taken place. The court's argumentation is unclear and it may be read in a way that the court found that statistics (provided by the city government) indicating that the city employed more than 100 persons aged over 50 years exclude the possibility of direct discrimination taking place in recruitment.

In another case, it was clear that Tallinn Administrative Court excluded direct discrimination on the ground of parenthood, basing its decision solely on statistics that, out of 63 judicial clerks appointed by *Harju Maakohus* (Harju County Court), 27 have children who are minors.⁵⁹

According to the law in force, 'objectively justified by a legitimate aim' is part of the definition of indirect discrimination only (Equal Treatment Act (ETA) 2008, Article 3(4)), but in practice the courts have made it part of their understanding of direct discrimination also. For example, in case no 3-22-1337 the district court claimed that '[a]ccording to ETA Article 3(2), (3) and (4), discrimination may be direct or indirect. In case of both types of discrimination it is not sufficient that mere unequal treatment exists but the unequal treatment must be qualified [as] unjustified'.⁶⁰

The courts of first and second instance are influenced by the Supreme Court practice of applying the Article 12 of the Constitution on non-discrimination. According to this practice, which dates back to the early 2000s, before the ETA was adopted, there is a violation of Article 12(1) of the Constitution and discrimination has taken place only if there is no 'reasonable cause' (in Estonian *mõistlik põhjus*) for unequal treatment.⁶¹ In the Tartu prison case the Supreme Court gave a more detailed explanation of 'reasonable cause', stating that the general right to be treated equally is violated in a case where 'unequal treatment has no reasonable and appropriate cause'.⁶² When assessing whether interference with a right is constitutional, the objective of unequal treatment and the gravity of the unequal situation it has created must be considered.

There are decisions by courts of lower instance in which both the Equal Treatment Act and the Gender Equality Act were applied in a manner similar to the Supreme Court's method of establishing violation of a constitutional right.⁶³

b) Justification for direct discrimination

The Equal Treatment Act does not provide for any justification for direct discrimination apart from the general exception in Article 9(1), which permits exceptionally and unlike the Racial Equality Directive, direct discrimination on the grounds of race and ethnicity in order to ensure public order and security, to prevent criminal offences, and to protect the health and the rights and freedoms of others. This exception is examined in detail in sections 4.6-4.8 below.

According to the law in force, 'objectively justified by a legitimate aim' is part of the definition of indirect discrimination only, but in practice, the courts have made it part of their understanding of direct discrimination also (see Section 2.4(a)).

⁵⁹ *Tallinna Halduskohus* (Tallinn Administrative Court), decision no 3-13-1617 of 19 February 2015.

⁶⁰ *Tallinna Ringkonnakohus halduskolleegium* (Tallinn Circuit Court Administrative Law Chamber), decision no 3-22-1337/35 of 7 October 2024.

⁶¹ See, for example, Supreme Court decisions in case no 3-3-1-47-03 of 10 December 2003 and case no 3-3-1-101-06 of 3 January 2008.

⁶² Supreme Court (*Riigikohtu üldkogus*), decision in case no 5-19-29/38 of 15 March 2022.

⁶³ For example, *Tallinna Ringkonnakohus* (Tallinn Circuit Court), decision in case no 3-22-1996 of 30 May 2024; decision in case no 3-08-2605 of 11 June 2010; and decision in case no 3-12-424 of 12 December 2013.

2.5 Indirect discrimination (Article 2(2)(b))

a) Prohibition and definition of indirect discrimination

In Estonia, indirect discrimination is prohibited in national law. It is defined in Article 3(4) of the Equal Treatment Act; the definition is identical to the definition of indirect discrimination in the directives. Indirect discrimination is taken to occur where an apparently neutral provision, criterion or practice would put persons, on grounds of ethnic origin, race, colour, religion or other beliefs, age, disability or sexual orientation, at a particular disadvantage compared with other persons unless that provision, criterion or practice is objectively justified by a legitimate aim and the means of achieving that aim are appropriate and necessary.

b) Justification test for indirect discrimination

As mentioned above, Article 3(4) of the Equal Treatment Act stipulates that indirect discrimination is taken to occur where an apparently neutral provision, criterion or practice would put persons, on grounds of ethnic origin, race, colour, religion or other beliefs, age, disability or sexual orientation, at a particular disadvantage compared with other persons unless that provision, criterion or practice is objectively justified by a legitimate aim and the means of achieving that aim are appropriate and necessary. According to Article 9(1) of the Equal Treatment Act, the Act does not prejudice measures laid down by law that are necessary for the maintenance of public order, for public security, for the prevention of criminal offences, for the protection of health and for the protection of the rights and freedoms of others. Such measures must be proportionate to achieving their aims.

The relevant provisions of the Equal Treatment Act are in line with the directives.

2.5.1 Statistical evidence

a) Legal framework

In Estonia, there is law in force regulating the collection of personal data. The Personal Data Protection Act⁶⁴ no longer uses the term 'sensitive data' as was done prior to 2019, instead it provides in Article 20(1) specifications for processing of 'personal data of special categories' and refers to EU Regulation 2016/679.⁶⁵ Processing of personal data of special categories is permitted only if this is strictly necessary and only in the following cases:

- 1) admissibility of processing is provided for in the legislation;
- 2) processing is necessary in order to protect the vital interests of the data subject or of any other natural person; or
- 3) processing relates to personal data which is manifestly made public by the data subject.

Article 6(4) of the same Act specifies that if scientific and historical research is based on special categories of personal data, the ethics committee of the area concerned shall first verify compliance with the terms and conditions provided for in the Personal Data Protection Act. If there is no ethics committee, the compliance with the requirements is verified by the Estonian Data Protection Inspectorate.

In Estonia, statistical evidence may be used in order to establish (indirect) discrimination. Estonian law does not explicitly ban the use of statistical evidence in courts (Article 229 of

⁶⁴ Personal Data Protection Act (*Isikuandmete kaitse seadus*), 12 December 2018, RT I, 04.01.2019, 11.

⁶⁵ Regulation (EU) 2016/679 of the European Parliament and of the Council of 27 April 2016 on the protection of natural persons with regard to the processing of personal data and on the free movement of such data, and repealing Directive 95/46/EC.

the Code of Civil Procedure).⁶⁶ The explanatory note to the draft Equal Treatment Act refers to statistical and sociological data in the context of indirect discrimination (although without providing any details or explanations).⁶⁷ In practice, Estonian courts permit statistical evidence in discrimination-related cases, although it might be difficult to win the case without any other evidence to back the claim.⁶⁸

b) Practice

In Estonia, statistical evidence is rarely used in practice in order to establish indirect discrimination. In the case of *X. v. Tartu city*,⁶⁹ the applicant argued among other claims (e.g. direct discrimination on the ground of age) that the recruiting practice by the Tartu city authorities entailed indirect discrimination on the ground of age, but the issue was not considered by the second-instance court (Tartu Circuit Court), and the court did not find direct discrimination on the ground of age. The Tartu Circuit Court refers to the first-instance court decision regarding the applicant's argument of using statistics to prove indirect discrimination and claims that it has nothing to add to the argumentation.⁷⁰ The first-instance court decision is not publicly available under the private life data protection clause and its argumentation regarding the use of statistics is unknown.

Employers commonly have data on their staff members' gender, age, disability or partial work ability, number and age of children, and whether the child has a disability.

2.6 Harassment (Article 2(3))

a) Prohibition and definition of harassment

In Estonia, harassment is prohibited in national law. It is defined by the Equal Treatment Act.

In Estonia, harassment explicitly constitutes a form of discrimination.

According to the Equal Treatment Act harassment is a form of direct discrimination when unwanted conduct related to ethnic origin, race, colour, religion or other beliefs, age, disability or sexual orientation takes place with the purpose or effect of violating the dignity of a person and of creating an intimidating, hostile, degrading, humiliating or offensive environment (Article 3(3)). The material scope of the Act is identical to that of Directives 2000/43 and 2000/78 for the grounds covered therein. As regards the personal scope of the Act, only natural persons are protected.

There is no case law clarifying whether the term 'one person' limits the scope of protection to individuals or not.

b) Scope of liability for harassment

Where harassment is perpetrated by an employee, in Estonia the employee is liable. Judicial interpretation is required regarding the potential liability of the employer. It could be argued that the employer is liable for such harassment, as the employer has the duty to take appropriate measures to protect employees against discrimination, including

⁶⁶ Code of Civil Procedure (*Tsiviilkohtumenetluse seadustik*), 20 April 2005, RT I 2005, 26, 197.

⁶⁷ See explanatory note attached to the draft No. 384 SE (11th *Riigikogu*); available at: <http://www.riigikogu.ee>.

⁶⁸ For example, in one of the 2020 cases, the Estonian court considered the complainant's statistical evidence but did not find it convincing. The case concerned alleged age discrimination in access to employment in a municipality. See: Judgment of the Tartu District Court (*Tartu Ringkonnakohtus*) of 19 November 2020 in Administrative Case No. 3-19-504.

⁶⁹ Judgment of the Tartu Circuit Court of 19 November 2020 in Administrative Case No. 3-19-504. <https://www.riigiteataja.ee/kohtulahendid/detailid.html?id=278966486> (in Estonian).

⁷⁰ Judgment of the Tartu Circuit Court of 19 November 2020 in Administrative Case No. 3-19-504, point 74.

harassment (Art. 12(1) of the Equal Treatment Act). Where harassment is perpetrated by a third party, judicial interpretation is required regarding the potential liability of the duty bearer – for instance, the service provider.

Unlike the Equal Treatment Act, the Gender Equality Act explicitly places an obligation on the employer to protect their employees from sexual and gender-based harassment, and provides for their liability if they fail to do so.

2.7 Instructions to discriminate (Article 2(4))

a) Prohibition of instructions to discriminate

In Estonia, instructions to discriminate are prohibited in national law. Instructions as such are not defined. The law does not say whether instructions to discriminate include explicit instructions and/or preferences or suggestions with a discriminatory impact and/or encouragement or pressure.

In Estonia, instructions explicitly constitute a form of discrimination.

According to the Equal Treatment Act, an instruction to discriminate against persons on grounds of ethnic origin, race, colour, religion or other beliefs, age, disability or sexual orientation is deemed to be discrimination (Article 3(5)). There is no case law to clarify this provision.

In Estonia, the legal provision on instructions to discriminate does not specify whether a hierarchical relationship between the instructor and instructed person is required. There is no case law on the issue, either. However, it is likely that an instruction to discriminate would be interpreted as implying a hierarchical relationship of some kind between the instructor and the person who has been instructed.

b) Scope of liability for instructions to discriminate

In Estonia, the instructor is liable under Article 3(5) of the Equal Treatment Act. Since the discriminator is liable under the general provisions of prohibition of discrimination, both the instructor and the discriminator are liable.

2.8 Reasonable accommodation duties (Article 2(2)(b)(ii) and Article 5 Directive 2000/78)

a) Implementation of the duty to provide reasonable accommodation for persons with disabilities in the area of employment

In Estonia, the duty to provide reasonable accommodation is included in national law. It is defined in Article 11 of the Equal Treatment Act as follows:

‘(1) Grant of preferences to disabled persons, including measures aimed at creating facilities for safeguarding or promoting their integration into the working environment, shall not constitute discrimination.

(2) Employers shall take appropriate measures, where needed in a particular case, to enable a person with a disability to have access to, participate in, or advance in employment, or to undergo training, unless such measures would impose a disproportionate burden on the employer.

(3) Upon determining whether the burden on the employer is disproportionate as specified in subsection 2, the financial and other costs of the employer, the size of the agency or enterprise and the possibilities to obtain public funding and funding from other sources shall also be taken into account.’

No other details or explanations are available in the text of the Equal Treatment Act. The provision suggests that the same duty applies in the private sector and the public sector.

It should be noted that Estonian law also provides for general employer's obligations regarding certain groups of employees. According to Article 10¹(4) of the Occupational Health and Safety Act:⁷¹

'The work, work equipment and workplace of a disabled employee shall be adapted to his or her physical and mental abilities. Adaptation means making the building, workroom, workplace or work equipment of the employer accessible and usable for a disabled person. This requirement also applies to commonly used routes and non-workrooms used by disabled employees.'

Certain legal provisions might be especially valuable in supporting the making of reasonable accommodation. Thus, the Employment Programme 2024–2029⁷² defines the measures that are meant to support 'work ability'. These include adapting premises and equipment, providing a technical appliance necessary for work free of charge and providing a support person to assist with the work.

According to the Occupational Health and Safety Act (Article 10¹(3)), an employer is required to enable a worker who has become partially incapacitated for work in the employer's enterprise as a result of an occupational accident or occupational disease to continue work suitable for him or her in the enterprise, pursuant to the procedure provided for in employment law.

b) Case law

There are good reasons to believe that reasonable accommodation is rarely applied in practice. In the *Tartu Prison* case⁷³ the Supreme Court touched upon the concept of reasonable accommodation for the first time.

In the *Tartu Prison* case, a former guard of Tartu Prison challenged his dismissal, which was initiated because his level of auditory acuity did not meet the minimum standards of sound perception prescribed by a regulation in force. The second-instance court found Regulation No. 12 relating to the auditory acuity requirements to be contrary to the general principle of equal treatment enshrined in the Constitution (Article 12) and initiated the procedure for reviewing the constitutionality of those provisions before the Supreme Court.⁷⁴ The Supreme Court decided to refer a question to the Court of Justice as to whether the provisions of Directive 2000/78 preclude such national legislation.⁷⁵

As to the reasonable accommodation the Supreme Court emphasised in its decision that there was no evidence that the claimant was not able to perform their duties as a prison guard, but

'even if it were established ... that the applicant's hearing impairment prevented them from doing so it could not inevitably result in the applicant losing their job, since it was incumbent upon the State to ensure that instead of dismissing them from the service, appropriate and necessary measures were adopted to enable them to

⁷¹ Occupational Health and Safety Act (*Töötervishoiu ja tööohutuse seadus*), 16 June 1999, RT I 1999, 60, 616. The relevant provisions were added in 2007. They were not intended to address the issue of reasonable accommodation, although they might be useful in this context.

⁷² Employment Programme 2024–2029 Act (*Tööhõiveprogramm 2024–2029*), 29 September 2023, no 90, RT I, 3 October 2023, 21.

⁷³ Riigikohus, 15 March 2022, No. 5-19-29, p 64.

⁷⁴ Tartu Ringkonnakohus, 11 April 2019, No. 3-17-1569.

⁷⁵ Judgment of 15 July 2021, *XX v Tartu Vangla*, C-795/19, ECLI:EU:C:2021:606.

continue their service. However, this is provided that such measures would not have imposed a disproportionate burden on the employer'.⁷⁶

The Supreme Court referred to the UN CRPD and the obligation of the state to provide reasonable accommodation but did not elaborate further on the desired balance between the opposing interests of the claimant and the defendant when deciding whether the accommodation is disproportionately burdensome on the employer. According to the Supreme Court, it cannot be ruled out that 'the continuation of the claimant's service would have been possible in addition to the possibility of using the hearing aid thanks to other appropriate measures'. For example, 'the prison could have considered making changes to the claimant's duties, reducing the number of duties requiring direct contact with prisoners, etc.' (p. 81).

The Supreme Court declared unconstitutional and invalid the provisions of Regulation No. 12 that imposed an absolute bar on the continued employment of a prison officer whose auditory acuity does not meet the minimum standards of sound perception, without allowing it to be ascertained whether that officer is capable of fulfilling their duties, after the adoption of reasonable accommodation measures where appropriate.

The applicant was awarded compensation in the amount of 60 times their monthly pay by the 2019 decision of the court of second instance, which initiated the constitutional review procedure before the Supreme Court.

c) Definition of disability and non-discrimination protection

The definition of a disability for the purposes of claiming a reasonable accommodation is the same as for the protection from discrimination in general (Article 5 of the Equal Treatment Act). The definition is the same for the private sector and the public sector. For further details see Section 2.1.c of this report.

d) Failure to meet the duty of reasonable accommodation for persons with disabilities

In Estonia, failure to meet the duty of reasonable accommodation is not recognised as a form of discrimination in the text of the law. This applies to both the public sector and the private sector. Judicial interpretation is required to ascertain whether the courts would recognise the failure to accommodate as discrimination.

e) Duties to provide reasonable accommodation in areas other than employment for persons with disabilities

In Estonia, there is no duty to provide reasonable accommodation for persons with disabilities outside the employment field. However, there are legal provisions which oblige the transport and building sectors to abide by the rules that aim to improve accessibility of public space and buildings. Decree No. 28 uses the term 'accommodate' in relation to considering the special needs of persons with disabilities in the context of public transport, road and railway crossings and requirements for buildings (including parking areas).⁷⁷

The Equal Treatment Act does not stipulate on reasonable accommodation in education or social welfare. However, it is clear from many acts regulating these sectors that the principles similar to the idea of reasonable accommodation are guiding principles in these policy areas.

For example, today children with disabilities are taught in a mainstream classroom or in a special school. The Estonian educational system has been reformed more than 10 years

⁷⁶ Riigikohus, 15 March 2022, No. 5-19-29, pp 78 and 81. See also section 4.1 below.

⁷⁷ *Puudega inimeste erivajadustest tulenevad nõuded ehitisele* (Building requirements in relation to the special needs of disabled people), RT I, 31.05.2018, 55, Articles 6, 9, 17 and 22.

ago to include children with disabilities in the general school system as much as possible. To this end children with special educational needs are provided with the support services in both regular and special schools.

All children, regardless of disability, have the right to education and the opportunities to access education according to the Constitution (Article 37). It is the responsibility of the state and local governments to ensure that everyone in Estonia can attend compulsory schooling.⁷⁸ The Basic Schools and Upper Secondary Schools Act provides in Article 46 detailed description of how the owner of the school must create opportunities for identifying the special educational needs (includes disability) of a student and providing the student with the required support.

According to the Social Welfare Act⁷⁹ Article 3(1) when providing social welfare assistance the following principles among others must be followed:

- the needs of the person shall be taken into consideration first;
- the efficiency of implementation of measures from the viewpoint of the person in need of assistance and, if necessary, from the viewpoint of the family and community shall be taken as the basis; and
- the person in need of assistance shall be involved in all the phases of the provision of assistance if the person has consented thereto.

Article 3(2) stipulates that a provider of social services must proceed from generally accepted quality principles, including person-centredness, empowering nature of the service, needs-based approach, and inclusiveness.

f) Duties to provide reasonable accommodation in respect of other grounds

In Estonia, there is no duty to provide reasonable accommodation in respect of other grounds in the public and/or the private sector.

⁷⁸ *Põhikooli- ja gümnaasiumiseadus* (Basic Schools and Upper Secondary Schools Act), RT I 2010, 41, 240.

⁷⁹ *Sotsiaalhoolekande seadus* (Social Welfare Act), RT I, 30.12.2015, 5.

3. PERSONAL AND MATERIAL SCOPE

3.1 Personal scope

In Estonia, there is no case law regarding discrimination involving the use of artificial intelligence or automated systems.

3.1.1 EU and non-EU nationals (Recital 13 and Article 3(2), Directive 2000/43 and Recital 12 and Article 3(2), Directive 2000/78)

Similarly to the wording of the equality directives, Estonian equality law does not cover differences of treatment based on nationality. Furthermore, the Equal Treatment Act cannot be invoked to challenge provisions and conditions relating to the entry and residence of third-country nationals and stateless persons in its territory. In Estonia, there are no residence, citizenship/nationality requirements for protection under the relevant national laws transposing the directives.

3.1.2 Natural and legal persons (Recital 16, Directive 2000/43)

a) Protection against discrimination

In Estonia, the personal scope of anti-discrimination law covers only natural persons for the purpose of protection against discrimination. Judicial interpretation is required to clarify whether legal persons could potentially be protected by anti-discrimination law.

The general anti-discrimination clause of the Constitution (Article 12) seems to cover both natural and legal persons for the purpose of protection against discrimination. The Supreme Court recognised equality before the law (the first sentence of Article 12 of the Constitution) as a right belonging to both natural and legal persons, however the decision did not consider whether legal persons can be discriminated against.⁸⁰ There have been no similar cases as regards prohibition of discrimination (the second sentence of Article 12 of the Constitution).

The Equal Treatment Act (which was adopted to transpose Directives 2000/43 and 2000/78) uses the term 'persons' (*isikud*). Article 2, which deals with the scope of application of the law, seems to refer to natural persons (unless proven otherwise by Estonian judiciary in future case law). The same law provides for definitions of 'an employee' (using the term 'a person') and 'an employer' (using the phrase 'a natural or legal person'). Article 24(1) (right to compensation for damage) refers to the rights of a person (*isik*).

b) Liability for discrimination

In Estonia, the personal scope of anti-discrimination law covers all natural and legal persons for the purpose of liability for discrimination (Articles 2 and 24(1) of the Equal Treatment Act).

3.1.3 Private and public sector including public bodies (Article 3(1))

a) Protection against discrimination

The Equal Treatment Act (Articles 2 and 24(1)) and other relevant provisions are applicable to both private and public sectors without any limitations (including those relating to public bodies).

⁸⁰ Supreme Court, constitutional review chamber, Decision of 6 March 2002 in case 3-4-1-1-02 (*Petition of the Tallinn Circuit Court to declare the second sentence of Article 18(8) of Value Added Tax Act invalid*); published in RT III 2002, 8, 74, para. 13.

b) Liability for discrimination

In Estonia, the personal scope of anti-discrimination law covers the private and public sectors, including public bodies, for the purpose of liability for discrimination (Equal Treatment Act, Articles 2 and 24(1)).

3.2 Material scope

In Estonia, there is no case law regarding discrimination involving the use of artificial intelligence or automated systems.

3.2.1 Conditions for access to employment, to self-employment or to occupation, including selection criteria, recruitment conditions and promotion, whatever the branch of activity and at all levels of the professional hierarchy (Article 3(1)(a))

In Estonia, national legislation prohibits discrimination in relation to conditions for access to employment, to self-employment or to occupation, including selection criteria, recruitment conditions and promotion, whatever the branch of activity and at all levels of the professional hierarchy for the five grounds in both private and public sectors as described in the directives (Articles 2(1)1 and 2(2)1 of the Equal Treatment Act). The wording used in the Equal Treatment Act is almost identical to that in the directives. The Act uses the formal legal term for self-employment (*füüsilisest isikust ettevõtja*), which corresponds according to the Estonian tax law to a natural person who is engaged in entrepreneurship (sole proprietor).

There is no case law regarding the scope of Estonian equality law in relation to access to self-employment.

Gender identity, gender expression and sex characteristics are not explicitly covered in national legislation.

3.2.2 Employment and working conditions, including pay and dismissals (Article 3(1)(c))

In Estonia, national legislation prohibits discrimination in working conditions including pay and dismissals, for all five grounds and for both private and public employment (Articles 2(1)2 and 2(2)2 of the Equal Treatment Act).

Gender identity, gender expression and sex characteristics are not explicitly covered in national legislation.

3.2.3 Access to all types and all levels of vocational guidance, vocational training, advanced vocational training and retraining, including practical work experience (Article 3(1)(b))

In Estonia, national legislation prohibits discrimination in vocational training outside the employment relationship, such as adult lifelong learning courses or vocational training provided by technical schools or universities (Articles 2(1)3 and 2(2)3 of the Equal Treatment Act).

Gender identity, gender expression and sex characteristics are not explicitly covered in national legislation.

3.2.4 Membership of, and involvement in, an organisation of workers or employers, or any organisation whose members carry on a particular

**profession, including the benefits provided for by such organisations
(Article 3(1)(d))**

In Estonia, national legislation prohibits discrimination in relation to membership of, and involvement in workers' or employers' organisations as formulated in the directives for all five grounds and for both private and public employment (Articles 2(1)4 and 2(2)4 of the Equal Treatment Act).

Gender identity, gender expression and sex characteristics are not explicitly covered in national legislation.

**3.2.5 Social protection, including social security and healthcare (Article 3(1)(e)
Directive 2000/43)**

In Estonia, national legislation prohibits discrimination in services of social welfare, social security and healthcare, including social benefits, as formulated in Directive 2000/43; only discrimination based on race, ethnic origin and colour is prohibited in respect of social protection (Equal Treatment Act, Article 2(1)5). According to the Social Welfare Act, social welfare includes services related to housing.⁸¹

General anti-discrimination provisions of the Constitution (Article 12) also apply in this context.⁸² The grounds covered by Directive 2000/78 are protected by the Constitution in all areas of life, going further than the Equal Treatment Act. The recent practice by the Supreme Court gives reason to believe that such cases can be heard with the help of the Constitution. For example, the Court held that the constitutional provisions on the right to family life, the protection of family and the principle of equality (Articles 26(1), 27(1) and 12(1) of the Constitution) are applicable to partnerships of people of the same gender.⁸³ In another case, the Supreme Court endorsed a particular form of access to healthcare insurance of a registered partner of a same-gender couple, which is reserved for a spouse who is maintained by their working spouse and taking care of a child under eight years old.⁸⁴

Gender identity, gender expression and sex characteristics are not explicitly covered in national legislation.

a) Article 3(3) exception (Directive 2000/78)

The Equal Treatment Act does not rely on the exception in Article 3(3) of Directive 2000/78 in relation to religion or belief, age, disability and sexual orientation.

3.2.6 Social advantages (Article 3(1)(f) Directive 2000/43)

In Estonia, national legislation prohibits discrimination in social advantages, as formulated in Directive 2000/43. Only discrimination based on race, ethnic origin and colour are prohibited in respect of social advantages (Equal Treatment Act, Article 2(1)5).

⁸¹ In the national context, social housing is covered under social welfare: Social Welfare Act (*Sotsiaalhoolekande seadus*), 9 December 2015, RT I, 30.12.2015, 5.

⁸² See e.g. Supreme Court, constitutional review chamber, Decision of 18 December 2019, Case No. 5-19-42. The case concerned the payment by the state of social tax for dependent spouses of insured employed persons, who are raising at least one child under eight years of age. The payment of social tax gives such spouses automatic access to the national health insurance system. The Supreme Court found it unconstitutional that dependent registered partners did not have access to the scheme on an equal footing with married partners. The Court, however, did not discuss whether the applicant was discriminated against on the ground of sexual orientation.

⁸³ Supreme Court *en banc*, Judgment of 21 June 2019, Case No. 5-8-15/17. The case concerned a non-issuing of a residence permit to a registered partner of a citizen of Estonia.

⁸⁴ Supreme Court, constitutional review chamber, Decision of 18 December 2019, Case No. 5-19-42.

Gender identity, gender expression and sex characteristics are not explicitly covered in national legislation.

Social advantages are translated as social benefits (*sotsiaaltoetused*) in the text of the Act. There is no case law regarding discrimination on the grounds of race, ethnic origin or colour related to social advantages. The general anti-discrimination provisions of the Constitution (Article 12) also apply in this context. The grounds covered by Directive 2000/78 are protected by the Constitution in areas not covered by the Equal Treatment Act with the recent Supreme Court practice supporting this interpretation.

In Estonia, the term 'benefits' will cover most of the likely social advantages available.

3.2.7 Education (Article 3(1)(g) Directive 2000/43)

In Estonia, national legislation prohibits discrimination in education as formulated in Directive 2000/43; only discrimination based on race, ethnic origin and colour is prohibited in respect of education (Equal Treatment Act, Article 2(1)6). Gender identity, gender expression and sex characteristics are not explicitly covered in national legislation.

General anti-discrimination provisions of the Constitution (Article 12) also apply in this context.

No other legislation addresses the issue of discrimination or segregation in education. There are no social practices of ethnic or religious segregation, including in private schools.

According to Article 4(1) of the Education Act,⁸⁵ the state and local self-government must ensure every person the opportunity to receive compulsory education (this requirement is essentially based on Article 37 of the Constitution). In conjunction with Article 12 of the Constitution this provision might be interpreted to the effect that compulsory education should be provided without any discrimination on any grounds. Several other provisions might be used by state and local government authorities to this end. For instance, it is possible to establish schools for students in need of enhanced support or special support (Article 2(4) of the Basic Schools and Upper Secondary Schools Act).⁸⁶ The Minister of Education and Research establishes special rules concerning the study of pupils with special educational needs at school (Article 32(7) of the Vocational Educational Institutions Act).⁸⁷

The main approach in Estonia is inclusive education of pupils with disabilities in the mainstream educational system.⁸⁸ The principle of inclusive education provides that all children regardless of their disability go to the school close to their home. However, there are also special schools for children with special needs regarding their hearing, vision or speech.

a) Trends and patterns regarding Roma pupils

In Estonia, there is little data about education regarding Roma pupils.

⁸⁵ Republic of Estonia Education Act (*Eesti Vabariigi haridusseadus*), 23 March 1992, RT I 1992, 12, 192.

⁸⁶ Basic Schools and Upper Secondary Schools Act (*Põhikooli- ja gümnaasiumiseadus*), 9 June 2010, RT I 2010, 41, 240.

⁸⁷ Vocational Educational Institutions Act (*Kutseõppeasutuse seadus*), 12 June 2013, RT I 22.12.2013, 2; Conditions and procedure for studying in a vocational educational institution for students with special educational needs (*Haridusliku erivajadusega õpilase kutseõppeasutuses õppimise tingimused ja kord*), RT I, 08.01.2019, 8.

⁸⁸ See e.g., the most recent statistics available in: Kallaste, E. (2016), *Haridusliku erivajadusega õpilaste kaasava hariduskorralduse ja sellega seotud meetmete tõhusus. Teemaatiline raport: Statistiline ülevaade HEV levikust, kaasamisest ja tugimeetmete kasutamisest Eestis 2010-2014*, Eesti Rakendusuuringu Keskus CentAR, p. 28.

In the academic year 2017/2018 there were 55 pupils in Estonian general education schools who spoke the Roma language at home and 50 of them studied in ordinary classes of ordinary schools.⁸⁹ There is no more recent data available.

3.2.8 Access to and supply of goods and services that are available to the public (Article 3(1)(h) Directive 2000/43)

In Estonia, national legislation prohibits discrimination in access to and the supply of goods and services as formulated in Directive 2000/43 (Article 2(1)7 of the Equal Treatment Act). Ethnic origin, race and colour are the only grounds that are covered.

Gender identity, gender expression and sex characteristics are not explicitly covered in national legislation.

The general anti-discrimination provisions of the Constitution (Article 12) also apply in this context. The grounds covered by Directive 2000/78 are protected by the Constitution in areas not covered by the Equal Treatment Act with the recent Supreme Court practice supporting this interpretation.

a) Distinction between goods and services available publicly or privately

In Estonia, national law distinguishes between goods and services available to the public and those only available privately but provides no further details (Article 2(1)7 of the Equal Treatment Act). Although the provisions are contained in the Equal Treatment Act, which covers further grounds, only discrimination based on race, ethnic origin and colour is prohibited in respect of access to and supply of goods and services.

3.2.9 Housing (Article 3(1)(h) Directive 2000/43)

In Estonia, national legislation prohibits discrimination in the area of housing as formulated in Directive 2000/43 (Article 2(1)7 of the Equal Treatment Act).

Although the provisions are contained in the Equal Treatment Act, which covers more grounds, only discrimination based on race, ethnic origin and colour is prohibited in respect of housing.

Gender identity, gender expression and sex characteristics are not explicitly covered in national legislation.

General anti-discrimination provisions of the Constitution (Article 12) also apply in this context. The grounds covered by Directive 2000/78 are protected by the Constitution in areas not covered by the Equal Treatment Act with the recent Supreme Court practice supporting this interpretation.

a) Trends and patterns regarding housing segregation for Roma

In Estonia, there is no data about housing segregation or discrimination against the Roma.

⁸⁹ Ministry of Foreign Affairs (2019), *Eesti kahteistkümnnes ja kolmeteistkümnnes perioodiline aruanne rassilise diskrimineerimise kõigi vormide likvideerimise konventsiooni täitmise kohta*, May 2019, para. 76. (on file with the author).

4. EXCEPTIONS

4.1 Genuine and determining occupational requirements (Article 4) Directive 2000/43, Article 4(1) Directive 2000/78

In Estonia, national legislation provides for an exception for genuine and determining occupational requirements.

The Equal Treatment Act stipulates a provision regarding genuine and determining occupational requirements (Article 10(1)), which is worded almost identically to that in the directives: a difference of treatment which is based on an attribute related to ethnic origin, race, colour, religion or other beliefs, age, disability or sexual orientation will not constitute discrimination where, by reason of the nature of the particular occupational activities concerned or of the context in which they are carried out, such an attribute constitutes a genuine and determining occupational requirement, provided that the objective is legitimate and the requirement is proportionate.

There have been no cases concerning prohibitions by employers on wearing visible signs of religious belief.

In 2017, a former guard of Tartu Prison challenged his dismissal, which was initiated because his level of auditory acuity did not meet the minimum standards of sound perception prescribed by Regulation No. 12. The second-instance court found Regulation No. 12 relating to the auditory acuity requirements to be contrary to the general principle of equal treatment enshrined in the Constitution (Article 12) and initiated the procedure for reviewing the constitutionality of those provisions before the Supreme Court.⁹⁰

The Supreme Court referred the following question to the Court of Justice of the European Union for a preliminary ruling: 'Should Article 2(2), read in combination with Article 4(1), of [Directive 2000/78] be interpreted as precluding provisions of national law which provide that impaired hearing below the prescribed standard constitutes an absolute impediment to work as a prison officer and that the use of corrective aids to assess compliance with the requirements is not permitted?'⁹¹

The CJEU found that the minimum standards of sound perception for prison officers may be regarded as a 'genuine and determining occupational requirement' within the meaning of Article 4(1).⁹² The Court took the view that the Article 2(2)(a), Article 4(1) and Article 5 of Directive 2000/78 preclude national legislation that imposes an absolute bar on the continued employment of a prison officer whose auditory acuity does not meet the minimum standards of sound perception, without allowing it to be ascertained whether that officer is capable of fulfilling those duties, where appropriate after the adoption of reasonable accommodation measures. The Estonian Supreme Court was to assess whether Regulation No. 12 has imposed a requirement that goes beyond what is necessary to attain the objectives pursued by it.

The Supreme Court, in its judgment of 15 March 2022, declared unconstitutional and invalid the provisions of Regulation No. 12 that impose an absolute bar on the continued employment of a prison officer whose auditory acuity does not meet the minimum standards of sound perception, without allowing it to be ascertained whether that officer is capable of fulfil their duties, after the adoption of reasonable accommodation measures where appropriate.

⁹⁰ Tartu Ringkonnakohus, 11 April 2019, No. 3-17-1569.

⁹¹ Riigikohus, 24 Oct 2019, No. 5-19-29.

⁹² Judgment of 15 July 2021, *Tartu Vangla*, Case C-795/19 ECLI:EU:C:2021:606.

4.2 Employers with an ethos based on religion or belief (Article 4(2) Directive 2000/78)

In Estonia, national law provides for an exception for employers with an ethos based on religion or belief.

The Equal Treatment Act stipulates in Articles 10(2) and 10(3) the relevant provisions regarding employers with an ethos based on religion or belief, which are worded almost identically to those in the directives:

'(2) In the case of occupational activities within religious associations⁹³ and other public or private organisations the ethos of which is based on religion or belief, a difference of treatment based on a person's religion or belief shall not constitute discrimination where, by reason of the nature of these activities or of the context in which they are carried out, a person's religion or belief constitute a genuine, legitimate and justified occupational requirement, having regard to the organisation's ethos.

(3) This Act shall thus not prejudice the right of religious associations and other public or private organisations, the ethos of which is based on religion or belief, to require individuals working for them to act in good faith and with loyalty to the organisation's ethos.'

There are no other provisions in Estonian law that ban or permit discrimination/unequal treatment by organisations, the ethos of which is based on religion or belief. By default, Articles 10(2) and 10(3) of the Equal Treatment Act provide the only exception to the general ban on discrimination by such organisations. The wording of the Act makes it clear that only a difference of treatment based on a person's religion or belief will not constitute discrimination and that other grounds of discrimination are not exempted, even though the national legislation lacks the *expressis verbis* indication that this provision is not able to justify discrimination on any other ground beyond religion and belief.

In practice in the Estonian context, the requirement 'to act in good faith and with loyalty to the organisation's ethos' would mean that access to some key positions (especially clergy) might be limited by internal rules or traditions of a church, but that would not apply to all positions or jobs. There is no case law to clarify this issue. However, the constitutional review chamber of the Supreme Court has confirmed that the general constitutional principle of equality is applicable to 'all spheres of life'.⁹⁴

It is worth mentioning that the Chancellor of Justice, in its capacity as an equality body, will not consider in conciliation procedure (private sector) discrimination-related complaints that concern the professing and practising of faith or working as a minister of religion in religious associations with registered articles of association (Article 35-5(2)1 of the Chancellor of Justice Act). In other words, complaints may concern working in any other position in a religious organisation. In such cases, the victim of discrimination may still file a complaint to the Equality Commissioner, labour dispute committee or court.

⁹³ According to Article 2(1) of the Churches and Congregations Act, 'religious associations' are churches, congregations, associations of congregations and monasteries as well as institutions of a church operating on the basis of an international agreement. Estonia, Churches and Congregations Act (*Kirikute ja koguduste seadus*), 12 February 2002, RT I 2002, 24, 135; available at: <https://www.riigiteataja.ee/akt/121062014030?leiaKehtiv> (Estonian); <https://www.riigiteataja.ee/en/eli/523012015005/consolide> (English). In other words, the term 'a religious association' in Estonian law is essentially equivalent to the term 'a church' in Directive 2000/78.

⁹⁴ Supreme Court, constitutional review chamber, Decision of 6 March 2002, Case No. 3-4-1-1-02, point 13.

4.3 Armed forces and other specific occupations (Article 3(4) and Recitals 18 and 19, Directive 2000/78)

In Estonia, national legislation does not provide for an exception for the armed forces in relation to age or disability discrimination (Article 3(4), Directive 2000/78). A general exception can be found in Article 9(2) of the Equal Treatment Act:

‘Differences of treatment on grounds of age shall not constitute discrimination, if, within the context of law, they are objectively and reasonably justified by a legitimate aim, including legitimate employment policy, labour market, vocational training and social insurance objectives, and if the means of achieving that aim are appropriate and necessary.’

In Estonia, national legislation provides a definition of ‘armed forces’ – technically, ‘defence forces’. The defence forces are a governmental structure that are subordinate to the government but organised according to military principles. The Military Service Act provides that military service is the service of a person liable to national defence obligation in a position of military rank. Military service is divided into the performance of the mandatory duty to serve in the defence forces, active service and voluntary service.

Maximum age limits have been established for certain groups of public officials, for example: the general retirement age⁹⁵ for military servicemen (Article 90 of the Military Defence Service Act),⁹⁶ and a retirement age of 58-60 for some categories of prison officials (Article 152 of the Imprisonment Act).⁹⁷ In certain circumstances, prison officials’ service may be prolonged. As of 1 January 2020, there are no maximum age limits for police officers.⁹⁸

The Minister of Defence (for military servicemen) and the Government (for police officers) establish the requirements concerning the state of health necessary for the performance of duties (Article 32(2) of the Military Defence Service Act and Article 71(4) of the Police and Border Guard Act).⁹⁹

On the basis of Article 93(1) of the Public Service Act,¹⁰⁰ a public official may be released from the service due to a decrease in capacity for work (e.g. disability) if they are not capable of performing the functions for over four consecutive months or over five months within a year. This provision is valid for police officers, prison officers and most other groups of public officials.

4.4 Nationality discrimination (Article 3(2))

a) Discrimination on the ground of nationality

In Estonia, national equality law does not include exceptions relating to difference of treatment based on nationality and hence takes a similar approach to Directive 2000/43.

As regards protection against discrimination on all five grounds, Estonian law does not differentiate between the status of a foreign citizen, a stateless person or a person with ‘undefined citizenship’.

In Estonia, nationality (citizenship) is not mentioned as a protected ground in national anti-discrimination law nor is it explicitly part of the list of grounds in Article 12 of the

⁹⁵ The age of 65; transitional requirements are valid for people born in 1953-1960. Article 7 of the State Pension Insurance Act (*Riikliku pensionikindlustuse seadus*), 5 December 2001, RT I 2001, 100, 648.

⁹⁶ Military Defence Service Act (*Kaitseväeteenistuse seadus*), 13 June 2012, RT I, 10.07.2012, 1.

⁹⁷ Imprisonment Act (*Vangistusseadus*), 14 June 2000, RT I 2000, 58, 376.

⁹⁸ Amendments published: RT I, 06.07. 2018, 3.

⁹⁹ Police and Border Guard Act (*Politsei ja piirivalve seadus*), 6 May 2009, RT I 2009, 26, 159.

¹⁰⁰ Public Service Act (*Avaliku teenistuse seadus*), 13 June 2012, RT I, 06.07.2012, 1.

Constitution. However, Article 9 of the Constitution declares that the rights, freedoms and duties of everyone and each person, as set out in the Constitution, are equal for Estonian citizens and for citizens of foreign states and stateless persons in Estonia. The European Commission against Racism and Intolerance (ECRI) noted in 2022 that despite its previous recommendations, the Equal Treatment Act 'still does not include the protected grounds of language, citizenship and gender identity'. ECRI recommended in 2022 'legislative amendments to the Equal Treatment Act and other related laws with a view to ensuring accessible and effective general anti-discrimination legislation covering all grounds and all areas of life, in line with its General Policy Recommendation No. 7 on national legislation to combat racism and racial discrimination.'¹⁰¹ The Equal Treatment Act includes language skills as a protected ground regarding discrimination in employment. There is no plan to implement this recommendation regarding the ground of citizenship.

b) Relationship between nationality and 'racial or ethnic origin'

In Estonia, the terms 'ethnic origin' (*etniline päritolu*) and 'nationality' (*rahvus*) are often used as synonyms. Conversely, the term 'citizenship' (*kodakondsus*) is ethnically neutral. In the Equal Treatment Act, nationality (as in citizenship) is not a protected ground. There have been no court decisions where differential treatment on the ground of citizenship has been seen to constitute ethnic discrimination.

The Gender Equality and Equal Treatment Commissioner has argued that there is a close link between the grounds of mother tongue and ethnic origin.¹⁰² The Commissioner found it very likely that a request, imposed by a public employer on a candidate with a non-Estonian mother tongue to prove their Estonian language skills beyond what was required by the law, was imposed due to the candidate's ethnic background. This amounted to direct discrimination on the ground of ethnic background.

4.5 Health and safety at work (Article 7(2) Directive 2000/78)

In Estonia, there are no exceptions in relation to disability and health and safety at work as allowed under Article 7(2) of Directive 2000/78.

General exceptions in relation to health and safety at work are formulated only in the context of Article 2(5), Directive 2000/78 (please see Section 4.7 of this report).

4.6 Exceptions related to discrimination on the ground of age (Article 6 Directive 2000/78)

4.6.1 Direct discrimination

a) Justification of direct discrimination on the ground of age

In Estonia, national law allows for specific justifications for direct discrimination on the ground of age.

Article 9(2) of the Equal Treatment Act introduced a provision almost identical to that of Article 6(1) of Directive 2000/78:

'(1) This Act does not prejudice the application of specific measures which are in accordance with law and are necessary to ensure public order and security, prevent crime, and protect health and the rights and freedoms of others. Such measures shall be in proportion to the objective being sought.

¹⁰¹ Council of Europe, European Commission against Racism and Intolerance (2022), *Report on Estonia (6th monitoring cycle)*, adopted 29 March 2022, p 105.

¹⁰² The opinion of the Gender Equality and Equal Treatment Commissioner from 16 August 2012, p. 7.1.3.

(2) Differences of treatment on grounds of age, if provided by law, do not constitute discrimination if they are objectively and reasonably justified by a legitimate aim related to employment policy, labour market, vocational training or social security, and if the means of achieving that aim are appropriate and necessary. [...]

- Supreme Court *en banc*, Judgment of 7 June 2011 in case 3-4-1-12-10 (verification of constitutionality)

In this landmark court case about the differential treatment of working old-age pensioners when accessing sickness benefits compared to younger persons, the Supreme Court used a proportionality test and delivered a judgment that neither the worse-than-average state of health of the elderly nor the receipt of an old-age pension nor the health insurance fund's need to save money could justify the unequal treatment on the ground of age in relation to the receipt of sickness benefit. Finally, the Supreme Court *en banc* declared that the relevant provision of the Health Insurance Act was unconstitutional and invalid.

b) Permitted differences of treatment based on age

In Estonia, national law permits differences of treatment based on age if they are provided in the law and their legitimate aim is related to employment policy, labour market, vocational training or social security. Nevertheless, this unequal treatment is subject to the strict proportionality test.

By way of exception, Estonian law has provided maximum age requirements (e.g. for military servicemen and prison officers; see Section 4.3 above for details). For safety reasons, upper age limits have also been established for pilots of commercial airlines (65 years).¹⁰³ Various labour market services have a minimum age limit. For example, a person is not registered as unemployed if they are under 16 years of age.¹⁰⁴

c) Fixing of ages for admission to occupational pension schemes

In Estonia, national law does stipulate on occupational pension schemes regarding ages for admission to the scheme (possibility provided for by Article 6(2)). According to Article 53(2²) of the Funded Pensions Act, an employer may not set a requirement for making contributions or payment of insurance premiums that the length of service of an employee, public servant or a member of the management or control body exceed three years or their minimum age is over 21 years.

Estonian law does not regulate the use of age criteria in actuarial calculations regarding occupational pension schemes.

4.6.2 Special conditions for younger and older workers

In Estonia, there are some conditions set by law for younger workers in order to promote their vocational integration. There are also special conditions set by law for older workers or which relate to requirements of professional experience or seniority.

The Equal Treatment Act (Article 9(2)) introduced provisions that are rather similar to those of Article 6(1) of Directive 2000/78 (first sentence).¹⁰⁵

¹⁰³ The requirements for the age and qualifications, training and examination of aviation specialists, and the rules for the issue of aviation personnel licences and recognition of aviation licences issued by foreign states (*Lennundusspetsialistide vanusele ja kvalifikatsioonile, nende koolitusele ja eksamineerimisele esitatavad nõuded ning lennundusspetsialistidele lennunduslubade väljaandmise ja välisriikides väljaantud lennunduslubade tunnustamise eeskiri*), 21 December 2001, RTL 2002, 5, 52, Article 5(2).

¹⁰⁴ Labour Market Measures Act (*Tööturumeetmete seadus*), 15.02.2023, RT I, 07.03.2023, 5.

¹⁰⁵ Article 6(1), Directive 2000/78 provides for an exception 'objectively and reasonably justified by a legitimate aim including legitimate employment policy, labour market and vocational training objectives, and if the means of achieving that aim are appropriate and necessary.' The Estonian text includes 'different

According to the Employment Programme 2024–2029¹⁰⁶, Article 41(2), the wage subsidy may be paid by the state to an employer who employs a person who is aged 16–24 years and has been registered as unemployed for at least six consecutive months. The same Act foresees the payment of compensation to an employer who employs a minor aged between 13 and 16 years (Article 42).

4.6.3 Minimum and maximum age requirements

In Estonia, there are rare exceptions permitting minimum and maximum age requirements in relation to access to employment (mostly in the public sector).

According to the Employment Contracts Act, a minor can be an employee only under certain circumstances, which may vary for different age groups (Article 7). Public officials must have active legal capacity (Article 14 of the Public Service Act), i.e. they must be at least 18 years old.

By way of exception, Estonian law has provided other minimum age requirements for several important public positions (such as the President of the Republic under Article 79(3) of the Constitution).

Some laws may require both minimum age and a minimum number of years of work in a particular area for certain positions as a precondition of employment (e.g. Article 15 of the Prosecutor's Office Act requires the person to be at least 21 years old to work as a prosecutor).¹⁰⁷

4.6.4 Retirement

a) State pension age

In Estonia, there is no state pension age at which individuals must begin to collect their state pensions and cease to work. People do not have to apply for the old-age pension as soon as they attain the pensionable age. If they retire later, their monthly old-age pension will be bigger. Also, an individual can collect a pension and still work.

The State Pension Insurance Act (Article 7) stipulates (for both men and women) that persons who have attained 65 years of age¹⁰⁸ and whose pension-qualifying period earned in Estonia is 15 years, have the right to receive an old-age pension. A transition period (i.e. a lower age requirement) was established for those born in 1953–1960. This means that in reality the pensionable age has been gradually increasing since 2017 reaching 65 years of age only by 2026.

As of 2027, pensionable age will depend on the average life expectancy. The basis for calculating the old-age pension age starting from 2027 is the life expectancy of people aged 65, according to the Statistical Office. Based on these data, the Government approves a new old-age pension age by 1 January of each year, which will come into effect in two

treatment provided in law' instead of the adjective 'legitimate' in front of 'employment policy' and added 'social security services' to the list. In other words, the scope of Article 9(2) of the Equal Treatment Act is somehow narrower than that in the Directive: the Act provides for the list of four aims (justifications), while the Directive includes an open-ended list of such aims with three examples. This cannot be interpreted as a breach of the Directive. It is also necessary to keep in mind the general exception in Article 9(1) of the same Act – see section 4.7 of this report for more detail.

¹⁰⁶ Employment Programme 2024–2029 Act (*Tööhõiveprogramm 2024–2029*), 29 September 2023, no 90, RT I, 03.10.2023, 21.

¹⁰⁷ Prosecutor's Office Act (*Prokuratuuriseadus*), 22 April 1998, RT I 1998, 41/42, 625.

¹⁰⁸ RT I 2010, 18, 97.

years. As life expectancy increases, the retirement age also increases, but it is not increased by more than three months at a time.¹⁰⁹

Old-age pensions with favourable conditions can be received by people with a certain type of disability, people who have raised children with disabilities or three or more children (Article 10).

If an individual wishes to work beyond state pension age and receive a pension it is allowed (with rare exceptions, such as in the case of the earned years pension if the pension recipient continues to work in the position for which the pension has been appointed). Thus, a person who receives a state old-age pension may work and collect their pension. However, the survivor's pension and national pension (a type of pension created for people who do not have the right to receive an old-age pension)¹¹⁰ will not normally be paid to people who are employed (Article 43(1) of the State Pension Insurance Act).

b) Occupational pension schemes

In the Estonian context an occupational pension fund is a voluntary pension fund where only an employer specified in the conditions of such a pension fund can make contributions for the employees thereof, persons specified in Section 2(3) of the Public Service Act and officials and for the members of the management and control body thereof for the purposes of Section 9 of the Income Tax Act.

Payments from a voluntary pension fund will be made to a policyholder pursuant to the rules of the pension fund, but not before the policyholder has five years until attaining the pensionable age established in the State Pension Insurance Act (Article 63(2) of the Funded Pensions Act). Consequently, in Estonia, there is no standard age when people can begin to receive payments from occupational pension schemes and other employer-funded pension arrangements.

If an individual wishes to work longer, payments from such occupational pension schemes can be deferred.

c) State-imposed mandatory retirement ages

In Estonia, there are no state-imposed mandatory retirement ages. There are a few exceptions, however, stipulated for some categories of military and law-enforcement officials (see Section 4.3 for details) as well as for some specific professions, e.g. judges, who must retire on reaching 67 years of age (Article 48 of the Courts Act).¹¹¹

d) Retirement ages imposed by employers

In Estonia, national law does not permit employers to set retirement ages (or ages at which the termination of an employment contract is possible) by contract and/or collective bargaining and/or unilaterally. No such provision can be found in Estonian laws.¹¹²

¹⁰⁹ *Sotsiaalkindlustusamet* (Social Insurance Board) official web page:

<https://sotsiaalkindlustusamet.ee/en/pension-and-benefits/applying-pension/retirement-age> (6.05.2024).

¹¹⁰ A national pension is paid to a person of pensionable age, a person with a disability, etc. with an insufficient pension qualifying period (State Pension Insurance Act, Article 22(1)).

¹¹¹ Courts Act (*Kohtute seadus*), 19 June 2002, RT I 2002, 64, 390.

¹¹² In Estonia, it is likely that such behaviour would be regarded as discriminatory. See for detailed analysis: Poleshchuk, V. (2014), 'Older Age, Employment and Equality in Legislation: A "Progressive" Estonian Approach?', *Equal Rights Review*, Vol. 12.

e) Employment rights applicable to all workers irrespective of age

The law on protection against dismissal and other laws protecting employment rights apply to all workers irrespective of age, even if they remain in employment after attaining pensionable age or any other age.

f) Compliance of national law with CJEU case law

In Estonia, national legislation is in line with the CJEU case law on age regarding mandatory retirement.

4.6.5 Redundancy

a) Age and seniority taken into account for redundancy selection

In Estonia, national law does not permit age or seniority to be taken into account in selecting workers for redundancy (Article 89 of the Employment Contracts Act and Article 90 of the Public Service Act).

b) Age taken into account for redundancy compensation

In Estonia, national law provides compensation for redundancy, but it is not affected by the age of the worker (Article 89 of the Employment Contracts Act and Article 90 of the Public Service Act).

4.7 Further exceptions necessary in a democratic society: Public security, public order, criminal offences, protection of health, protection of the rights and freedoms of others (Article 2(5) Directive 2000/78)

In Estonia, national law includes exceptions that seek to rely on Article 2(5) of Directive 2000/78.

Article 9(1) of the Equal Treatment Act stipulates that it

‘does not prejudice the maintaining or adopting of specific measures which are in accordance with law and are necessary to ensure public order and security, prevent criminal offences, and protect health and the rights and freedoms of others. Such action shall be in proportion to the objective being sought.’

This wording is seemingly based on two provisions:

- Article 2(5) of Directive 2000/78 (however, there are no references to ‘a democratic society’ but to the principle of proportionality).¹¹³
- Article 11 of the Estonian Constitution (‘Rights and freedoms may be restricted only in accordance with the Constitution. Such restrictions must be necessary in a democratic society and shall not distort the nature of the rights and freedoms restricted’).

In general, the exception provided in Article 9(1) of the Equal Treatment Act is not in line with Directive 2000/43. The Directive provides more advanced protection against ethnic or racial discrimination. Difference in treatment on the basis of ethnic or racial origin in the

¹¹³ The initial version of the draft law (Bill. No. 67) did not permit these measures in the context of ethnic and racial discrimination. As stated in the explanatory note, this approach was based on the understanding of the directives. This initial version, however, was amended by the Parliament without any public debates. This amended version was used for the drafts Nos. 262 and 384 (the latter was adopted in December 2008).

form of *direct* discrimination is justified in the case of a genuine and determining occupational requirement (Article 4(1) of Directive 2000/43 and Article 10 of the Equal Treatment Act). Differential treatment in the framework of positive action measures is another possibility (Article 5 of the Directive). No other exceptions are possible. Although the Equal Treatment Act does not specify that the exception does not apply to race and ethnicity, the explanatory note of the Equal Treatment Act does.

Article 9(1) of the Equal Treatment Act does not contradict Directive 2000/78 in the context of discrimination on the grounds of religion or belief, disability, age or sexual orientation. In this context, Article 9(1) is based on the exception provided in Article 2(5) of the Directive.

4.8 Any other exceptions

In Estonia, another exception to the prohibition of discrimination provided in national law is provided in Article 9(3) in the Equal Treatment Act, which allows labour relations agreements to grant preferences to people caring for adult children with disabilities.

5. POSITIVE ACTION (Article 5 Directive 2000/43, Article 7 Directive 2000/78)

a) Scope for positive action measures

In Estonia, positive action in respect of racial or ethnic origin, religion or belief, disability, age or sexual orientation is permitted in national law. In practice, most positive action in Estonia is taken through employment policy measures that benefit some disadvantaged groups, such as young people not in education, employment or training (NEET), linguistic minorities, and persons with disabilities. However, these measures are rarely interpreted as positive action measures by policymakers themselves.

The Equal Treatment Act (Article 6) does not prejudice the maintaining or adopting of specific measures to prevent or compensate for disadvantages linked to ethnic origin, race, colour, religion or other beliefs, age, disability or sexual orientation. Such action must be in proportion to the objective being sought. No other clarifications can be found in the text of the law.

b) Quotas in employment for persons with disabilities

In Estonia, national law does not provide for quotas for the employment of persons with disabilities.

6. REMEDIES AND ENFORCEMENT

6.1 Judicial and/or administrative procedures (Article 7 Directive 2000/43, Article 9 Directive 2000/78)

- a) Available procedures for enforcing the principle of equal treatment

In Estonia, the following procedures exist for enforcing the principle of equal treatment:

- Judicial procedures

A victim of discrimination can use *criminal* procedures, *administrative court* procedures (e.g. complaints against the action of an official or state/municipal institution, including conflicts between public officials and between a public official and their employer) or *civil court* procedures (e.g. labour disputes in the private sector, the issue of non-pecuniary damage and protection of consumer rights).

Discrimination-related cases are solved on the basis of general procedural rules and standards. The only exception is the application of provisions regarding a shift in the burden of proof established by the Equal Treatment Act (see Section 6.3 below for details).

- Non-judicial procedures
 - Quasi-judicial procedures at labour disputes committees

Article 23 of the Equal Treatment Act stipulates that discrimination disputes will be resolved by court and labour dispute committees.¹¹⁴ A labour dispute committee is an extrajudicial authority within the Labour Inspectorate that adjudicates labour disputes (Article 4(1) of the Resolution of Labour Disputes Act). Their decisions are based on laws and other legislation, international agreements, collective agreements and employment contracts (Article 4(2)) and they are legally binding. If the parties do not agree with a decision of a labour dispute committee, they have recourse to the courts, which may hear the same labour dispute (Article 58(1)). Participation in this procedure is not compulsory before bringing the lawsuit to court.

- Quasi-judicial procedure of the equality body

The Gender Equality and Equal Treatment Commissioner provides opinions concerning alleged cases of discrimination based on the applications filed by persons or on the Commissioner's own initiative on the basis of the information obtained. Cases may relate to the public and private sectors. In order to provide an opinion, the Commissioner has the right to obtain information from all persons who possess information that is necessary to ascertain the facts relating to a case of discrimination, and demand written explanations concerning an alleged case of discrimination (Article 17(4) of the Equal Treatment Act). The right to obtain information includes also information concerning the remuneration, the conditions for remuneration and other benefits. The opinion of the Commissioner is legally non-binding.

- Conciliation

Conciliation procedures may be conducted by the Chancellor of Justice in relation to discrimination disputes between private actors if both parties to the dispute agree to conciliate. If the conciliation procedure fails, a victim may seek the protection of their rights in court. Participation in a conciliation procedure is *not* compulsory before lodging the lawsuit before the court.

¹¹⁴ *Töövaidluskomisjonid*. Resolution of Labour Disputes Act (*Töövaidluse lahendamise seadus*), 14 June 2017, RT I, 28.12.2017, 18.

An agreement between parties in a conciliation procedure is legally binding.

- Ombudsman-like procedures

The Chancellor of Justice (in the public sector) is entitled to conduct ombudsman-like procedures, the results of which are not legally binding (see below).

- Challenge proceedings

A person who finds that their rights are violated or their freedoms are restricted by an administrative act or in the course of administrative proceedings may file a challenge with an administrative authority that exercises supervisory control over the administrative authority in question (Chapter 5 of the Administrative Procedure Act).¹¹⁵ The annulment of a decision on a challenge may be requested in an appeal filed with an administrative court (Article 87).

b) Barriers and other deterrents faced by litigants seeking redress

- Equality bodies

There are very few obstacles as regards access to both equality bodies.

The Chancellor of Justice is almost free to decide whether they want to deal with any discrimination-related complaint. There is no guaranteed access to their procedures for a *bona fide* complainant. In practice, victims of discrimination may be advised by the Chancellor to address the Gender Equality and Equal Treatment Commissioner or other institutions.

- Judicial and quasi-judicial procedures

As for judicial and quasi-judicial procedures, in Estonia, state legal aid is granted on the basis of the State Legal Aid Act¹¹⁶ to the natural or legal persons involved in proceedings in an Estonian court or administrative authority.

In Estonia, about 40 % of the non-Estonian population speak Estonian (active command of Estonian language including the answers 'fluent speaker', 'I understand, speak and write it');¹¹⁷ 8 % of the non-Estonian population does not speak Estonian at all. Estonian as the official language may influence access to courts for these people, but there are no studies that would suggest that this is a problem in Estonia. According to Article 10(2) of the Code of Criminal Procedure, the assistance of a translator or interpreter must be ensured for participants in court proceedings and for those parties who are not proficient in Estonian.

In civil court procedure, where a party to proceedings is not proficient in the Estonian language and does not have a representative in the proceedings, the court, where this is possible, enlists the assistance of an interpreter or translator on a motion of the party or of its own motion (Article 34(1) of the Code of Civil Procedure). Representatives and advisers of a participant in a procedure are not entitled to use translators/interpreters (Article 34(5) of the Code of Civil Procedure).

¹¹⁵ Administrative Procedure Act (*Haldusmenetluse seadus*), 6 June 2001, RT I 2001, 58, 354.

¹¹⁶ State Legal Aid Act (*Riigi õigusabi seadus*), 28 June 2004, RT I 2004, 56, 403.

¹¹⁷ Kivistik, K. (2021), 'Eesti elanike keeleoskus ja -kasutus, inimestevahelised kontaktid, sallivus ning Eesti keele väärtustamine', (Estonian residents' language skills and use, interpersonal contacts, tolerance and appreciation of the Estonian language), in [Eesti Ühiskonna Lõimumismonitooring 2020](#). SA Poliitikauuringute Keskus Praxis, Balti Uuringute Instituut, Tallinna Ülikool, Tartu Ülikool, Turu-uuringute AS.

Language-related problems may be alleviated through the State Legal Aid Act. Applications for state legal aid should be submitted in Estonian (EU citizens and residents of EU countries can also submit them in English) (Article 12(6)). According to the 2016 amendments (Article 12(7)),¹¹⁸ applications may also be submitted in 'another language widely used in Estonia' (i.e. in Russian). The request for state legal aid does not limit the right of a participant in the proceeding to use the services of an interpreter or translator.

As for persons with disabilities, there is no research data available about how widespread the use of sign language in courts is. According to the Code of Administrative Court Procedure (Article 82(4)) and the Code of Civil Procedure (Article 35), if a participant in the proceedings is deaf, or they are unable to speak or they are deaf and unable to speak, the course of the proceeding must be communicated to them in writing, or an interpreter or translator will be involved in the proceeding. The author of this report is not aware of any instances of the use of Braille.

c) Number of discrimination cases brought to justice

In Estonia, no specific statistics on the number of court cases related to discrimination brought to justice are available.

The number of cases is rather modest, most probably due to low public awareness of anti-discrimination legislation, low public support for some minority groups, and a lack of broad social confidence in the ability of the current legislation to provide sufficient support or to give relief to the victims.

d) Registration of national court decisions on discrimination cases

In Estonia, court decisions on discrimination cases are not registered as such by national courts. However, all the court decisions are accessible via public online database with a search function.¹¹⁹ The search with an official abbreviation of the Equal Treatment Act in Estonian 'VõrdKS' gives 71 results in the database for the period from January 2009 (entering into force of the law) to 1 January 2025 and 7 for the year 2025. Not all of these cases or decisions are about a discrimination claim. In 2025, there was no court decision that would have established discrimination on any of the grounds listed in the Equal Treatment Act.

6.2 Legal standing and associations (Article 7(2) Directive 2000/43, Article 9(2) Directive 2000/78)

a) Engaging in proceedings on behalf of victims of discrimination (representing them)

In Estonia, associations and organisations are entitled to act on behalf of victims of discrimination. Organisations that have a legitimate interest in monitoring compliance with the requirements for equal treatment can act on behalf of victims of discrimination in proceedings of the Gender Equality and Equal Treatment Commissioner. The Equal Treatment Act stipulates that these organisations can file an application to the Commissioner for the Commissioner's opinion on whether discrimination has occurred.

In conciliation proceedings for the resolution of discrimination disputes (in the private sector) at the Chancellor of Justice, a person (meaning both a legal and a natural person) who has a legitimate interest in checking compliance with the requirements for equal treatment may also act as a representative (Article 23(2)).¹²⁰

¹¹⁸ RT I 28.12.2016, 14.

¹¹⁹ Available at: https://www.riigiteataja.ee/kohtulahendid/koik_menetlused.html.

¹²⁰ In general, a petitioner must file a petition with the Chancellor of Justice in person or through an authorised representative (Article 23(1) of the Chancellor of Justice Act).

The explanatory note to the Equal Treatment Act provides an insight into the legislature's intention regarding the legal standing of associations before the courts.¹²¹ The note ties the capacity to act on behalf of the victim with the provision in the Code of Civil Procedure that allows the parties to the dispute to include an adviser in the proceedings. An adviser may appear in the trial or hearing together with the party to proceedings and provide explanations. An adviser cannot perform procedural operations or file petitions, hence an adviser is not a legal representative (Article 228). This means that if the victim feels that they are not able to represent themselves regarding procedural operations and/or the adviser is not sufficiently aware of procedural law to give advice on the matter, the victim would still need to contract a representative. There is no data on whether this provision has been applied in any court case. There are no other specific provisions. Therefore, it is not clear who is considered to have a legitimate interest in checking compliance with the requirements for equal treatment. Estonian law provides no criteria or other guidance.

The Act that regulates the work of labour dispute committees – the Resolution of Labour Disputes Act of 2017 – does not address the issue of legal standing of NGOs in individual labour discrimination disputes. However, the Trade Unions Act,¹²² Article 17(7), provides that the competencies of trade unions include the representation and legal defence of their members in labour dispute resolution bodies and in relations with state and local government authorities, employers and associations of employers. As labour dispute committees also hear discrimination cases, trade unions would have a standing in discrimination cases involving their members.

b) Engaging in proceedings in support of victims of discrimination (joining existing proceedings)

In Estonia, associations/organisations are not specifically entitled to act in support of victims of discrimination.

Engagement in support of the victim (even at a later stage, i.e. joining existing proceedings) is regulated by general procedural rules. Thus, there are rules on the involvement of a third party who does not have an independent claim concerning the object of the proceeding but has legal interest in having the dispute resolved in favour of one of the parties in a civil court procedure (Article 213 of the Code of Civil Procedure). It is not completely clear whether associations/organisations/trade unions will be recognised as such third parties in the context of discrimination-related civil cases. It seems that the courts might interpret the term 'legal interest' restrictively.

Furthermore, it also seems to be impossible for associations/organisations/trade unions to join the procedure as a third party in support of victims of discrimination *at the request of* victims, due to formal requirements (Article 216 of the Code of Civil Procedure). The law says:

'A party who, upon adjudication of a court action against such party, has the right to file a claim against a third party arising from the circumstances which the party considers to be a breach of contract, or a claim for compensation of damage or for release from the obligation to pay damages, or who has reason to presume that such claim may be filed against the party by a third party, may file, until the end of pre-trial proceedings or during the term prescribed for submission of documents in written proceedings, a petition with the court conducting proceedings in the matter in order to involve the third party in the proceeding.'

¹²¹ See explanatory note attached to draft No. 384 SE (11th Riigikogu); available at: <https://www.riigikogu.ee/tegevus/eelnoud/eelnou/cc5e0cc0-2620-3f44-e381-071e238b4195/V%C3%B5rdse%20kohtlemise%20seadus>.

¹²² Trade Unions Act (*Ametiühingute seadus*), 14 June 2000, RT I 2000, 57, 372, available in English at: <https://www.riigiteataja.ee/en/eli/519012023006/consolide>.

As for administrative court procedure, the relevant code seems to apply a fairly restrictive approach to third parties.¹²³ The Code of Administrative Court Procedure, Article 16, provides that the complainant may be an association of persons that has filed a complaint with the administrative court, but only in situations provided for by the law. Currently, there are no legal provisions allowing associations to file a complaint to the administrative court in support of a discrimination victim.

Given Estonian law and practice, in court proceedings, NGOs and other relevant associations prefer to support victims through their staff members, who as individuals may act as legal representatives or advisers of victims.

c) Submitting observations, e.g. *amicus curiae* briefs/letters

In Estonia, associations, organisations and trade unions are not entitled to submit *amicus curiae* briefs to courts or other adjudicating bodies in discrimination cases. The procedural law does not provide for *amicus curiae* institution under such name. However, in the administrative court, the court may add to proceedings an administrative authority – in order for that authority to provide its opinion – whose opinion, or information that the authority possesses, may, for other reasons, facilitate disposition of the case (Article 24(1) of the Code of Administrative Court Procedure). There is no such provision in the law on civil court procedure.

d) *Actio popularis*

In Estonia, national law does not allow associations or trade unions to act in the public interest on their own behalf, without a specific victim to support or represent (*actio popularis*).

e) Class action

In Estonia, national law does not allow associations or trade unions to act in the interest of more than one individual victim (class action) for claims arising from the same event.

6.3 Burden of proof (Article 8 Directive 2000/43, Article 10 Directive 2000/78)

In Estonia, national law requires a shift of the burden of proof from the complainant to the respondent (the national term is 'shared burden of proof' – *jagatud tõendamiskohustus*).

The Equal Treatment Act (Article 8) states:

'(1) An application of a person addressing a court, a labour dispute committee or the Commissioner for Gender Equality and Equal Treatment shall set out the facts on the basis of which it can be presumed that discrimination has occurred.

(2) In the course of proceedings, it shall be for the respondent to prove that there has been no breach of the principle of equal treatment. If the person refuses to provide proof, such refusal shall be deemed to be equal to acknowledgement of discrimination by the person.

(3) The shared burden of proof does not apply in administrative court or criminal proceedings.'

Article 8 applies for all types of discrimination, including harassment and instruction to discriminate.

¹²³ 'In the case that the administrative court's decision *may affect the rights or obligations of a person* who is not a party to the matter, the court must join such a person to the proceedings as a third party.' Article 20(1) of the Code of Administrative Court Procedure.

The jurisdiction of administrative courts is the adjudication of disputes in public law and other matters which are placed within the competence of administrative courts by law (Code of Administrative Court Procedure, Article 4). For instance, employment-related complaints of public officials fall within the competence of administrative courts. There is no shift in the burden of proof in administrative court procedure because this court investigates the facts of the case within the meaning of Article 8(5) of the Directive 2000/43 and Article 10(5) of the Directive 2000/78. Under Article 59 of the Code of Administrative Court Procedure a party must prove the circumstances on which their assertions are founded and, if the court requires this, the circumstances in relation to which it may be assumed that the party has access to the corresponding items of evidence. Where production of these items is not possible, the reasons for the impossibility must be provided and the location or possible location of the items disclosed. Where items of evidence required for the just disposition of the case have not been produced or where they are insufficient, the court invites the party on whom it is incumbent to prove the relevant circumstances to produce the items, or collects evidence itself. Where a party does not produce an item of evidence concerning a circumstance that they are required to prove, and evidence concerning that circumstance or rebutting it cannot be obtained by other means, the court may assess the circumstance in a way that is adverse to the party. This means that the administrative court must actively investigate the case. Nevertheless, it might prove difficult to prove one's case even in the administrative court.

In a case where the applicant turned to the Tartu city government to obtain a written explanation, as provided for by the ETA, because she felt she had been discriminated on the ground of her age (a younger and less qualified candidate than her was picked for the job), and she subsequently received a letter clearly expressing ageism, the court did not deem the letter to be sufficient.¹²⁴ The court of second instance agreed that the response by the city government 'was not a success' but concluded that 'under Article 59 of the Code of Administrative Court Procedure, if the party fails to provide evidence concerning a circumstance that they are required to prove under this article and it cannot be obtained by other means, the court may assess the circumstance adversely to the party. Consequently, the applicant was under the obligation to prove that she was not picked for the job because of her age.'¹²⁵ In the author's opinion, such reasoning by the court makes proving a recruitment discrimination case virtually impossible, as, usually, it is the respondent who holds the evidence on recruitment decisions. In light of the *Feryn*¹²⁶ decision, one might argue that the letter expressing ageist views was sufficient to prove the claim of discrimination by the applicant.

Shift in the burden of proof is also not applicable to conciliation procedures at the Chancellor of Justice because these procedures are voluntary.

Usually, the courts apply the reverse burden of proof principle by following the case law of the Supreme Court,¹²⁷ which, referring to the case law of the European Court of Justice, has pointed out that when deciding discrimination cases the court must first identify a fact that allows presumption of direct or indirect discrimination and, once the court has

¹²⁴ The court of first instance decision is declared confidential to protect the privacy of the applicant. The reasoning of this court is referenced in the decision of the court of second instance: *Tartu Ringkonnakohus* decision in case no 3-19-504 of 19 November 2020.

¹²⁵ See *Tartu Ringkonnakohus* decision in case no 3-19-504 of 19 November 2020.

¹²⁶ Court of Justice of the European Union, C-54/07, *Centrum voor gelijkheid van kansen en voor racismebestrijding v Firma Feryn NV*, 10 July 2008, <https://curia.europa.eu/juris/document/document.jsf?jsessionid=03FE1BE201491338D208871C1427EADF?text=&docid=67586&pageIndex=0&doclang=EN&mode=lst&dir=&occ=first&part=1&cid=7203089>.

¹²⁷ Sepper, M.-L. (2024), *Soolise võrdõiguslikkuse seaduse ja võrdse kohtlemise seaduse rakendamine. Kohtute ja võrdõigusvoliniku praktika analüüs (Implementation of the Gender Equality Act and the Equal Treatment Act. Analysis of the practice of the courts and the Gender Equality Commissioner)*, Mõttekoda Praxis, 2024, available at: <https://www.praxis.ee/uploads/2025/01/SoVS%20ja%20V%C3%B5rdKS%20rakendamise%20anal%C3%B5C%C3%BCs.pdf>.

identified such a fact, then discrimination is *prima facie* evident and the regulation of burden of proof applies.¹²⁸

The approach of the Supreme Court when identifying discrimination is simple and does not always mention identifying the ground of discrimination or comparable persons. In 2012, the Supreme Court made a decision in a discrimination case applying the Gender Equality Act, saying that 'establishing discrimination requires first to establish unequal treatment (differentiation), after which one must assess whether different treatment is justified (whether there is a reasonable cause for it)'.¹²⁹ An example of how courts of lower instance are referencing the Supreme Court approach is a case that went through two instances. In the first instance, the county court found that 'no facts have been established which would allow the court to presume direct or indirect discrimination. Therefore, the discrimination is not evident and there is no reason to apply the burden of proof regulation as provided [for] in the Equal Treatment Act, Art[icle] 8'.¹³⁰ Such reasoning was one of the reasons why the victim appealed, stating that 'the county court misapplied the Equal Treatment Act [...] [and] did not follow the correct manner of establishing discrimination, as it did not identify comparable people or groups of people, nor did it make a comparison as required'.¹³¹ The court of second instance, however, agreed with the county court, saying that 'the county court was obligated to first verify whether the fact that the respondent violated the law was established and only then to verify whether the respondent violated the principles of equal treatment'. The manner in which both courts explained how they establish discrimination is difficult to follow and their line of argumentation does not derive from the ETA.

The shared burden of proof applies also in the procedure of the Equality Commissioner. In the Commissioner's opinions, it is not always explicit how the burden of proof has been applied.¹³² There are opinions, such as opinion no 19 of 13 February 2012, where the text indirectly suggests that the manner of establishing discrimination and a shared burden of proof has been applied before the decision by the Commissioner to give an opinion. There is also an opinion in which the Commissioner explicitly explains why they deem information provided by the applicant sufficient to prove their claim that they have been discriminated against, 'although the events described by the applicant took place years ago, are in parts explained in general terms, and for some events the applicant has not been able to reason nor prove sufficiently why they think that the treatment they were subjected to was due to their ethnic origin'.¹³³ In another opinion, on gender discrimination in the recruitment process, the Commissioner explained that since the employer's written response to the applicant did not remove the doubt that the applicant might have been discriminated against on the ground of gender, the Commissioner started an investigation to establish discrimination.¹³⁴

6.4 Victimisation (Article 9 Directive 2000/43, Article 11 Directive 2000/78)

In Estonia, there are legal measures of protection against victimisation. According to Article 3(6) of the Equal Treatment Act,

¹²⁸ Supreme Court (*Riigikohtu halduskolleegium*), decision in case no 3-3-1-13-10 of 17 May 2010, points 15 and 16.

¹²⁹ Supreme Court (*Riigikohus*), decision in case no 3-2-1-135-11 of 4 January 2012, p. 11.

¹³⁰ The county court's reasoning is referenced in the decision of the court of second instance: *Tartu Ringkonnakohtus*, decision in case no 2-15-8216 of 31 October 2016.

¹³¹ See *Tartu Ringkonnakohtus*, decision in case no 2-15-8216 of 31 October 2016.

¹³² Sepper, M.-L. (2024), *Soolise võrdõiguslikkuse seaduse ja võrdse kohtlemise seaduse rakendamise. Kohtute ja võrdõigusvoliniku praktika analüüs (Implementation of the Gender Equality Act and the Equal Treatment Act. Analysis of the practice of the courts and the Gender Equality Commissioner)*, Mõttekoda Praxis, available at: <https://www.praxis.ee/uploads/2025/01/SoVS%20ja%20V%C3%B5rdKS%20rakendamise%20anal%C3%B5C%C3%BCs.pdf>.

¹³³ Gender Equality and Equal Treatment Commissioner, opinion no 31 of 2 April 2013.

¹³⁴ Gender Equality and Equal Treatment Commissioner, opinion no 20 of 6 July 2012.

'discrimination includes also a situation where one person is treated less favourably than others or negative consequences follow because he or she has filed a complaint regarding discrimination or has supported a person who has filed such complaint.'

There is no case law clarifying whether the term 'one person' limits the scope of protection to individuals or not.

Protection against victimisation provided in the Equal Treatment Act will be limited only by the material scope of this law. Thus, protection against victimisation in cases of discrimination on the ground of race, ethnic origin or colour will extend to areas outside employment.

6.5 Sanctions and remedies (Article 15 Directive 2000/43, Article 17 Directive 2000/78)

a) Applicable sanctions in cases of discrimination – in law and in practice

The Equal Treatment Act provides for the right of an injured party to demand compensation for damage and for the discrimination to end. There is no possibility to demand that a victim of a discriminatory recruitment process be given the job they applied for nor can the victim demand reinstatement to their job in the case of discriminatory dismissal. A victim may demand that a 'reasonable amount of money' be paid as compensation for non-pecuniary damage caused by the violation (Article 24(1)-(2)). Compensation may be awarded only in the processes before the labour dispute committee or before the court (civil as well as administrative): 'Upon determination of the amount of compensation, a court shall take into account, inter alia, the scope, duration and nature of the discrimination' (Article 24(3)).

The Law of Obligations Act, Article 127, stipulates that the purpose of compensation for damage is to place the aggrieved person in a situation as near as possible to that in which the person would have been had the circumstances that are the basis for the compensation obligation not occurred.¹³⁵

The limitation period of such claims is one year from the date when the injured party became aware or should have become aware of the damage caused (Article 25).

The above-mentioned provisions are applied within the material scope of the Equal Treatment Act (as the latter is *lex specialis*).

The Penal Code, in Article 152, provides that unlawful restriction of the rights of a person, or granting of unlawful preferences to a person, on the basis of their nationality, race, colour, sex, language, origin, religion, sexual orientation, political opinion, financial or social status is a misdemeanour punishable by a fine of up to three hundred fine units¹³⁶ or by detention. If the same act is committed:

- 1) at least twice; or
- 2) if significant damage is thereby caused to the rights or interests of another person that are protected by law or to public interests, it is a crime punishable by a pecuniary punishment or up to one year's imprisonment.

If the act is committed by a legal person, it is punishable by a fine of up to EUR 2 000.

¹³⁵ Law of Obligations Act (*võlaõigusseadus*), RT I 2001, 81, 487, available in English at: <https://www.riigiteataja.ee/en/eli/525112025001/consolide>.

¹³⁶ A fine unit is a basic sum of a fine. In 2025, one fine unit corresponded to EUR 8.

i) Preventive and socio-preventive sanctions, including injunctions and structural injunctions

The Equal Treatment Act does not regulate preventive sanctions or injunctions. The ETA simply states that discrimination disputes are solved by a court and that the victim has a right to demand compensation for damage (Articles 23 and 24).

Under the civil court procedure, the claimant may ask the court to demand that the respondent commit certain acts or refrain from certain activities. The Code of Civil Procedure does not provide a list of permitted claims. Where the discrimination has occurred because certain actions provided for by labour law or public service regulations have not been performed, the labour dispute committee or court may decide on such an obligation. There is, however, no one legal provision for the victim's right to such a claim. For example, in the labour law, the provisions regarding the claim and content of the decision by the labour dispute committee are very general. The Labour Dispute Resolution Act,¹³⁷ Article 26(2(4)), provides that the petition must set out the petitioner's clearly expressed claim and the amount of the claim, if the claim is monetary. Article 54(1) of the same Act provides that a labour dispute committee shall decide if, in its opinion, the labour dispute matter has been heard to a sufficient extent and the matter is ready for a final decision to be made. The labour dispute committee, in its decision, may not exceed the limits of the claim or make a decision on a claim that has not been filed.

Structural injunction measures are orders of the court that oblige the respondent to take certain action that would provide remedy for not just the applicant but a wider group of people – for example, where a court orders the cessation of discriminatory practice or a change to a policy.

In Estonian civil procedure law, there are few limitations as to the claim (that is, the type of relief sought). However, the Code of Civil Procedure does limit who can start litigation: the court accepts the civil case when a person has applied to the court for relief in relation to a presumed right or interest of that person that is protected by law. It is questionable whether an individual applicant may demand that the court order a measure that has a wider remedial nature.

In Estonia, all the courts have an obligation not to apply a legal act that is unconstitutional and thereby initiate a constitutional review procedure.

The Chancellor of Justice can verify conformity with the Constitution and laws of legislation of general application based either on an application or their own initiative. If the Chancellor of Justice finds that the legislation of general application is unconstitutional and contrary to the laws, they propose to the body that passed the legislation that it bring the legislation into conformity with the Constitution and the law. The body that issued the legislation of general application (e.g. Parliament, Government, a minister or local government) shall present its statement to the Chancellor of Justice within 20 days. If the proposal is ignored, the Chancellor of Justice shall submit a request to the Supreme Court to declare the legislation of general application unconstitutional or invalid. They may also submit a memorandum to the preparer of the legislation of general application (e.g. a ministry under whose purview the legislation falls) to bring it into conformity with the Constitution and the law, at the same time setting a deadline for removal of the discordance. In the event that the recommendations made in the memorandum are disregarded, the Chancellor of Justice may submit a proposal to the issuer of the legislation. If the proposal is ignored, the Chancellor of Justice shall submit a request to the Supreme Court to have the legislation of general application declared unconstitutional or invalid.

¹³⁷ Labour Dispute Resolution Act (*töövaidluse lahendamise seadus*), RT I, 4 July 2017, 3, available in English at: <https://www.riigiteataja.ee/en/eli/502122020006/consolide>.

ii) Sanctions specific to cases of collective redress (*actio popularis* or class actions)

In Estonia, there are no sanctions specific to discrimination cases involving collective redress. Recently, the legal system has introduced collective representative actions, which were previously unknown in Estonia. From 1 January 2025, the Code of Civil Procedure regulates collective representative actions, which can currently be used in situations where an infringement of legal rules has harmed the collective interests of consumers or of data subjects within the meaning of the Personal Data Protection Act. The regulation does not apply in discrimination cases.

iii) Sanctions to deal with cases of mass discrimination, particularly as a result of the use of AI or automated systems

There are no specialised sanctions for mass discrimination.

b) Pecuniary sanctions – maximum and average amounts

No upper limits for compensation were explicitly established in the Equal Treatment Act.

The Public Service Act (Article 105(3)) provides that the upper limit of the compensation provided for the illegal termination of an employment or service does not apply when there has been a violation of the principle of equal treatment.

As for ordinary employment, the court or labour dispute committee may change the standard amount of the compensation (three months' wages), taking into consideration the circumstances of the cancellation of employment and the interests of both parties (Article 109(1) of the Employment Contract Act).

There are no comprehensive official statistics as to the average amounts of compensation.

There are no rules on the amount of compensation or any ceiling on the maximum amount of compensation in discrimination cases.

c) Assessment of the sanctions

The relevant provisions in the Equal Treatment Act are quite general and do not include many details. Upon determination of the amount of compensation, a court or a labour dispute committee must take into account, among other things, the scope, duration and nature of the discrimination. There are no specific provisions, however, to guarantee that sanctions applicable to infringements of the national anti-discrimination provisions are effective, proportionate and dissuasive.

The Estonian judiciary is traditionally cautious as regards awarding compensation for non-pecuniary damage. In labour law, judges and labour dispute committees make use of rather detailed provisions of labour law regarding compensation in labour disputes regardless of whether a claim of discrimination is involved or not. In equality law, however, lack of tradition as well as detailed guidance regarding compensation results in judges avoiding awarding generous compensation in discrimination disputes. Finally, the level of awareness of discrimination issues in Estonian society is low and there have been only a small number of discrimination court cases. As a result, case law that interprets anti-discrimination laws is scarce.

- d) Enforcement and monitoring of the implementation of sanctions
- i) Courts and other adjudicating bodies' mechanisms to monitor or enforce their decisions

The Code of Civil Procedure, Article 445, provides that in its judgment, a court may, on a motion of a principal party, determine the method of and rules for complying with the judgment, set the time limit or due date for compliance and declare the judgment to be enforceable without delay or declare that compliance with the judgment is secured by certain measures of interim relief.

Where judgment is given that grants the court claim or the court terminates the proceedings by a compromise, it maintains the measure of interim relief that was imposed in the case as a measure to secure compliance with the judicial disposition, provided that this is manifestly necessary for ensuring such compliance and that the principal party in whose favour the court decided the case does not – or the parties to the compromise agreement do not – make a motion to revoke the measure.

- ii) Possibility for courts and other adjudicating bodies to retain jurisdiction after sanctions have been imposed

According to the Code of Enforcement Procedure (Article 11), imposing a fine, ordering a person to be forcibly brought in, authorising a search and other enforcement procedure measures fall within the exclusive jurisdiction of the district court, in whose judicial district the enforcement proceedings should be conducted.

- iii) Further steps/measures that courts or adjudicating bodies can take in case of non-compliance with the sanction

The Code of Enforcement Procedure lays down the rules for enforcement. In the enforcement procedure, the courts have powers to impose a fine; order a person to be forcibly brought in, issue an arrest warrant or impose a short-term custodial sentence; authorise a search; appoint and release a compulsory administrator; etc.

Legal status and powers of the enforcement agents are provided in the Enforcement Agents Act.

- iv) The burden of enforcing sanctions

The Code of Enforcement Procedure, Article 23(1), stipulates that the enforcement agent conducts enforcement proceedings based on an application of the party seeking enforcement and an enforceable title. Where the enforceable title is a decision concerning payment of the enforcement agent's fee or a decision ordering payment of the costs of enforcement, and in other situations provided for by law, the enforcement agent conducts enforcement proceedings regardless of whether an application has been filed by the party seeking enforcement.

According to Article 38(1) of the same law, the enforcement costs are borne by the debtor.

7. BODIES FOR THE PROMOTION OF EQUAL TREATMENT (Article 13 Directive 2000/43)¹³⁸

National law is not currently in compliance with Directive 2024/1499, especially with regard to the equality bodies' powers to represent victims of discrimination in court. The government has drafted a bill transposing into Estonian law Directives 2024/1499 and 2024/1500 on standards for equality bodies. As at 1 January 2026, the bill had not been sent to parliament.

7.1 National equality bodies

a) General 'architecture' of equality bodies

There are two equality bodies in Estonia: the Gender Equality and Equal Treatment Commissioner (in short, the Equality Commissioner) and the Chancellor of Justice. The two acts giving these bodies their equality law related mandate – the Equal Treatment Act and the Chancellor of Justice Act – suggest that these two bodies are designated equality bodies under Article 13 of the Racial Equality Directive. In 2023 in connection to the COM(2022) 688 proposal for the directives on standards for equality bodies, the Estonian Government held a consultation with the key stakeholders in Estonia regarding COM(2022) 688.

The Chancellor of Justice suggested that the Chancellor should not be regarded as an equality body in the sense of the proposed directives and that Estonia should legislate which body is an equality body. The Chancellor of Justice suggested that only the Equality Commissioner should be the equality body. The suggestion by the Chancellor has been approved by the ministry responsible for the legislative process.¹³⁹ Also the Ministry of Justice agreed with the Chancellor of Justice that the designated body should only be the Equality Commissioner.¹⁴⁰ In 2025, a bill¹⁴¹ transposing Directives 2024/1499 and 2024/1500 was sent to stakeholders for consultation. The explanatory note to this draft law states that, in Estonia, the national equality body within the meaning of the directives is the Gender Equality and Equal Treatment Commissioner. However, the draft law currently has no objective to amend the Chancellor of Justice Act, which means that the Chancellor will keep their equality-related mandate but will not be considered an equality body within the meaning of Directives 2024/1499 and 2024/1500 once the bill is adopted.

The equality law in force is not in line with Directive 2024/1499, so the aforementioned bill must be adopted to ensure that the national equality law is in conformity with Directive 2024/1499. The proposed amendments to the Equal Treatment Act aim to enhance the protection against discrimination and guarantee the independence of the institution of Commissioner. The Commissioner's powers will widen to include the right to represent victims of discrimination in court and solve discrimination disputes, if the parties so wish.

In order to broaden the possibilities for an out-of-court settlement, the Commissioner will have the power to issue binding opinions, if the parties to the dispute jointly so wish. The Commissioner will be given a task to make propositions regarding draft legislation, strategies, policy measures and activities to ensure compliance with the Gender Equality Act and the Equal Treatment Act.

Both equality bodies have a multi-ground mandate.

¹³⁸ Assessments and views concerning compliance with EU law throughout Section 7, notably for Directive 2024/1499 whose transposition deadline is 19 June 2026 after the cut off date for this report, reflect the author's opinion.

¹³⁹ The table with the results of the consultation and a note whether the expressed views have been taken into account: <https://eelnoud.valitsus.ee/main/mount/docList/31ee0647-7203-4aee-96dc-c9d5c63fe35f#T7oUH5vh>.

¹⁴⁰ The letter by the Ministry of Justice available at: <https://eelnoud.valitsus.ee/main/#IUAb3Vy1>.

¹⁴¹ File No. 2-2/2025 (Act Amending the Equal Treatment Act and Related Legislation). Available in Estonian at: <https://eelnoud.valitsus.ee/main/mount/docList/8b9d571f-c4d1-425f-b3d2-3385629d2337#7AvMx2tu>.

- b) Designated body for the promotion of equal treatment irrespective of racial/ethnic origin according to Article 13 of the Racial Equality Directive

Neither of the bodies has representation outside of the capital. However, the complaints may be submitted via online channels, in writing, via phone and, in the case of the Chancellor of Justice via audio or video files, including in sign language. The services of both equality bodies are available for all with no costs.

No public accessibility audits are available concerning the accessibility of the premises of the equality bodies to people with special mobility needs.

According to written communication with the Equality Commissioner's Office in 2025, the office made further adjustments to ensure that the information it disseminates on its web page, social media and during events is accessible (for example, videos produced have subtitles or descriptive narration). Events organised by the Commissioner take place in venues accessible by people with mobility impairment and sign language interpreters are employed, where necessary.

In 2025, the web page was redesigned to improve accessibility, as recommended by an accessibility audit conducted in 2024. Some of the audit's recommendations are still to be implemented. There are also issues linked to the physical accessibility of the premises of the Commissioner's office that have not yet been resolved.¹⁴²

According to the written communication with the Chancellor of Justice's Office a number of adjustments have been made to make their premises and services accessible for persons with disabilities.¹⁴³ In making the Office's building and services accessible, the recommendations and observations of the Office's collaborators with disabilities have been taken into account. The new website of the Chancellor was published in December 2024 and was designed to take into account accessibility requirements.¹⁴⁴ To this end, one of the options it offers is text to speech or listening functionality.

7.2 Political, economic and social context of the designated bodies

For many years the Gender Equality and Equal Treatment Commissioner worked in a challenging political context, with insufficient financial means to carry out the mandate. In 2009 when the Equal Treatment Act entered into force and the mandate of the Commissioner was widened, no additional resources were allocated to the body. In addition, the Commissioner continues to be in a precarious position since there are regular discussions initiated by various politicians or policy makers about abolishing it as an independent Government agency and giving its tasks to some other public body.¹⁴⁵

The Chancellor of Justice enjoys a high regard and reputable image in Estonian public space. This may be because it is a constitutional institution with many functions and tasks.

7.3 Institutional architecture

In Estonia, one of the designated bodies was established to transpose Article 13 (the Commissioner) and the other is part of a body with multiple mandates (the Chancellor).

First, for all practical purposes, the leading equality body is the Gender Equality and Equal Treatment Commissioner – a body that deals with equality and non-discrimination.

¹⁴² Office of the Gender Equality and Equal Treatment Commissioner, written communication of 23 February 2026.

¹⁴³ Office of the Chancellor of Justice, Written communication of 7 February 2024.

¹⁴⁴ Office of the Chancellor of Justice, written communication of 20 February 2025.

¹⁴⁵ Most recently this was voiced in 2022 by a top level executive of the Ministry of Social Affairs when preparing the public competition for recruitment of the new Commissioner.

However, this body is also acting as a 'contact point for cooperation between the Member States of the European Union to facilitate the exercise of the right of free movement of the workers who are citizens of a Member State of the European Union and of the European Economic Area, and of their family members' (Article 16(8) of the Equal Treatment Act).

Secondly, the Chancellor of Justice was initially solely the guardian for constitutionality and ombudsman, but later also became an equality body (the first relevant amendments to the Chancellor of Justice Act¹⁴⁶ were adopted on 11 February 2003). The Chancellor also deals with protection of the rights of children and young people (ombudsman for children), persons with disabilities,¹⁴⁷ prevention of ill-treatment,¹⁴⁸ etc. Since 2019 the Chancellor is also the national human rights institution.

The Chancellor's tasks as an equality body are provided for in Articles 19 and 35¹⁶ of the Chancellor of Justice Act. Importantly, the Chancellor as an ombudsman can deal with cases of discrimination by public bodies and institutions on any grounds. Such procedures result in non-binding opinions by the Chancellor. In January 2004, the Chancellor of Justice's Office became a *quasi*-judicial institution for disputes regarding discrimination by natural persons and legal persons in private law on the grounds of gender, race, ethnic origin, colour, language, origin, religious, political or other belief, property or social status, age, disability, sexual orientation or other grounds of discrimination provided for in the law (known as the conciliation procedure).

In practice, the Chancellor's Office does not prioritise issues related to equality/anti-discrimination in its work. No special staff or budget resources are allocated to this field of activity.

7.4 Status of the designated bodies – general independence and resources

a) Status of the bodies

The Gender Equality and Equal Treatment Commissioner

- Separate or other legal status or personality

According to the Equal Treatment Act, the Gender Equality and Equal Treatment Commissioner is an *independent* and impartial expert appointed for a five-year period by the minister in charge of the policy sector (at present, the Minister for Economic Affairs and Communications). The office of the Commissioner is governed under statute enacted by the Government of the Republic. The office of the Commissioner is a legal personality similar to any other governmental body.

- Selection of governing body

The Equality Commissioner is the chief executive of their office. The Equality Commissioner has no other governing bodies.

The Commissioner is appointed to office by the minister in charge of the equality policy sector for five years.

- Sources of funding

¹⁴⁶ Chancellor of Justice Act (*Õiguskantsleri seadus*), 25 February 1999, RT I 1999, 29, 406.

¹⁴⁷ Based on Article 33(2) of the Convention on Rights of Persons with Disabilities.

¹⁴⁸ As an 'independent national preventive mechanism for the prevention of torture at the domestic level' in the meaning of Article 17 of the UN Optional Protocol of the Convention against Torture and Other Cruel, Inhuman or Degrading Treatment or Punishment.

The Commissioner's activities, supported by the office, are funded by the state budget. In practice, the Commissioner's Office does not have a completely independent budget. It is funded from the budget of the Ministry of Economic Affairs and Communications, and the State Budget Act for each year designates the budget of the Commissioner below which the Ministry cannot go when allocating funds for the Commissioner.

- Powers to recruit and manage staff

The Commissioner is free to decide on office structure and recruitment (Article 15).

- Accountability

No legal provisions beside the rules applied to the Ministry of Economic Affairs and Communications and the entire public service in Estonia exist regarding the financial accountability of the Commissioner.¹⁴⁹ In practice the Commissioner presents an annual report of activity to the Parliament's constitutional committee. The committee may ask questions regarding the Commissioner's activities but has no power to hold the Commissioner accountable over misconduct.

The Chancellor of Justice

- Separate or other legal status or personality

The Chancellor of Justice is a constitutional institution, meaning that it was founded by the Constitution and therefore enjoys special status and independence from the Government.

- Selection of governing body

The Chancellor is appointed by the Parliament, on the proposal of the President of the Republic, for a term of seven years (Article 140(1) of the Constitution). The Office of the Chancellor has an administrative director responsible for managing the daily work of the office. According to the Statute of the Chancellor of Justice Office there is an executive board, members of which are *ex officio* the Chancellor, the deputies of the Chancellor, the director, heads of departments, the head of the legal service, the chief communication officer, the external communications officer and the development officer.

- Sources of funding

The Chancellor is independent in their decision-making, and the office has a budget of its own (fixed in the annual state budget). The Chancellor, along with other constitutional institutions, suggested that Parliament increase its financial independence from the influence of the executive power. The State Budget Act was thus amended and the new regulation entered into force in June 2024.¹⁵⁰ According to the new regulation, budgetary applications by the constitutional institutions are reviewed by the finance committee of Parliament instead of by the Government.¹⁵¹

- Powers to recruit and manage staff

¹⁴⁹ However, the Commissioner must publish on the website an annual overview of their activities and the activities of their office (Estonia, Statute of the Gender Equality and Equal Treatment Commissioner (*Soolise võrdõiguslikkuse ja võrdse kohtlemise voliniku ning kantselei põhimäärus*), Article 12(1), RT I 2010, 33, 170).

¹⁵⁰ The State Budget Act (*riigieelarve seadus*), RT I, 13.03.2014, 2, available online in English at: <https://www.riigiteataja.ee/en/eli/531052024002/consolide>.

¹⁵¹ According to the written communication with the Office of the Chancellor of Justice of 20 February 2025, the new regulation was applied for the first time in 2025, that is, after the cut-off date of the present report. Although the Government has been cutting budgets across governmental agencies, the constitutional institutions have been spared.

The Chancellor is free to decide on office structure and recruitment.

- Accountability

The Chancellor comes under the control of the State Audit Office, which is an independent state body exercising economic control (on the basis of Article 7(1) of the State Audit Office Act). Criminal charges may be brought against the Chancellor only on the proposal of the President of the Republic, and with the consent of the majority of the membership of the Parliament (Article 145 of the Constitution).

The Chancellor presents an annual report on their activity to the Parliament.

- b) Independence of the bodies

According to the Equal Treatment Act, the Gender Equality and Equal Treatment Commissioner is 'an independent expert' (Article 15).

Independence of the Chancellor of Justice is guaranteed by its exceptional autonomous status provided in the Constitution (see Section 7.4.a above).

In terms of independence it is important to note that during their term of office, both the Chancellor of Justice and the Gender Equality and Equal Treatment Commissioner cannot hold any other state or local government office or an office of a legal person in public law, belong to the management board, supervisory board or supervisory body of a commercial undertaking, engage in enterprise, except their personal investments and the interest and dividends received therefrom and income received from the disposal of their property. They are permitted to engage in research or teaching unless this hinders the performance of their functions. In addition, the Chancellor of Justice cannot participate in the activities of political parties (Article 12 of the Chancellor of Justice Act and Article 22 of the Equal Treatment Act). The Chancellor of Justice Act established the same restrictions for Deputy Chancellor of Justice-Advisers and (with some exceptions) for advisers to the Chancellor of Justice (Article 39).

Both the Commissioner and the Chancellor are independent in law. However, the independence of the Commissioner can be compromised in the context where the power of appointment lies with the minister and the law provides no requirements as to the expertise or qualifications of the Commissioner.

- c) Resources

The Chancellor of Justice

- The annual budget of the body

The Chancellor of Justice's annual budget for 2026 is EUR 3 575 000.

- The share of the annual budget dedicated to the equality body mandate

There is no share of the annual budget dedicated to the equality body mandate.

- The total number of staff of the body

The total number of staff of the Chancellor of Justice is 48 (including public servants and employees in supporting functions).

- The number of staff dedicated to the equality body mandate

There is no staff nor unit dedicated solely to the equality body mandate, because issues of equality are dealt with within various units of the Chancellor of Justice's Office.

The Gender Equality and Equal Treatment Commissioner

- The annual budget of the body

The Gender Equality and Equal Treatment Commissioner has a budget of EUR 501 195 for the year 2026.

- The share of the annual budget dedicated to the equality body mandate

Since the Commissioner has only the equality body mandate, all the resources are used for this task.¹⁵²

- The total number of staff of the body

Including the Commissioner there are seven positions (of which six are currently filled).

- The number of staff dedicated to the equality body mandate

Since the Commissioner has only the equality body mandate, the entire staff is dedicated to this mandate.

The Equality Commissioner has too few employees to efficiently fulfil the wide mandate (all the grounds under EU law, including gender) as the equality body. The same opinion has been expressed over the years multiple times by several Estonian advocacy organisations¹⁵³ and international human rights bodies such as ECRI¹⁵⁴ and the Commissioner for Human Rights of the Council of Europe.¹⁵⁵ The budget has increased over the years but is still considered too small considering the scope of the mandate.

7.5 Grounds and fields covered by the designated bodies

The Gender Equality and Equal Treatment Commissioner deals with discrimination on the grounds of gender, pregnancy, childbirth, parenting, family-related duties, and other circumstances related to gender in all areas of life. These grounds are stipulated in the Gender Equality Act. In addition, the grounds of ethnic origin, race, colour, religion or other beliefs, age, disability or sexual orientation are covered within the material scope similar to Directives 2000/43 and 2000/78 for the respective grounds.¹⁵⁶

The Equal Treatment Act provides an additional list of grounds stating that it does not preclude the requirements of equal treatment in labour relations in relation to any other ground, in particular due to family-related duties, social status, representation of the interests of employees or membership in an organisation of employees, level of language proficiency or duty to serve in defence forces. There have been Commissioners who have taken the view that they may investigate a case regarding a protected ground from the additional list. Moreover, in 2024, the Commissioner provided an opinion stating that an

¹⁵² The Gender Equality and Equal Treatment Commissioner, written communication, 7 March 2025.

¹⁵³ Most recently by the Equal Treatment Network (*Võrdse kohtlemise võrgustik*) (2021) *Ühisaruanne Eesti kolmanda üldise korralise ülevaatuse (UPR) jaoks* (Joint report for the third general periodic review (UPR) of Estonia), <https://humanrights.ee/app/uploads/2020/12/UPR-EST-uus.pdf>.

¹⁵⁴ ECRI (2015) *Report on Estonia (5th monitoring cycle)*, 16 June 2015: <https://rm.coe.int/fifth-report-on-estonia-estonian-translation-/16808b56f2>.

¹⁵⁵ Commissioner of Human Rights (2018) Report of Ms Dunja Mijatović on the visit to Estonia, Council of Europe, <https://rm.coe.int/euroopa-noukogu-inimoiguste-voliniku-dunja-mijatovici-raport-11-15-juu/16808de6a3>.

¹⁵⁶ In other words, the Commissioner cannot deal with discrimination on the grounds of religion or other beliefs, age, disability or sexual orientation in the areas outside employment.

additional open-ended list allows the Commissioner to expand the list of protected grounds. The Commissioner said that the geographical area in which the work is being done cannot be a characteristic on the basis of which different bonuses are paid to employees of the same organisation.¹⁵⁷ Thereby, the Commissioner has created a new ground not provided for in the Equal Treatment Act.

The Chancellor of Justice deals with unspecified grounds – in fact, any ground – of discrimination in the public sector, through ombudsman-like procedures. Furthermore, the Chancellor deals with conciliation in the entire private sector areas in cases of discrimination on the grounds of gender, ethnic and racial origin, colour, language, origin, religious, political or other belief, property or social status, age, disability, sexual orientation or other ground of discrimination provided for in the law.

7.6 Competences of the designated bodies – and their independent exercise

a) Independent assistance to victims

In Estonia, only the Gender Equality and Equal Treatment Commissioner has an explicit duty to advise and assist people pursuing their complaints about discrimination. However, there is no obligation to provide legal representation to victims of discrimination (Article 16 of the Equal Treatment Act). In practical terms, the Commissioner or their advisers deal with legal counselling in situ.

As for the Chancellor of Justice, they normally inform applicants (victims) about their rights and avenues of redress (being an ombudsman).

b) Independent surveys and reports

In Estonia, only the Gender Equality and Equal Treatment Commissioner has the competence to conduct independent surveys and publish independent reports (Article 16 of the Equal Treatment Act). The Commissioner previously commissioned a study on the situation of LGBTQ people in Estonia¹⁵⁸ and a study to measure equality across various equality strands and areas of life.¹⁵⁹ In 2024, the Commissioner ordered a study on racism to be conducted.¹⁶⁰ That same year, an analysis of the use of AI in the public sector and discrimination was published.¹⁶¹ There are more studies regarding gender equality.

The Chancellor of Justice Act, Article 35¹⁶ provides that the Chancellor must inform the Riigikogu, the Government of the Republic and governmental agencies, and the public about the application of the principle of equal treatment, and promote cooperation.

There is no public data on whether the bodies engage in strategic planning.

¹⁵⁷ The Gender Equality and Equal Treatment Commissioner, opinion 1-3/4_2024 of 25 July 2024, available at: https://www.volinik.ee/volinik-live-web-prd/s3fs-public/2024-07/Arvamus_FestiPost_tulemustasu.pdf.

¹⁵⁸ Aavik, K., Roosalu, T., Kazjulja, M., Mere, L., Kaal, K., Raudsepp, M. (2016) *LGBTQ inimeste igapäevane toimetulek ja strateegilised valikud Eesti ühiskonnas* (Daily coping strategies of LGBTQ people in Estonia), Gender Equality and Equal Treatment Commissioner, Tallinn, <https://www.volinik.ee/infomaterjalid/lgbtq-inimeste-igapaevane-toimetulek-ja-strateegilised-valikud-eesti-uhiskonnas>.

¹⁵⁹ Lees, K., Vahaste-Pruul, S., Sammul, M., Humal, K., Lamesoo, K., Veemaa, J., Kann, A., Espenberg, K. & Varblane, U. (2016) *Kellel on Eestis hea, kellel parem? Võrdõiguslikkuse mõõtmise mudel* (Who does well in Estonia and who does better? Equality measurement model), Gender Equality and Equal Treatment Commissioner, <https://www.volinik.ee/infomaterjalid/kellel-eestis-hea-kellel-parem-vordoisuslikkuse-mootmise-mudel>.

¹⁶⁰ Veske, C. (2024), *Racial discrimination in Estonia*, The Gender Equality and Equal Treatment Commissioner, available at: <https://www.volinik.ee/en/information-materials/report-racial-discrimination-estonia.html>.

¹⁶¹ Gender Equality and Equal Treatment Commissioner's Office of Estonia et al. (2024), *Report on auditing discrimination and bias within Estonian public sector adm systems*, 25 November 2024, available at: https://www.volinik.ee/volinik-live-web-prd/s3fs-public/2024-12/Equitech_AuditReport_TalTech_25.11.24.pdf.

c) Recommendations

In Estonia, both designated bodies – the Chancellor of Justice and the Gender Equality and Equal Treatment Commissioner – have the competence to issue recommendations.¹⁶²

Both the Chancellor of Justice and the Commissioner are entitled to make policy-related proposals to governmental bodies for amendments to legislation or on how to improve the implementation of equality law. All the proposals by the Chancellor are public and can be read online. Some of the Commissioner's proposals are referenced in their annual activity report. If either of them is asked for an opinion in the course of a legislative procedure, their views are made public in the governmental online portal (in Estonian *eelnõude infosüsteem* at: <https://eelnoud.valitsus.ee>) under the legal dossier in question. There is no study which would show how many proposals have been made and how many of these have been taken into account by the Government.

d) Prevention, promotion and awareness-raising

The Gender Equality and Equal Treatment Commissioner and the Chancellor of Justice are obliged to inform official bodies (e.g. ministries, city councils) about the principles of equality and equal treatment with the view to promote equality in legislation and governing.¹⁶³ The activities of the Commissioner are mostly limited to the scope of application of the Equal Treatment Act and the Gender Equality Act. The relevant competence of the Chancellor is based on Article 12 of the Constitution and the Chancellor has almost no limits as regards material scope and grounds of discrimination (Article 12 includes an open-ended list of discrimination grounds, and as such it covers even those grounds that are not specifically mentioned, e.g. age and sexual orientation). In practice, relevant activities are organised independently and on an ad hoc basis.

The Equal Treatment Act lists taking measures to promote equal treatment and gender equality as part of the mandate of the Commissioner. According to the Act, the Equality Commissioner is expected to cooperate with other persons and entities to promote gender equality and equal treatment. The website of the Equality Commissioner suggests various publications, tools, training material and other awareness-raising activities to prevent discrimination. The Equality Commissioners have also regularly appeared at conferences and other similar events organised by the civil society organisations.

e) Other competences

Both bodies have a duty to analyse the effect of laws on the situation of persons with the protected characteristics. The Equal Treatment Act provides this in relation to the Commissioner in Article 16(4), and Article 35¹⁶ of the Chancellor of Justice Act stipulates that the Chancellor promotes equality and equal treatment by analysing the impact of legal acts with respect to the position of various members of society.

7.7 Legal standing of the designated bodies

In Estonia, the designated bodies do not have legal standing to:

- bring discrimination complaints (on behalf of identified victims) to court;
- bring discrimination complaints (on behalf of non-identified victims) to court;
- bring discrimination complaints *ex officio* to court; and
- intervene in legal cases concerning discrimination, e.g. as an *amicus curiae*.

¹⁶² Chancellor of Justice Act 1999, Article 35¹⁶ and Equal Treatment Act 2008, Article 16.

¹⁶³ Chancellor of Justice Act 1999, Article 35¹⁶ and Equal Treatment Act 2008, Article 16.

7.8 Dispute resolution

a) Quasi-judicial functions

In Estonia, both the Chancellor of Justice and the Gender Equality and Equal Treatment Commissioner are quasi-judicial institutions.

The Chancellor cannot initiate the conciliation procedure without an application from a victim (Article 35⁵). An alleged discriminator is not obliged to participate in the procedure (Article 35¹¹(1)). Not only is the conciliation procedure voluntary for the parties, but the proposal to resolve the dispute by the Chancellor of Justice must also be approved by both parties and only then can the approved agreement between the parties become mandatory for the parties. Once the agreement is mandatory it can be enforced by a bailiff (Article 35¹⁴). It may also include an obligation to pay compensation (Article 35¹²). If a conciliation procedure fails, a victim may address the court for the protection of their rights (Article 35¹⁵).

The conciliation procedure is very rarely used in practice and therefore any comprehensive analysis of its implementation is impossible. In 2024, one conciliation procedure was finally concluded and the agreement was approved.¹⁶⁴ There were no conciliation procedures between 2012 and 2015, nor between 2018 and 2020, but there was one in 2021 and one in 2022.¹⁶⁵ In 2025, there were three cases in which the applicant was offered conciliation. In one of these, the applicant agreed, but the procedure did not take place, because the respondent did not agree to engage in conciliation. The procedure can hardly be considered to be an efficient legal instrument.

The Chancellor of Justice can issue binding enforceable decisions only in the conciliation procedure. The non-binding opinions by the Chancellor of Justice are issued in cases where the discrimination has occurred in the public sector (in the ombudsman-like procedure).

Everyone's right of recourse to the Chancellor of Justice in order to verify whether a state agency or legal persons in private law performing public duties observe fundamental rights (Article 19(1) of the Chancellor of Justice Act), including the principle of equal treatment is the so-called ombudsman procedure.

In the course of proceedings, the Chancellor of Justice establishes the facts relevant to the case and, where necessary, collects evidence on their own initiative (Article 21(1)). The Chancellor of Justice has unrestricted access to documents and places which are in the possession of the agencies under supervision. Agencies are under an obligation to enable the Chancellor of Justice unconditional and immediate opportunity to receive all documents and other materials in their possession and access to relevant places (Article 27(1)). The Chancellor of Justice may request that agencies under supervision submit written explanations concerning a petition (Article 29), they can also take testimonies from persons who know facts relevant to the case (Article 30(1)).

Proceedings are completed when the Chancellor of Justice formulates their position, assessing whether the activities of the agency under supervision are legal and in compliance with good administrative practice. The Chancellor of Justice may provide criticism, suggestions and express their opinion in other ways or make proposals for elimination of the violation. The position is final and cannot be contested in court

¹⁶⁴ Chancellor of Justice, written communication of 20 February 2025.

¹⁶⁵ Chancellor of Justice, written communications of 4 February 2013, of 7 February 2014, of 13 March 2015, of 5 January 2016, and of 7 March 2019; Chancellor of Justice (2018), *Annual report 2017/2018*, section on 'equal treatment', available at: <https://www.oiguskantsler.ee/annual-report-2018/equal-treatment>; Chancellor of Justice (2019), *Annual report 2018/2019*, section on 'equal treatment', available at: <https://www.oiguskantsler.ee/annual-report-2019/social-security#i6>; Chancellor of Justice (2020), *Annual report 2019/2020*, section on 'equal treatment', available at: <https://www.oiguskantsler.ee/annual-report-2020/equal-treatment>.

(Article 35¹). Considering the nature and rules of carrying out the ombudsman proceedings, both proceedings of the Chancellor of Justice may be considered to be quasi-judicial functions.

The Gender Equality and Equal Treatment Commissioner is a *quasi*-judicial institution as the Commissioner investigates a case, has the right to obtain information from all persons who may possess information that is necessary to ascertain the facts relating to a case of discrimination, demand written explanations concerning facts relating to an alleged case of discrimination and the filing of documents or copies thereof within the term set by the Commissioner (Article 17 of the Equal Treatment Act).

The Gender Equality and Equal Treatment Commissioner cannot issue binding enforceable decisions. Nevertheless, the Commissioner drafts legally non-binding opinions concerning possible cases of discrimination on the basis of the complaints submitted by persons or on the Commissioner's own initiative (Article 17 of the Equal Treatment Act). The victim may attach the opinion to their court file to inform the court of the assessment of the complaint by the Commissioner.

The labour dispute committees have in their mandate to resolve discrimination disputes (Article 23 of the Equal Treatment Act) and can be considered separate quasi-judicial institutions. In addition to courts, only labour dispute committees may decide on the compensation paid for the victim of discrimination for the damage caused by the discrimination (Article 24). The rules of procedure of the labour dispute committees are provided in the Labour Dispute Resolution Act.¹⁶⁶ The rules include among other issues such as legal representor (optional), requirements to the petition, hearing, evidence, termination of proceedings, enforcement of decisions and the right of parties to recourse to the court. The decisions of the labour dispute committees are binding. The labour dispute committees are an accessible and cheap recourse to remedy discrimination.

i) Power to impose sanctions

The equality bodies nor the labour dispute committees cannot impose sanctions.

ii) Nature and level of sanctions that can be imposed

The bodies nor the labour dispute committees cannot impose sanctions.

iii) Possibility to appeal

There is no possibility to appeal the non-binding opinions by the Equality Commissioner.

Once the agreement by the Chancellor of Justice in the conciliation procedure is mandatory it can be enforced by a bailiff (Article 35¹⁴). An agreement approved by the Chancellor of Justice is final and cannot be contested in court, except where the Chancellor materially violates a provision of the conciliation proceedings and the violation may affect the content of the agreement (Article 35¹⁵).

If the parties disagree with the decision of the labour dispute committee, they may have recourse to court for the hearing of the same labour dispute matter within 30 calendar days as of the receipt of the decision. Recourse to court shall be in the form of a statement of claim, not an appeal against the decision of a labour dispute committee.

iv) Enforcement of binding decisions

¹⁶⁶ *Töövaidluse lahendamise seadus* (Labour Dispute Resolution Act) RT I, 04.07.2017, 3.

Performance of an agreement approved by the Chancellor of Justice is mandatory for the parties to conciliation proceedings. An agreement must be performed within 30 days as of the day following the day on which a copy of the agreement is received, unless another term is prescribed in the agreement. Where an agreement is not performed within the term specified, the petitioner or respondent may submit the agreement approved by the Chancellor of Justice to an enforcement agent for enforcement, pursuant to the procedure provided by the Code of Enforcement Procedure.

A decision of a labour dispute committee shall be enforced after the entry into force thereof, unless the decision is subject to immediate enforcement. A decision is enforced pursuant to the procedure provided by the Code of Enforcement Procedure.

v) Implementation of non-binding opinions

There is no data on whether the non-binding opinions by the Equality Commissioner are well respected. However, several of the Commissioner's opinions have received a lot of media attention over the years and influenced awareness of the public of equality matters. There is no data on how the Commissioner tracks the enforcement of their opinions.

The activity reports of the Chancellor do not include data on whether the non-binding opinions of the Chancellor are enforced.

b) Amicable settlements

The Chancellor of Justice may carry out a conciliation procedure (see above for details). Outside of this function the bodies have no competence to offer the parties to a discrimination case the possibility to seek an amicable resolution.

The parties of the dispute before the labour dispute committee may terminate the proceedings by way of compromise until the entry into force of the decision. The chairperson of the labour dispute committee approves the compromise by a ruling which also terminates the hearing of the labour dispute matter. The ruling sets out the conditions of the compromise.

7.9 Procedural safeguards

The Equality Commissioner may refuse to provide an opinion if the Commissioner has previously provided an opinion regarding the same matter or when on the same basis and regarding the same matter, judicial proceedings have been commenced, a court judgment has entered into force, proceedings have been initiated at a labour dispute committee, a decision of a labour dispute committee has entered into force, a petition has been filed with the Chancellor of Justice, or a conciliation procedure of the Chancellor of Justice for the resolution of a discrimination dispute is pending or the Chancellor of Justice has approved an agreement in a conciliation procedure (Article 18 of the Equal Treatment Act).

Since the Commissioner cannot settle disputes amicably, they provide their legal counselling services primarily to the victims with no special procedural safeguards in place. However, in the procedure of forming an opinion on whether discrimination has occurred, the Commissioner must keep in mind the equality of arms of both parties by ensuring that the defendant provides any evidence to prove that they abide by the law.

The Chancellor of Justice reviews the application only if no court judgments, court orders on termination of misdemeanour proceedings or judicial proceedings or decisions of bodies conducting extrajudicial proceedings in misdemeanour proceedings have entered into force in the matter of the application. At the time of filing the application, the matter may not be subject to court proceedings, offence proceedings or mandatory pre-trial complaint proceedings (Article 25(2) of the Chancellor of Justice Act).

7.10 Data collection by the designated bodies

a) Registration of complaints and decisions

In Estonia, both equality bodies register the number of complaints of discrimination made and/or decisions (by ground, field, type of discrimination, etc.). This data is available to the public (often on request). However, the data is not always complete and entirely comparable from year to year.

The number of complaints filed with the Gender Equality and Equal Treatment Commissioner has been relatively large. In 2020, there were 319 complaints; in 2021, there were 239; in 2022, there were 217; in 2023, there were 198; in 2024, there were 230 and in 2025, there were 280.¹⁶⁷ The grounds on which the most number of complaints were filed in 2025 were: nationality and ethnic origin (99); gender, including family responsibilities, pregnancy, sexual or gender related harassment (64); age (15); disability (14); race and colour (5); sexual orientation (1); and religion or belief (2).¹⁶⁸

The number of complaints in 2025 was influenced by the new AI tool VALDUR, which helps the Equality Commissioner identify discriminatory job announcements. Most of the discriminatory announcements concerned language requirements. In December 2025 alone, VALDUR identified 60 discriminatory announcements and the Commissioner has started an investigation in all 60 cases. See also Section 10.

In 2025, the Commissioner gave six opinions. See Section 12.2 for an overview of two of these cases.

In 2025, the Chancellor of Justice did not reach a conclusion in any conciliation procedure. That year, 48 complaints of discrimination were sent to the Chancellor.¹⁶⁹ There were five complaints concerning age, six concerning disability, four concerning language and four concerning ethnic origin. In most of the cases, the Chancellor counselled the applicant on their rights, and few cases required intervention by the Chancellor.

- Labour dispute committees

In 2025, the labour dispute committees across Estonia resolved 55 disputes in which at least one of the claims concerned discrimination or work-related bullying.¹⁷⁰ The statistics referenced do not disaggregate discrimination claims.

b) Equality data collection

In Estonia, the Equality Commissioner collects general equality data and orders studies on an ad hoc basis. All such studies and reports are published online. For example, in 2014-2015 the Equality Commissioner developed an equality measurement methodology using survey data and statistics to measure equality across many fields of life and across several grounds.¹⁷¹

¹⁶⁷ Gender Equality and Equal Treatment Commissioner, written communications from various years.

¹⁶⁸ Gender Equality and Equal Treatment Commissioner, written communication of 23 February 2026. Note that a large number of complaints (80) concerned no identifiable ground and/or were out of the scope of the Commissioner's mandate.

¹⁶⁹ Chancellor of Justice (2025), *Annual Report 2024/2025*, available in Estonian at: <https://www.oiguskantsler.ee/ylevaade2025/vordne-kohtlemine>.

¹⁷⁰ The annual statistics provided by the Labour Inspectorate can be found at: <https://www.ti.ee/sites/default/files/documents/2026-01/T%C3%B6%C3%B6vaidluskomisjoni%20menetluses%20olnud%20ebav%C3%B5rdse%20kohtlemisega%20seotud%20t%C3%B6%C3%B6vaidlusasjad%202025.pdf>.

¹⁷¹ The report of the research project in Estonian at: <https://www.volnik.ee/infomaterjalid/kellel-eestis-hea-kellel-pare-vordoiguslikkuse-mootmise-mudel>.

7.11 Roma and travellers

There were no opinions or statements by either of the equality bodies regarding cases involving Roma or travellers. The data on the number of complaints does not feature information on number of complaints made by the Roma people or travellers. These cases would be part of the statistics on number of complaints on the ground of ethnic origin.

8. IMPLEMENTATION ISSUES

8.1 Dissemination of information, dialogue with NGOs and between social partners

- a) Dissemination of information about legal protection against discrimination (Article 10 Directive 2000/43 and Article 12 Directive 2000/78)

In 2025, Estonian authorities continued to support various activities, including seminars and media publications,¹⁷² to promote equality and non-discrimination in Estonia on the grounds provided in the directives.

- b) Measures to encourage dialogue with NGOs with a view to promoting the principle of equal treatment (Article 12 Directive 2000/43 and Article 14 Directive 2000/78)

The Ministry of Social Affairs has regularly funded NGOs whose main area of activity is to promote human rights and equal treatment (such as the Estonian LGBT Association and the Estonian Human Rights Centre) through strategic partnership contracts.

The Chancellor of Justice convened two councils, which are intended to advise the Chancellor of Justice on human rights and the rights of persons with disabilities. The main reason for the councils is the Chancellor's role as the national human rights institution (NHRI) and the monitoring body for the UN CRPD. Members were elected to the councils in a public competition. The council for people with disabilities convenes twice a year. In 2025, both meetings were on issues concerning accessibility.¹⁷³

The Gender Equality and Equal Treatment Commissioner promotes dialogue with civil society.¹⁷⁴ In early 2025, the Commissioner reached out to NGOs to convene a council of advocacy associations to advise the Commissioner on issues regarding the constituencies of the associations. The first meeting of the council took place in April 2025.

This dialogue has also been promoted by state and municipal institutions, especially in the context of a national system of third sector inclusion in legislative processes.

- c) Measures to promote dialogue between social partners to give effect to the principle of equal treatment within workplace practices, codes of practice and workforce monitoring (Article 11 Directive 2000/43 and Article 13 Directive 2000/78)

The Gender Equality and Equal Treatment Commissioner maintains working contacts with social partners to promote the principle of equal treatment in the workplace.

- d) Addressing the situation of Roma and Travellers

The Ministry of Culture curates the activities of the Cultural Council of National Minorities and the roundtable of the East-Viru County National Cultural Associations, which are comprised of the representatives of national minority organisations, including the Roma associations. In addition, a separate Roma Integration Council was set up in 2016 to support Roma integration.¹⁷⁵

¹⁷² See e.g. the Gender Equality and Equal Treatment Commissioner, at: <https://www.volinik.ee/articles.html>.

¹⁷³ Chancellor of Justice, *Annual report 2024–2025*, available at: <https://www.oiguskantsler.ee/ylevaade2025/puuetega-inimeste-oigused>.

¹⁷⁴ See: <https://www.volinik.ee/artiklid/vordoigusvolinik-kutsub-vabauhendusi-huvikaitse-noukogusse-kandideerima.html>.

¹⁷⁵ The list of members of the Council can be found at: <https://www.eestiromad.ee/kontaktid/romade-loiumise-noukoda/>.

8.2 Measures to ensure compliance with the principle of equal treatment (Article 14 Directive 2000/43, Article 16 Directive 2000/78)

a) Compliance of national legislation (Articles 14(a) and 16(a))

Estonia has taken the necessary measures to ensure that any laws, regulations and administrative provisions contrary to the principle of equal treatment are abolished (Article 14(a) of Directive 2000/43 and Article 16(a) of Directive 2000/78).

There are several legal avenues in place to ensure that any law, regulation or administrative provision that is contrary to the principle of equal treatment will be declared unconstitutional or simply not applied before courts of law. According to the Constitution (Article 152) the court may not apply a law that is contrary to the Constitution, including the constitutional principle of non-discrimination stipulated in Article 12. The checking by the Supreme Court of the constitutionality of a legal norm may be initiated by several bodies, including the Chancellor of Justice and the Parliament.

The provisions of the Estonian Constitution are directly applicable, and the basic principle of equality and non-discrimination is provided for in Article 12.

b) Compliance of other rules/clauses (Articles 14(b) and 16(b))

Estonia has taken the necessary measures to ensure compliance with Article 14(b) of Directive 2000/43 and Article 16(b) of Directive 2000/78.

The principles of *lex specialis derogat legi generali* and *lex posteriori derogat legi priori* are applied in Estonian law.

According to the common rule in relation to undertaking transactions (including treaties of any kind) as stipulated in Articles 86 and 87 of the General Principles of the Civil Code Act,¹⁷⁶ a transaction that is contrary to the public order, good morals or the law is void. A breach of the constitutional provision will obviously be recognised as being contrary to good morals or as a significant violation of the law.

As for cases of unlawful discriminatory practice against employees, the Employment Contracts Act stipulates that any agreement that would harm the employee by overriding the rights and obligations of the Employment Contracts Act is void (Article 2)).

Employers in the public as well as private sector must ensure the protection of employees against discrimination, follow the principle of equal treatment and promote equality in line with the Equal Treatment Act (Article 3 of the Employment Contracts Act and Article 13 of the Public Service Act).

According to Article 4(2) of the Collective Agreements Act,¹⁷⁷ the terms and conditions of a collective agreement that are 'less favourable to employees than those prescribed' by the Collective Agreements Act or any other law are invalid unless exceptions are permitted by the law.

The author of this report is not aware of any regulations or rules that are manifestly contrary to the principle of equality that remain in force in Estonia.

¹⁷⁶ General Principles of the Civil Code Act (*Tsiviilseadustiku üldosa seadus*), 27 March 2002, RT I 2002, 35, 216.

¹⁷⁷ Collective Agreements Act (*Kollektiivlepingu seadus*), 14 April 1993, RT I 1993, 20, 353.

9. COORDINATION AT NATIONAL LEVEL

9.1 Coordination at the governmental level

According to the Government of the Republic Act,¹⁷⁸ starting from July 2023 the responsibility of the Ministry of Economic Affairs and Communications¹⁷⁹ is to promote equal treatment as well as gender equality, including coordination of activities in this field, and the preparation of the corresponding draft legislation (Article 67(1)).¹⁸⁰ The equality policies department lies now with the aforementioned ministry and not at the Ministry of Social Affairs as previously.

The Cohesion Policy Funds Equality Competence Centre (*Ühtekuuluvuspoliitika fondide võrdõiguslikkuse kompetentsikeskus*)¹⁸¹ is responsible for the guidance and training of the institutions who use structural funds to improve their awareness on gender equality and equal treatment, including equal treatment on the ground of race. The Centre offers equality-related support for public sector officials who develop and implement measures in relation to EU structural funds.

Other ministries also play a role in designing equal treatment policies. The Ministry of Culture is responsible for integration policies and cultural diversity, including promoting the rights of minority ethnic groups. Integration policy activities are implemented by the Integration Foundation (INSA).

The Ministry of the Interior has a department responsible for policies around religious institutions and is deemed to have a say on equality policies of religious minorities.¹⁸²

9.2 National strategies and action plans

There is no separate national action plan against racism and racial discrimination. Nor is there a separate action plan for persons with disabilities. In 2021, the government adopted a Concept of Measures to Fight Antisemitism,¹⁸³ but it does not enjoy the status of a national action plan. In 2025, the Ministry of Economic Affairs and Communications adopted the LGBTIQ action plan 2025–2030,¹⁸⁴ a strategic document that lays down the fundamental principles across several policy areas for advancement of equal opportunities for LGBTIQ people. The action plan foresees activities to promote equal opportunities of LGBTIQ people in the fields of education and youth policy, health and employment. It also provides that the legal order must support and protect the rights of LGBTIQ people, that self-representation and advocacy of LGBTIQ people are supported, that Estonian society is a safe place for LGBTIQ people in which to live and that Estonia supports globally the fundamental rights and equal treatment of LGBTIQ people.

The action plan features indicators to monitor progress – all linked to various studies on population perceptions of LGBTIQ people or the experiences of LGBTIQ people (for

¹⁷⁸ Government of the Republic Act (*Vabariigi Valitsuse seadus*), 13 December 1995, RT I 1995, 94, 1628.

¹⁷⁹ *Sotsiaalministeerium* (Ministry of Social Affairs) <https://www.sm.ee/en>.

¹⁸⁰ More details are available at: <https://www.mkm.ee/ministeerium-uudised-ja-kontakt/ministeerium-ja-ministrid/ministeeriumi-tutvustus-ja-struktuur#vordsuspoliitika-osa>.

¹⁸¹ The web page of the competence centre: <https://kompetentsikeskus.sm.ee/meist/>.

¹⁸² *Siseministeerium* (Ministry of the Interior) The area of government of the Ministry of the Interior includes the management of issues relating to churches and congregations. More information at: <https://www.siseministeerium.ee/tegevusvaldkonnad/sidus-uhiskond/usulised-uhendused>.

¹⁸³ The concept is available in Estonian at:

<https://www.google.com/url?sa=i&rct=j&q=&esrc=s&source=web&cd=&ved=0CAIQw7AJahcKEwiAgKjK9YOAAxUAAAAAHQAAAAQAw&url=https%3A%2F%2Fsiseministeerium.ee%2Fmedia%2F1566%2Fdownload&sig=AOvVaw1LBtmE56s7qrmq-mOJQ-kO&ust=1689070900942998&opi=89978449>.

¹⁸⁴ *LGBTIQ-inimeste võrdsete võimaluste edendamise aluspõhimõtted ja tegevuskava 2025–2030* (Guiding principles and action plan for promoting equal opportunities for LGBTIQ people 2025–2023), available at: <https://www.mkm.ee/sites/default/files/documents/2025-12/LGBTIQ-inimeste%20v%C3%B5rdsete%20v%C3%B5imaluste%20edendamise%20alusp%C3%B5him%C3%B5tted%20ja%20tegevuskava%202025-2030.pdf>.

example, the European Union Agency for Fundamental Rights LGBTIQ survey). The action plan also contains the list of ministries and agencies responsible for implementing the actions, with references to the policy area programme under which the activities will be carried out and funded.

Representatives of civil society were included in the working groups and had a chance to comment on the draft plan. Civil society provided considerable input for the plan which was taken on board by the ministry. LGBTIQ organisations will also participate in the implementation phase of the plan.

The main strategy that includes measures and actions to promote equal treatment of various minority groups is the Welfare Development Plan 2023-2030.¹⁸⁵ The development plan has five sub-goals. The third sub-goal concerns seniors and active ageing and the fourth sub-goal social welfare, including certain issues relevant for persons with disabilities (e.g. independent living).

The fifth sub-goals states: *'In Estonia, women and men have equal rights, duties, opportunities and responsibilities in all areas of social life, and equal opportunities for self-fulfilment and participation in society are guaranteed for minority groups'*. The development plan is carried out through various programmes which are updated annually.

Racial equality, LGBTIQ+ equality as well as disability-rights related issues are covered by the gender equality and equal treatment programme.¹⁸⁶ The programme for 2025–2028¹⁸⁷ contains a measure titled 'Ensuring equal treatment and promoting equal opportunities of minority groups'. The measure contains no actions which explicitly fight racism or discrimination on grounds of sexual orientation or disability. However, the measure has a LGBTIQ+ related indicator: 'Percentage of residents who would vote for a candidate in an election regardless of whether the candidate is gay, lesbian, bisexual or transgender' which must be higher than 56 % (the base level in 2021). The programme focuses instead on the services and actions of state institutions (e.g. the ministry responsible for equality policies, the Equality Commissioner, etc.) or improving legislation or implementation of equality laws, tasks which the ministry is required to fulfil by law in any case. The measures as well as actions and indicators, except for the one mentioned, are rather abstract and usually do not concentrate on one separate discrimination ground. The programme features no evidence of an intersectional approach.

Programme Elderly 2025–2028 sets out actions aimed at improving perceptions of elderly people, and reducing age-related bias and discrimination.¹⁸⁸ The programme is intended to help implement the goals of the Welfare Development Plan 2023–2030 relating to ensuring equal opportunities for older people to participate in society and supporting their 'economic coping'. The programme contains a measure (no. 1.1) on the social inclusion, equal treatment and economic security of elderly people. The indicators under this measure include the employment rate of people aged 50–74 (the targeted rate for 2025 of 57.3 % was reached). The second indicator is the at-risk-of-poverty and social exclusion rate of people aged 65 and older (the base rate in 2023 was 47 % and the targeted rate for 2025 was 35.9 %).

¹⁸⁵ All the documents related to the development plan in Estonian and in English available at: <https://sm.ee/heaolu-arengukava-2023-2030#heaolu-arengukava-20>.

¹⁸⁶ Available in Estonian at: <https://www.sm.ee/arengukavad-programmid-ja-tooplaanid#arengukavade-programm>.

¹⁸⁷ *Soolise võrdsuse ja võrdse kohtlemise programm 2025–2028 (Gender equality and equal treatment programme 2025–2028)*, available in Estonian at: <https://www.sm.ee/sites/default/files/documents/2025-03/Soolise%20v%C3%B5rdsuse%20ja%20v%C3%B5rdse%20kohtlemise%20programm%202025-2028.pdf>.

¹⁸⁸ *Programm Vanemaealised 2025–2028 (Programme Elderly 2025–2028)*, available in Estonian at: <https://www.sm.ee/sites/default/files/documents/2025-01/Vanemaealiste%20programm%202025-2028.pdf>.

Another relevant development plan is the Cohesive Estonia Strategy 2030 (*Sidusa Eesti arengukava*).¹⁸⁹ The strategy addresses the integration of the Russian-speaking minority and aims to empower the members of the Roma community and increase their social cohesiveness. Racial equality is not part of this strategy.

¹⁸⁹ Cohesive Estonia Strategy 2030 (*Sidusa Eesti arengukava*), available in English at: <https://www.kul.ee/en/media/3969/download>.

10. CURRENT BEST PRACTICES

The Equality Policies Unit of the Government coordinates the strategic partnership with NGOs to support and finance NGOs that promote equal treatment and/or gender equality. The funding scheme supports NGOs that work with minority groups and promote equality, thereby strengthening Estonian civil society.

The NGO Human Rights Centre continues the Diversity Day project – a day when numerous photo competitions for employees, students and partners, thematic quizzes and film screenings, festivals of ethnic cuisine, etc. are organised.¹⁹⁰

The Equality Commissioner founded the Advocacy Council, composed of 15 representatives of various NGOs working with protected groups and promoting equality. The Council will advise the Commissioner on questions concerning strategic planning and will offer its expertise on topics that the Commissioner will bring before the Council. The Council sits at least once a year and Council member participation is not remunerated.

In recent years, a genuine success story with regard to promoting diversity and equal treatment has been the Diversity Charter, which has been signed by many public institutions, companies and civil society organisations. The campaign continued in 2025; as at 10 March 2026, that is, after the cut-off date of this report (1 January 2026), the number of signatories was 237.¹⁹¹

An example of best practice in relation to the use of artificial intelligence (AI) is the AI application VALDUR created by the Equality Commissioner in cooperation with major job announcement portal CV-Online.ee. VALDUR analyses about 3 000–4 000 job announcements per month and screens them for discriminatory language and protected grounds. The AI application also gives employers feedback on how to phrase a job announcement to avoid unequal treatment.

The Equality Commissioner has been carrying out a project – EquiTech – on AI and equality issues with Tallinn Technical University, the Ministry of Justice, the Ministry of Economic Affairs and Communications and the Lithuanian Office of the Equal Opportunities Ombudsperson.¹⁹² The project, which runs from 1 May 2024 to 30 April 2026, will map the usage of AI-assisted automated decision-making tools by Estonian and Lithuanian public sector institutions and will assess their risks of discrimination.¹⁹³

A legal analysis identified numerous regulatory challenges regarding the use of AI and preventing discrimination. The four main challenges identified were: the intersectional nature of algorithmic discrimination, the lack of transparency for ensuring effective enforcement in cases of algorithmic discrimination, the difficulty in codifying and measuring what constitutes algorithmic fairness, and insufficient risk management obligations in developing and operating algorithms.¹⁹⁴

In 2025, the project partners published an e-learning course on the prevention of risks associated with algorithmic bias in the public sector.¹⁹⁵

¹⁹⁰ Human Rights Centre, <https://humanrights.ee/en/topics-main/mitmekesisus-ja-kaasatus/diversity-day/>.

¹⁹¹ Human Rights Centre, <https://humanrights.ee/teemad/mitmekesisus-ja-kaasatus/charter/>.

¹⁹² All the outputs of the project are accessible at: <https://www.volinik.ee/en/activities/ec-projects.html>.

¹⁹³ Office of the Gender Equality and Equal Treatment Commissioner, written communication of 6 February 2024.

¹⁹⁴ Gender Equality and Equal Treatment Commissioner's Office of Estonia et al. (2024), *Legal analysis on non-discrimination regulation and regulatory gaps concerning algorithmic systems in Estonia and Lithuania*, 25 November 2024, available at: https://www.volinik.ee/volinik-live-web-prd/s3fs-public/2024-12/Equitech_Legal-Analysis_25.11.2024.pdf.

¹⁹⁵ Published on the government-managed e-learning platform Digiriigi Akadeemia: <https://digiriigiakadeemia.ee/enrol/index.php?id=316>.

11. SENSITIVE OR CONTROVERSIAL ISSUES¹⁹⁶

11.1 Potential breaches of the directives at the national level

- Article 9(1) of the Equal Treatment Act permits direct discrimination on the grounds of race and ethnicity in circumstances other than genuine and determining occupational requirements or positive action measures. In other words, this provision goes beyond possible exceptions provided in Articles 4 and 5 of Directive 2000/43. See Section 4.7 of this report for analysis.
- There are no specific provisions regarding the legal standing of 'a person who has a legitimate interest in checking compliance with the requirements for equal treatment' (the right to act as a representative of a victim of discrimination) in areas outside the procedure of the Gender Equality and Equal Treatment Commissioner and the conciliation procedure at the Chancellor of Justice (regarding discrimination by natural persons and legal persons in private law). This might be a breach of Article 7(2), Directive 2000/43 and Article 9(2), Directive 2000/78. As a result, Estonian NGOs face difficulties if they want to support discrimination victims in court procedures. For more details see Section 6.2 of this report.
- There are no provisions in national law to guarantee that sanctions applicable to infringements of the national anti-discrimination provisions are 'effective, proportionate and dissuasive' as required by Article 15 of Directive 2000/43, and Article 17 of Directive 2000/78. See more details in Section 6.5 of this report.

11.2 Other issues of concern

- The Equal Treatment Act, which has a different scope for different protected grounds is likely contrary to the spirit of the Constitution, which does not feature a different scope of protection for different grounds. This was first pointed out by the Chancellor of Justice during the legislative process of the Equal Treatment Act in 2008. There have been attempts to unify the scope for all five grounds, which have proved unsuccessful. In 2024, a progressive draft law was drawn up with the participation of representatives of civil society. The law would have raised the standard of equality law considerably. Unfortunately, with the change of Government, the bill was dropped. Worrisome developments have taken place since then. The responsibility for drafting the new law has been changed from the Equality Policies Unit at the Ministry of Economic Affairs and Communications to the Ministry of Justice. The Ministry of Justice has ordered a private law firm to draft a new law, which caused a minor scandal over whether a ministry can contract out one of its fundamental functions.¹⁹⁷ The Minister for Justice has also refused to show the law drafted by the law firm to any of the parties concerned, including the Equality Commissioner and the Equality Policies Unit.¹⁹⁸ As at 1 January 2026, the law and/or analyses drafted by the law firm were undisclosed.
- The awareness level of policy makers, legal practitioners and the general public about principles of equality and non-discrimination remains low.
- There are only a few studies available from the previous years which assess the implementation and impact of equality law in Estonia, none of them takes a comprehensive view including all the stakeholders with a duty to promote equality.

¹⁹⁶ The assessments and views expressed in both sections 11.1 and 11.2 reflect the author's opinion.

¹⁹⁷ 'Riik tellis uue soolise võrdsuse seaduse eelnõu advokaadibüroolt' ('State commissions new draft gender equality law from a law firm'), ERR (Estonia Public Broadcasting) website, 24 November 2024, <https://www.err.ee/1609525471/riik-tellis-uee-soolise-vordsuse-seaduse-eelnou-advokaadiburoolt>.

¹⁹⁸ 'Võrdse kohtlemise saladus: riik peidab riigi eest dokumente' ('The secret of equal treatment: the state hides documents from the state'), ERR website, 7 February 2025, <https://www.err.ee/1609598315/vordse-kohtlemise-saladus-riik-peidab-riigi-eest-dokumente>.

- In 2025, the number of discrimination disputes before the courts remained very low. In 2024, an analysis was published studying the application of the Equal Treatment Act and the Gender Equality Act by Estonian courts and the Equality Commissioner between 2010 and 2024.¹⁹⁹ The analysis revealed that not only are there few court cases but even among these, only a few provide meaningful interpretations of the equality law in force. The analysis provided a number of potential reasons why the number of cases is low. One of the reasons is fear of stigmatisation and victimisation, especially when the victim litigates against their current employer. Furthermore, the awareness of rights among the wider public is low. The courts tend to use a high threshold for proving any civil claim, including in discrimination claims. Furthermore, the remedies available, as well as the court practice regarding immaterial damages, does not encourage victims to file a complaint, since there is little to gain from court proceedings. There are only a few cases publicised in the media where the victim successfully obtained compensation for damages.²⁰⁰ Among the problematic issues of implementation pointed out by the analysis is that the courts often prefer to dismiss or disregard the discrimination-related arguments of the parties involved and, instead, solve cases by referring to other provisions of which they have greater knowledge. Since there is no deeply rooted doctrine on how to identify discrimination, even in cases of direct discrimination the courts are applying the proportionality test (or similar) used by the Estonian Supreme Court when discussing violations of the Constitution. Although neither the Equal Treatment Act nor the Gender Equality Act explicitly permit seeking a 'reasonable cause' or an 'objectively grounded' justification for direct discrimination, the courts nonetheless use these terms as steps in their reasoning when assessing whether discrimination has taken place (for more details, see Section 2.4). In some cases, application of the burden of proof is also problematic, with the courts applying high thresholds before the burden shifts to the respondent and requiring victims to provide exhaustive evidence for their discrimination claim and dismissing the claims if the victim fails to do so (see also Section 6.3).
- The Gender Equality and Equal Treatment Commissioner, the equality body which receives the bulk of individual complaints of discrimination in Estonia, continues to be in a precarious position since there are regular discussions initiated by various politicians or policy makers over abolishing it as an independent government agency and giving its tasks to some other public body.
- In 2024, an analysis identified numerous regulatory challenges regarding the use of AI and preventing discrimination. The four key challenges identified were: the intersectional nature of algorithmic discrimination, the lack of transparency for ensuring effective enforcement in cases of algorithmic discrimination, the difficulty in codifying and measuring what constitutes algorithmic fairness, and insufficient risk

¹⁹⁹ Sepper, M.-L. (2024), *Soolise võrdõiguslikkuse seaduse ja võrdse kohtlemise seaduse rakendamine. Kohtute ja võrdõigusvoliniku praktika analüüs (Implementation of the Gender Equality Act and the Equal Treatment Act. Analysis of the practice of the courts and the Gender Equality Commissioner)*, Mõttekoda Praxis, available at: <https://www.praxis.ee/uploads/2025/01/SoVS%20ja%20V%C3%B5rdKS%20rakendamise%20anal%C3%B5C%C3%BCs.pdf>.

²⁰⁰ An overview of successful strategic litigation cases in which a victim received compensation can be found in the 2014 annual report of the Equality Commissioner, available at: <https://www.vollinik.ee/volinik-live-web-prd/s3fs-public/wp-content/uploads/2020/01/SVV-Aastaaruanne-2014.pdf>. In 2015, a strategic litigation case by the Equality Commissioner received a lot of attention in the Estonian media. It centred around a woman who was discriminated against on the ground of parental responsibilities when she wanted to return to work after parental leave. The Danske Bank settled the case in court and paid EUR 6 000. See 'Lapsepuhkuselt naasnud naine jäeti Danske Bankis tööta' (Woman returning from paternity leave was dismissed by Danske Bank), in *Eesti Päevaleht*, 14 May 2015, available at: <https://epl.delfi.ee/artikkel/71474983/lapsepuhkuselt-naasnud-naine-jaeti-danske-bankis-toota>.

management obligations in developing and operating algorithms.²⁰¹ The study established that many public sector algorithmic systems, which fall outside the scope of the EU AI Act, also pose risks concerning non-discrimination.

²⁰¹ Gender Equality and Equal Treatment Commissioner's Office of Estonia et al. (2024), *Legal analysis on non-discrimination regulation and regulatory gaps concerning algorithmic systems in Estonia and Lithuania*, 2024, available at: https://www.volinik.ee/volinik-live-web-prd/s3fs-public/2024-12/Equitech_Legal-Analysis_25.11.2024.pdf.

12. LATEST DEVELOPMENTS IN 2025

12.1 Legislative amendments

There have been no legislative amendments to the equality law in 2025.

12.2 Case law

Relevant discrimination ground(s): age

Name of the body: the Gender Equality and Equal Treatment Commissioner

Date of decision: not known

Name of the parties: the name of the applicant is not public, the public body answering the Commissioner's information requests was HARNO

Reference number: 1-3/4_2025

Link: <https://www.volinik.ee/volinik-live-web-prd/s3fs-public/2025-03/Voliniku-arvamus-seoses-vanuselise-diskrimineerimisega-keele-eksami-sooritamisel.pdf>

Brief summary:

The complaint concerned a limitation applicable to children in 7th grade, which meant they could only take a B1 Estonian language exam once a year, with children in 9th grade, and only if they had passed a pre-test. There are more options to take the language test in cases where the child applies for Estonian citizenship. A parent complained that this hinders the possibility of working during the summer holidays for these children, as some employers may require a certificate of language skills.

The Commissioner found that there is a legislative gap concerning minors who wish to take a language test for the purposes of working. These minors are at a disadvantage compared with adults who have the possibility to take the language test four times a year, and since there is no objectively justified aim for different treatment of minors, there is a risk of indirect discrimination on the ground of age. The Commissioner did not examine whether direct age discrimination had also taken place.

Relevant discrimination ground(s): language and nationality

Name of the body: the Gender Equality and Equal Treatment Commissioner

Date of decision: not known

Name of the parties: the name of the applicant is not public, the respondent is the city of Kohtla-Järve

Reference number:

Link: <https://www.volinik.ee/volinik-live-web-prd/s3fs-public/2025-03/Voliniku-arvamus-C-1-keelen%c3%b5udest-t%c3%b6%c3%b6kuulutuses.pdf>

Brief summary:

The city government of Kohtla-Järve published a job advertisement seeking a public relations officer, stipulating the requirement of Russian-language skills to C1 level. In the course of the Commissioner's investigation, the opinion of the Language Board was also requested. The Language Board stated that according to Article 52 of the Constitution, in a local government territory where the mother tongue of more than half the population is a language other than Estonian, the local government may use the language of the majority of the permanent residents as an internal working language. The internal working language will be changed after the local government makes an application to the government and the government issues a decision on the issue.

According to the Language Act, in local government areas where at least half the permanent residents belong to a national minority, everyone has the right to approach the local government authorities and receive from its agencies and officials responses in the language of the national minority, as well as in Estonian. In Kohtla-Järve, the Russian ethnic minority does not constitute half the population, so there is no decision by the government on this issue and thus no obligation on the local government officials to respond in Russian. Therefore, there is no need to require C1-level Russian-language skills;

for communication in Russian, B-level is sufficient. Furthermore, in Estonia, there is only one institution at which an exam in C1-level Russian can be taken, and the exams are not held regularly, owing to the lack of people wishing to sit such an exam. Moreover, a person who has studied Russian as a foreign language in an Estonian school will acquire only level B2 upon graduation.

The Commissioner took into account the legal reasoning of the Language Board and added that the C1-level language requirement suggests that only people who have studied Russian in Estonia at university level could fulfil the language requirement, thus excluding virtually all Estonians from this job. Considering the ethnic composition of the Kohtla-Järve population, the professional responsibilities of a public relations official and the principles of teaching foreign languages in the Estonian school system, the Commissioner found that the Russian-language skill-level requirement ought not to be higher than B2. A higher language requirement may discriminate indirectly on grounds of nationality and language.

ANNEX 1: TABLE OF INTERNATIONAL INSTRUMENTS

Country: Estonia
Date: 1 January 2026

Instrument	Date of signature	Date of ratification	Derogations/ reservations relevant to equality and non-discrimination	Right of individual petition accepted?	Can this instrument be directly relied upon in domestic courts by individuals?
European Convention on Human Rights (ECHR)	14 May 1993	16 April 1996	No	Yes	Yes
Protocol 12, ECHR	4 November 2000	No	N/A	N/A	N/A
Revised European Social Charter	4 May 1998	11 September 2000	No	collective complaints – No	Yes
International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights	(accession)	21 October 1991 (accession)	No	Yes	Yes
Framework Convention for the Protection of National Minorities	2 February 1995	6 January 1997	No; however, according to the Estonian declaration only Estonian citizens may be recognised as national minority members	N/A	Yes (in the case of self-executing norms)
International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights	(accession)	21 October 1991 (accession)	No	N/A	Yes
Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Racial Discrimination	(accession)	21 October 1991 (accession)	No	Yes	Yes

Instrument	Date of signature	Date of ratification	Derogations/ reservations relevant to equality and non-discrimination	Right of individual petition accepted?	Can this instrument be directly relied upon in domestic courts by individuals?
ILO Convention No. 111 on Discrimination	Irrelevant	8 June 2005	No	N/A	Yes
Convention on the Rights of the Child	(accession)	21 October 1991 (accession)	No	N/A	Yes
Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities	25 September 2007	30 May 2012	No	Yes	Yes

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