

# Estonia

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*Capital:* Tallinn  
*Population:* 1.3 million  
*GNI/capita, PPP:* US\$25,190

Source: The data above are drawn from the World Bank's *World Development Indicators 2015*.

## Nations in Transit Ratings and Averaged Scores

	2006	2007	2008	2009	2010	2011	2012	2013	2014	2015
Electoral Process	1.50	1.50	1.50	1.50	1.75	1.75	1.75	1.75	1.75	1.75
Civil Society	2.00	2.00	1.75	1.75	1.75	1.75	1.75	1.75	1.75	1.75
Independent Media	1.50	1.50	1.50	1.50	1.50	1.50	1.50	1.50	1.50	1.50
National Democratic Governance	2.25	2.25	2.25	2.25	2.25	2.25	2.25	2.25	2.25	2.25
Local Democratic Governance	2.50	2.50	2.50	2.50	2.50	2.50	2.50	2.50	2.50	2.50
Judicial Framework and Independence	1.50	1.50	1.50	1.50	1.50	1.50	1.50	1.50	1.50	1.50
Corruption	2.50	2.50	2.50	2.50	2.50	2.25	2.25	2.50	2.50	2.50
Democracy Score	1.96	1.96	1.93	1.93	1.96	1.93	1.93	1.96	1.96	1.96

NOTE: The ratings reflect the consensus of Freedom House, its academic advisers, and the author(s) of this report. The opinions expressed in this report are those of the author(s). The ratings are based on a scale of 1 to 7, with 1 representing the highest level of democratic progress and 7 the lowest. The Democracy Score is an average of ratings for the categories tracked in a given year.

# EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

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In early 2014, the Estonian ruling coalition, which consisted of the Reform Party (RP), Pro Patria, and Res Publica Union (PPRPU), split up. The Reform Party sought out a new partner, the Social Democrats (SD), and formed a coalition government. This partnership brought a welcome shake-up of the political status quo.

Taavi Rõivas, a minister in the previous Reform Party cabinet, was appointed prime minister to replace Andrus Ansip, who had been in power for nine years. Ansip ran for the European Parliament, got elected, and is currently Vice-President of European Commission, in charge of digital development.

Economic growth in Estonia has been slower than expected, due to the very different but serious woes of its main trading partners, Finland and Russia. Russia's food import blockade concerned Estonian exporters.

**National Democratic Governance.** A new cabinet formed in March 2014, after Prime Minister Andrus Ansip resigned to pursue a job in Brussels. The coalition partner of RP changed after PPRPU moved to opposition and the Social Democrats joined RP in the government. Following his appointment, new prime minister Taavi Rõivas made several changes to the cabinet. The new government has dealt with some fundamental issues, including national security, social reform, and the rights of sexual minorities. *Estonia's national democratic governance rating remains unchanged at 2.25.*

**Electoral Process.** Estonian politics became more open in 2014. Politicians who had split from established parties founded two new ones. The parliament adopted several amendments to the Political Parties Act, including a reduction in the number of members necessary to form a political party, a halving of the candidate deposit, and increased public funding to parties that fail to meet the parliamentary threshold. European Parliament elections took place in March, with RP winning the most votes. *Estonia's electoral process rating remains unchanged at 1.75.*

**Civil Society.** Estonia has many civil society organizations, but most Estonians do not become involved in political issues. Local community groups have become more active, initiating campaigns on neighborhood problems and urban planning. LGBT activists hailed the October adoption of the Civil Cohabitation Act, which provided legal recognition to same-sex partnerships in the country. In December, the government adopted an ethnic integration strategy, focusing on new immigrants. *Estonia's civil society rating remains unchanged at 1.75.*

**Independent Media.** Estonia's media landscape is diverse and includes national and local newspapers, magazines, radio stations, television broadcasters, and a growing number of online news sites. The case of an online portal, Delfi, which had to pay a fine for offensive comments posted on its website, was pending in front of the European Court of Human Rights (ECHR). In response to Russia's propaganda campaign, the government decided to allocate resources to local Russian-language television channels and agreed to set up a new station in 2015. *Estonia's rating for independent media remains unchanged at 1.50.*

**Local Democratic Governance.** Most local government districts are small and lack the capacity to meet the public service needs of constituents. Efforts to reform the sector stalled in 2014. The 2013 reform plan of Regional Affairs Minister Siim-Valmar Kiisler, which focused on the creation of "commuting centers" to reorganize local governments into more capable and equitable units, was discontinued in early 2014. The Rõivas government promised to come up with a new plan by early 2015. *Estonia's local democratic governance rating remains unchanged at 2.50.*

**Judicial Framework and Independence.** The government amended the penal code, specifying punishment for various offenses, and reducing the number of acts subject to criminal prosecution. The act introduced the notion of domestic violence and toughened sentences for the offense. Following a lengthy public debate on surveillance regulation, Estonia's chancellor of justice will have the power to audit law enforcement agencies' compliance with surveillance laws. The average duration of criminal, civil, and administrative proceedings dropped. *Estonia's judicial framework and independence rating remains unchanged at 1.50.*

**Corruption.** Estonia is one of the least corrupt countries in the European Union. Key anticorruption documents adopted in 2013 established a framework for tackling corruption and enhancing the accountability of the civil sector. In 2014, however, several scandals involving bribery and political influencing were brought to the public's attention. A recent analysis on lobbying practices conducted by Transparency International found need for self-regulation and greater transparency. *Estonia's corruption rating remains unchanged at 2.50.*

**Outlook for 2015.** Estonia will hold parliamentary elections in March 2015. Political parties have recruited fresh faces to convey a message that political culture has changed. It is uncertain whether the RP–SD coalition will last beyond March 2015 and whether recently established political parties meet the election threshold and enter parliament. As the crisis in Ukraine continues, national security will be the main topic of the campaign. The economic problems of the Baltic Sea region will also feature as an issue.

# MAIN REPORT

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## National Democratic Governance

2006	2007	2008	2009	2010	2011	2012	2013	2014	2015
2.25	2.25	2.25	2.25	2.25	2.25	2.25	2.25	2.25	2.25

During the year, Estonia's political class reshuffled its coalition partners, and political parties prepared for parliamentary elections scheduled for March 2015. On 4 March 2014, Prime Minister Andrus Ansip of the Reform Party (RP) resigned from office, announcing his candidacy for the upcoming European Parliament (EP) elections.<sup>1</sup> His departure ended the coalition government of RP and the Pro Patria-Res Publica Union (PPRPU). The news did not come as complete surprise, however, since Ansip had announced a year earlier that he would not run for the post again.

Siim Kallas, former RP leader and seasoned heavy-weight in Estonian politics, expressed his readiness to form a new government with the Social Democrats (SD) but withdrew after journalists criticized his work as president of Estonia's central bank and characterized his candidacy as a cosmetic reshuffle.<sup>2</sup> After considering other candidates, RP nominated a young politician, Taavi Rõivas, who was serving as minister of social affairs at the time. President Toomas Hendrik Ilves appointed Rõivas on 26 March, and RP and SD formed a new government with 52 out of 101 seats in the parliament.

Rõivas made several changes to the composition of the cabinet. He abolished the Ministry of Regional Affairs and created separate administrative fields for the Minister of Economic Affairs and Infrastructure and Minister of Foreign Trade and Entrepreneurship. He also split the portfolio of the Minister of Social Affairs into the Minister of Social Protection and the Minister of Health and Work Affairs to manage the execution of political priorities more easily.

Quite a few ministers have changed during the year. In October, Finance Minister Jürgen Ligi was accused of using inappropriate language on social media. Ligi had commented on the ethnicity of Education Minister Jevgeni Ossinovski, the first Estonian minister with a Russian background since independence.<sup>3</sup> Ligi apologized and under intense public pressure, resigned in October.<sup>4</sup> Following the decision of Minister for Foreign Affairs Urmas Paet to run for a seat in the European Parliament, Keit Pentus-Rosimannus, former minister for the environment, replaced him in November, while Mati Raidma, a deputy with no government experience, took on the environment portfolio. Rõivas's government is extraordinary since it has the highest percentage of women (43 percent) in the cabinet since Estonia became an independent state.<sup>5</sup>

In contrast to Ansip's government, which had been criticized for being unresponsive to public needs, the RD–SD coalition has paid in its communication more attention to the quality of democracy. There was a separate chapter on democracy and engagement in the coalition agreement, and Rõivas has emphasized

transparency, flexibility, and cooperation between government and citizens as important values.<sup>6</sup> Partly because of this, trust toward the government has increased. At the end of 2013, 38 percent of Estonians said that they tended to trust the government and 58 percent said they did not. By the end of 2014, the corresponding figures were respectively 51 percent and 32 percent.<sup>7</sup>

The era of Rõivas, the youngest government leader in the European Union, began a “generational change” in Estonian politics that has helped shake up what Estonians saw as a stagnant political landscape. Persons without political experience have entered national politics, and members of the old guard have established new political parties.<sup>8</sup> One former RP member, Kristiina Ojuland, founded Party of People’s Unity (PPU). A former PPRPU member, Andres Herkel, founded the Estonian Free Party (EFP).

The struggle for power positions has been observable within and among parties. In October, Center Party (CP) board member Jüri Ratas nominated Vice Chairman Kadri Simson for the leadership of CP instead of its long-term chairman, Edgar Savisaar. His nomination, which would have marked a new era for CP and Estonian politics, did not find enough support. At the end of October, Erik-Niiles Kross, one of the leading figures of PPRPU, and Yoko Alender, a well-known public figure in Estonia, quit PPRPU and joined RP.

From the beginning, the coalition faced many sensitive issues. The conflict in Ukraine and Estonia’s relationship with Russia were on the agenda throughout the year. Journalists and civil society organizations claimed that the government was mishandling reform of the disability system, while organizations representing people with special needs called for more dialogue. The Cohabitation Act and the right to register a partnership between persons of the same sex brought people out to the streets and provoked intense debate in the parliament.<sup>9</sup> Both bills passed, despite significant opposition within the parliament and among some civil society organizations.

During 2013 and in the first half of 2014, economic growth was slower than expected since Estonia’s main trading partners, Finland and Russia, have both been struggling with economic woes.<sup>10</sup> However, the country’s competitiveness has improved, and private consumption and average gross income have increased.<sup>11</sup> According to experts, the government could do more to foster the country’s economic and social development, including boosting the oil shale sector, reforming social security and education, and restructuring municipal administration.<sup>12</sup>

### Electoral Process

2006	2007	2008	2009	2010	2011	2012	2013	2014	2015
1.50	1.50	1.50	1.50	1.75	1.75	1.75	1.75	1.75	1.75

The reshuffle of the governing coalition, the new prime minister, and the approaching 2015 parliamentary elections all breathed life into Estonian politics. Two new parties were founded during the year. The EFP, founded in September, declared that their aim is to facilitate overall political participation by being more

responsive to public needs and public opinion. They also plan to fight political corruption, amend the rules on party financing, and level the playing field in other ways for parties, electoral alliances, and individual candidates. The other new party, PPU, was founded by Kristiina Ojuland, who had been expelled from RP in 2013 for alleged identity theft during the party's internal election. She decided to establish a party which would concentrate on "human centered politics," with the goal of building a strong civil society and engaging people in the political process. Among other things, the party lobbies for the introduction of direct elections for the president of Estonia. These new parties may enrich public debate before the 2015 parliamentary elections, but their chances of passing the threshold to enter parliament are still rather small.<sup>13</sup>

The resignation of Ansip triggered maneuvering in national politics ahead of the March EP elections. Despite this, RP won 24.3 percent of the votes and two out of six seats allocated for the country, while CP (22.4 percent), PPRPU (13.9 percent), and SD (13.6 percent) each won one seat. The remaining seat went to Indrek Tarand, a former civil servant and unaffiliated candidate. The turnout, which was low throughout the European Union (EU), fell to 37 percent, compared to 44 percent in 2009, and remained below the EU average of 43 percent.<sup>14</sup> Ansip got his seat in the EP and in October became Digital Single Market Commissioner and vice-president of the European Commission.

In early 2014, the parliament approved several amendments to the Political Parties Act originating from the People's Assembly, a crowdsourcing initiative that pools ideas to make the democratic system more transparent and effective in Estonia. The amendments increased electoral competitiveness and made political activity more transparent. They refined the rules on public financing of political parties, making them stricter and requiring more detail, and on oversight of political party budgets.<sup>15</sup> The changes also clarified rules on political donations: they specified who can make a donation, the data needed to be submitted about the donors, and potential sanctions in case of forbidden donations.

In January, the parliament lowered the minimum number of members required to establish a new party from 1,000 to 500 to help boost competition. Both new parties, EFP and PPU, have approximately 600 members. To encourage smaller parties, the parliament additionally reduced the candidate deposit required to participate in elections and increased the funding for parties that fail to meet the election threshold.

Several stakeholders complained that the amendments do not go far enough and were cosmetic, designed to assuage public demand for a more open political system. Although, the changes constitute a step toward increased diversity of political parties, the barriers to competitiveness, transparency, and accountability remain a problem.<sup>16</sup> The proposal to lower the threshold for parliamentary representation, currently at 5 percent, did not find enough support among parliamentarians. Several other proposals, such as limitations on campaign finance and forbidding parliamentarians from sitting on the boards of state-owned companies, were not approved or were phrased in a way that does not change the current legislation.

The new government led by Rõivas has declared its commitment to a more competitive and transparent electoral process. It has promised to balance the requirements for obtaining district mandates in elections between political parties and independent candidates. Rõivas's government also promised to regulate election advertising more strictly and to abolish deposits for political parties who participate in parliamentary elections for the first time. Deputies from SD have submitted several proposals in this regard, but the drafts were pending in the parliament at year's end.

The four big parties were vying for votes ahead of the March 2015 parliamentary elections. The ruling party, RP, whose popularity fell during the sharp economic slowdown in 2013, gained some votes as the economy started to recover in early 2014. It polled at 32 percent in mid-December.<sup>17</sup> The CP and SD were polling head-to-head at 23 and 21 percent and PPRPU had 16 percent support at year's end.<sup>18</sup>

#### Civil Society

2006	2007	2008	2009	2010	2011	2012	2013	2014	2015
2.00	2.00	1.75	1.75	1.75	1.75	1.75	1.75	1.75	1.75

A number of established organizations support civil society activity in Estonia. These include the National Foundation of Civil Society, which distributes public funding among civic sector organizations, and the Open Estonia Foundation, which acts as an administrator for European Economic Area (EEA) capacity-building funds. In the past two years, the National Foundation of Civil Society doubled its resources to reach €2.5 million per year. The addition came after the organization took on the funding of small-scale local community initiatives, such as street festivals and cultural heritage preservation campaigns. The Network of Estonian Nonprofit Organizations (NENO), an umbrella association with over 100 member organizations, also provides support to nongovernmental organizations (NGOs). It works to increase public awareness of nongovernmental activities, advocates for public benefit organizations, and facilitates relations between the public and business sectors.

Close to 31,000 NGOs and foundations are registered in the country, with approximately one third of them housing associations. According to the United States Agency for International Development (USAID), Estonian civil society organizations enjoy a favorable legislative environment and infrastructure, but financial sustainability remains an issue for them.<sup>19</sup>

Two-thirds of Estonians polled in 2013 expressed a belief that NGOs influence political decision-making.<sup>20</sup> At the same time, less than one-fifth of Estonian residents work or volunteer for an NGO. Between elections, political activism remains low. Civil society activism primarily focuses on local and neighborhood issues, culture and heritage, sports and recreation, environmental protection, and human rights.

Volunteerism is becoming more popular, albeit from a low base. In 2013, 29 percent of Estonian residents were involved in voluntary activities, such as community work, culture, and sports events.<sup>21</sup> For six years in a row, the annual community activities day “Let’s Do It!” has taken place in 1,754 locations all over country, with over 45,000 participants.<sup>22</sup> In August 2014, around 4,000 people gathered for the second Opinion Festival, similar to Almedalen Week in Sweden, held in the Estonian town of Paide.<sup>23</sup> It is an open forum for politicians, journalists, lobbyists, and the public to gather informally and discuss current issues in Estonia.

In 2014, a debate about the legal rights of same-sex couples divided Estonian society. The parliament proposed to grant gender-neutral rights for partners in cohabitation in October. Vocal conservative and religious lobby groups presented arguments against the motion, and homophobic comments spread among the public. Activists on both sides of the argument organized street protests and social media campaigns. Polling agencies found that the two camps divided along lines of age and native language, Estonian or Russian, rather than education, religious beliefs, or income.<sup>24</sup> Younger Estonian speakers were in favor of same-sex partnerships, while older and more conservative Estonians and Russian speakers were against them. The parliament passed the Civil Cohabitation Act on 9 October; but the vote was close, with 40 deputies voting for and 38 against it. The new law will come into force in 2016 and gives unmarried couples similar rights to married ones with regard to inheritance and property. Human rights activists hailed the result, stating that it made Estonia a more tolerant and inclusive society.<sup>25</sup>

In the fall, the Federation of Estonian Chemical Industries, a single-issue lobby group, organized an expensive media campaign to protest a planned raise in environmental taxes. The campaign exaggerated the potential impact of a tax raise and used threats in its messaging, forecasting economic downfall and social unrest in Ida-Viru county, which is mostly Russian-speaking. The minister of environment refuted the claims, but the details of legal changes were not clear at year’s end.<sup>26</sup>

Estonia’s new ethnic integration strategy for the 2014–2020 period was finally adopted in December, following a drawn-out preparatory phase. The new education minister, Jevgeni Ossinovski, vetoed the strategy after his appointment, claiming that it did not support the integration of Russian speakers and was too focused on receiving EU funding. The strategy was updated following his veto, and programs were added to help new immigrants.

#### Independent Media

2006	2007	2008	2009	2010	2011	2012	2013	2014	2015
1.50	1.50	1.50	1.50	1.50	1.50	1.50	1.50	1.50	1.50

Estonia’s media outlets express a variety of views, without government interference. The market is diverse but calcified due to cross-ownership of media outlets and barriers to entry.<sup>27</sup>



The Estonian-language print media landscape includes four major national dailies. Of these, *Postimees* has the largest circulation of 50,000 print copies. *Postimees's* Russian-language edition has a circulation of 6,700 print copies. The other dailies are *Õhtuleht*, *Eesti Päevaleht*, and *Äripäev*. There are three popular weekly newspapers—*Maaleht*, *Eesti Ekspress*, and *Den za Dnjom* (in Russian)—each of which has a circulation of between 10,000 and 50,000 copies.<sup>28</sup> The number of local Russian-language outlets remains limited. Estonia's over 300,000 Russian-speaking residents usually access information and entertainment from media, especially television, broadcast from the Russian Federation.

Estonia has among the world's highest levels of internet penetration, with 80 percent of the population active online.<sup>29</sup> Readership of online news sites, which are predominantly run by established media outlets, is growing. However, Estonians still prefer to get their news and entertainment from radio and especially television.<sup>30</sup> Besides the Public Broadcasting Corporation, there are two primary national commercial television stations, Kanal2 and TV3. There are also a large number of private radio stations and cable and satellite services. Commercial broadcasters have been struggling financially even as cable operators continue to earn profits.

Radio is very popular in Estonia. According to Eurobarometer, 66 percent listen to radio every day or almost every day. The most popular channel is Vikerraadio of Public Broadcasting Corporation, with a stable audience share of 30 percent.<sup>31</sup> Russkoje Radio has the highest share of audience among Russian speakers, at 14.6 percent of its Russian-speaking target population.<sup>32</sup>

Dozens of regional and local newspapers populate the Estonian media landscape. Tallinn City government has its own taxpayer-funded TV channel and issues newspaper-like bulletins that are disseminated free-of-charge. Municipal channels are staffed by civil servants who are not subject to a journalistic code of ethics. However, Tallinn TV joined the Press Council in July 2014, after Prime Minister Rõivas set it as a prerequisite for participating in government press briefings. The council is a self-regulatory body that handles complaints against media outlets. The Estonian Newspaper Association works to raise awareness about municipally owned media and the need for their self-regulation.<sup>33</sup>

Hate speech and disparaging commenting on the internet are ongoing problems. Survey data indicates that the number of people who write online comments on news articles is down by one-third from 2013. The biggest drop is among the youngest group, those 35 and under, who seem to be leaving news channels operated by media outlets for other social media. The research further disclosed some signs that the commenting culture has become too sensationalist and crude.<sup>34</sup> Online outlets have not done enough to bring more accountability to the process, as the comments section of most papers remains unmoderated.

In 2013, the European Court of Human Rights (ECHR) stated in the case of *Delfi AS v. Estonia* that holding an online portal liable for comments was a justifiable restriction on freedom of expression given the offensive nature of the comments in the case, the portal's profitable gain for publicizing them, and the fact that the Estonian court enforced a reasonable fine for damages. Previously, the

Estonian Supreme Court upheld a decision of the district court, which had ordered Delfi to pay €320 in damages.<sup>35</sup> In January 2014, dozens of media and technology companies and NGOs including Google, the New York Times, Bloomberg, and Greenpeace, called for the ECHR to review its 2013 decision. The case was pending in front of the court's Grand Chamber at year's end.

Russia's annexing of Crimea and the situation in eastern Ukraine has prompted the Estonian government to float the idea of creating a state-run Russian-language media outlet. Several people, including Maksim Rogalski, the anchor of the Russian-language evening news program and candidate for the 2015 elections, proposed blocking access to TV channels broadcast from Russia.<sup>36</sup> Since these channels can be viewed via satellite or over the internet, it is impossible for the government to create a watertight embargo.

Other proposals included creating a pan-Baltic or even pan-European Russian-language channel. Irina Kozõrenko, the head of the Baltic Media Alliance Estonia, suggested allocating more funds to Pervyi Baltiiski Kanal (PBK), which is already popular among local Russian communities in the Baltics.<sup>37</sup> PBK has been accused of disseminating Kremlin propaganda, and Latvian authorities fined the channel for biased coverage in October. Sputnik, a Russian radio station and website launched in 2014, aims to broadcast in 30 languages, including in Estonian, however, Estonia was yet to grant it a license at year's end.<sup>38</sup>

In May, a committee on Russian-language media, empowered by the Ministry of Culture, recommended that a new Russian-language channel should be set up and that existing channels should receive more money.<sup>39</sup> The program will launch in late 2015 as part of the public broadcaster, offering 5–6 hours of original programming per day.

#### Local Democratic Governance

2006	2007	2008	2009	2010	2011	2012	2013	2014	2015
2.50	2.50	2.50	2.50	2.50	2.50	2.50	2.50	2.50	2.50

The authors of Estonia's municipal government system strived to give local government maximal autonomy as a guarantee against the intervention of central authorities in reaction to the central planning and authoritarianism of the communist era.<sup>40</sup> Despite the fact that the leading principles of the institutional organization of local governments have remained the same, today the financial independence of local administrations is small. The share of local taxes in local government budgets is around 1 percent, representing a centralized system.

At the end of 2014, Estonia had 213 municipalities, 30 cities, and 183 parishes—for a country of only 1.3 million people.<sup>41</sup> Many local government units are small and lack the capacity to meet the service needs of constituents. Working-age citizens continue to migrate from small communities to cities or to emigrate in search of job opportunities and better social services.<sup>42</sup>

In small Estonian communities, critics complain about the “oligarchization” of local life: the blending of public and private interests that occurs where there is a limited number of business, political, and civil sector actors. An estimated 75 percent of all council members in Estonian local governments are shareholders or supervisory board members of private businesses.<sup>43</sup> The percentage of Estonians who expressed trust toward local public authorities was 55 percent in 2014 (which was above the EU average of 44 percent).<sup>44</sup>

Past mergers of municipalities have decreased governance and administrative costs, in some cases by 50 percent.<sup>45</sup> Despite this, the government policy has been to facilitate only voluntary mergers, rather than planning a broader amalgamation. Previous governments have framed this hands-off approach as an attempt to respect the autonomy of local municipalities.

Twenty years of administrative reform proposals by individual politicians have failed due to lack of political support. In August 2013, Regional Affairs Minister Siim-Valmar Kiisler (PPRPU) proposed to offset the marginalization of smaller municipalities through the creation of 18 “commuting centers,” where people from surrounding regions could come to work, study, and consume various social services. Municipalities would be required to choose their residents’ designated commuting centers within a certain timeframe. Over time, these centers and their service areas would define the borders of local government units in Estonia. Kiisler forecasted 2017 as the target date for these units’ first local elections. A number of ministers opposed the Kiisler plan and criticized its focus on territorial issues, claiming that municipal mergers do not solve the capacity gap.

While coalition partners RP and SD agreed that administrative reform is inescapable, the Kiisler plan did not make it to the new government’s agenda. After PPRPU moved to opposition, it submitted a bill in April to push through the commuting centers plan. The bill, however, did not find enough support in the parliament. The government was planning to push through its own local government reform plan in early 2015.<sup>46</sup>

Experts have repeatedly indicated problems relating to the unfinished administrative reform. In 2014, the Auditor General stated that regional development and local government are of great importance to the functioning of the state and society.<sup>47</sup> He criticized that the reforms had been sidelined due to a lack of political consensus but praised the plan on the commuting centers for stimulating public debate on the issue of municipal governance.

#### Judicial Framework and Independence

2006	2007	2008	2009	2010	2011	2012	2013	2014	2015
1.50	1.50	1.50	1.50	1.50	1.50	1.50	1.50	1.50	1.50

Estonia’s judicial system is not subject to political influence. The country ranks 19<sup>th</sup> among 144 countries in perceived judicial independence according to the World Economic Forum’s Global Competitiveness Report.<sup>48</sup> The judiciary defends

fundamental political, civil, and human rights. In 2014, Estonia continued to increase judicial efficiency and improve the protection of fundamental rights.

In June, the parliament adopted amendments to the penal code, completing a major reform that began in 2011. The bill introduced hundreds of changes to the penal code and amended 128 other acts. The new code, which enters into force in January 2015, eliminates overlaps in legislation, specifies punishment for various offenses, and reduces the number of acts subject to criminal—rather than civil or administrative—prosecution. Additionally, the reform introduced the notion of domestic violence and toughened sentences for the offense.<sup>49</sup>

In November, the cabinet drafted amendments to the Code of Criminal Procedure. The bill seeks to shorten the maximum period of pretrial detention of suspects from 6 months to 4 months and strengthen judicial oversight of people in custody and police searches. Another goal of the bill is to accelerate the preliminary phase of investigations and speed up legal processes.<sup>50</sup>

Surveillance featured prominently in discussions about judicial reform in 2013. Some politicians were concerned that police and investigators too frequently employ covert surveillance. They argued that there is an imbalance—crime levels are going down, but surveillance measures impinging on basic rights are increasing.<sup>51</sup> The Supreme Court concluded in a 2013 analysis that there is no massive and uncontrollable surveillance in Estonia. Problems, however, include the lack of accuracy of surveillance statistics and the need for police guidelines.<sup>52</sup> In response, the government supported an October 2014 bill that gives the chancellor of justice oversight over security agencies to check whether they follow the rules of surveillance. In addition, the Justice Ministry proposed amendments to the Criminal Procedure Act that would introduce control mechanisms over informing people about surveillance activities authorized before 2013. Efficient control systems were in place with respect to criminal cases starting in 2013.<sup>53</sup>

The Justice Ministry continues to reform the court system to improve its efficiency and effectiveness without affecting the fundamental structure of the system. The ministry is streamlining processes via technological improvements to databases and registers, and hiring nonjudicial staff to aid judges. The scope of the reform will likely expand. The ministry imported the best practices of a pilot project in one court to several other court institutions in 2014.<sup>54</sup>

The average duration of legal proceedings in criminal, civil, and administrative cases has fallen in recent years. The 2014 EU Justice Scoreboard ranked Estonia second among 28 EU members states where speed of resolving civil, commercial, and administrative cases is concerned; sixth with regard to litigious civil and commercial cases; and first when it comes to resolving administrative cases.<sup>55</sup> According to the most recent data from 2013, the average time for proceedings diminished by 15 percent in civil cases; 11 percent in general procedure cases; and 16 percent in administrative cases, compared to 2012. The average time needed to resolve misdemeanor cases increased by 5 percent.<sup>56</sup>

Estonia's prison system has long suffered from overcrowding. As of January 2014, amendments to the Internal Rules of Prison entered into force, guaranteeing each

prisoner at least 3 square meters of floor space in a cell, in line with a European Court of Human Rights ruling.<sup>57</sup> This number is still smaller than the 4 square meters recommended by European Committee for the Prevention of Torture and Inhuman or Degrading Treatment or Punishment. The Estonian government has promised to provide minimum floor space of 4 square meters in 2017, once a new Tallinn prison is completed. Reducing the number of inmates is a goal of the Justice Ministry. The number of prisoners fell by 8 percent in 2013 and 4 percent in 2014.<sup>58</sup>

The new coalition, which took office in March 2014, declared its intention to continue ongoing reforms that expedite judicial proceedings. In addition to tackling domestic violence, the government promised to enhance the rights of ethnic minorities and those without citizenship, and provide more legal protection to disabled people and the elderly.<sup>59</sup> In December, Minister of Justice Andres Anvelt signed the Council of Europe convention on preventing and combating violence against women and domestic violence. Additionally, the Ministry of Justice was preparing a victim support directive at year's end.

### Corruption

2006	2007	2008	2009	2010	2011	2012	2013	2014	2015
2.50	2.50	2.50	2.50	2.50	2.25	2.25	2.50	2.50	2.50

Estonia ranks well in all global corruption indexes and is considered one of the least corrupt countries in the EU. However, over the past two years, there have been allegations that both the RP and the CP were guilty of money laundering. Estonians consider political parties the most corrupt of all institutions, followed by businesses and public officials, according to Transparency International's 2013 Corruption Barometer.<sup>60</sup>

In 2014, several cases of corruption were brought to the public's attention. In July, a court convicted two former ministers, several businessmen, and a former director of Estonia's public land management agency, involved in a rigged land swap. The court ruled that the politicians had allowed the businessmen to trade lower-value state land for valuable countryside properties in exchange for bribes. One of the people convicted was Ester Tuiksoo, a Center Party deputy who had served as agriculture minister from 2004 to 2007. She gave up her seat in parliament. Villu Reiljan, who served as environment minister from 2003 to 2006 was also found guilty, and sentenced to almost six years in prison.

In April, newly appointed foreign trade minister Anne Sulling restructured the supervisory board of Enterprise Estonia, a government agency that promotes trade and entrepreneurship, and disburses EU structural funds. The move aimed to address a glaring conflict of interest problem: 5 out of 11 board members of Enterprise Estonia were owners or managers of companies that received grants and loans from the agency. In June, the police imprisoned five intelligence service members and the prosecutor charged them with corruption and embezzling hundreds of thousands of euros via state procurement.

Neinar Seli, the president of the Estonian Olympic Committee and well-known Reform Party supporter, was facing charges of corruption and conflict of interest at year's end. Representing the supervisory board of Tallinn Port, he had voted in favor of granting €250,000 to the Olympic Committee.

In May, based on a request from the parliament's Political Party Funding Oversight Committee, the Prosecutor's Office launched a criminal investigation into the use of the Tallinn city budget to finance Center Party campaign advertising ahead of the 2013 municipal elections. The committee must determine whether the ads were of a political nature, which would make them an illegal donation. The Anti-Corruption Committee of the parliament has discussed further legal steps to prevent improper use of public funds, mostly regarding political advertising.

In 2013, the government adopted a comprehensive Anticorruption Strategy for 2014–2020.<sup>61</sup> Information on anticorruption measures is now accessible to both Estonian and Russian speakers, and the main activities in the government strategy have been made available online. Additionally, employees at the Estonia chapter of Transparency International have agreed to provide trainings to journalists and editors of Russian-language media outlets.

Amendments to the Political Parties Act, which gained political support following a 2012 money laundering scandal and subsequent civic deliberation process, established stricter punishments for accepting prohibited donations and extended the authority of the Political Party Funding Oversight Committee. The law prohibits political parties from accepting cash donations that exceed €1,200 per person per year.

The revised Civil Service Act, which came into force in 2013, aims to increase transparency in the public sector by creating a clearer and narrower definition of a public servant. The act outlines rules to make hiring and compensation of public servants competitive and transparent. The government now publishes the salaries of all civil servants online, and all civil servants are subject to financial disclosure. Previously, only high-level civil servants or those involved in public procurement had to disclose their personal finances.

In May 2014, the government launched an electronic register for declarations of economic interests. Public officials submit their declarations to this register, which then crosschecks the declarations with digital tax records. Close to 6,800 officials must present annual declarations and 96 percent of them fulfilled this obligation in 2014. Declarations are missing mostly from elected local council members. The register has become a tool that enhances transparency, as it shines light on potential conflicts of interest and works as a preventive anticorruption measure.

The Ministry of Finance is responsible for collecting and publishing financial data, based on accounting reports regularly submitted by government agencies and municipalities. The ministry makes the financial information of all municipalities available online. The interactive data portal presents municipal financial data since 2004 and has become a tool for the public. It is also used by the State Auditing Office and law enforcement agencies to monitor public spending.<sup>62</sup>

Lobbying practices are unregulated and not transparent in Estonia according to Transparency International. Other deficits include a lack of oversight in the parliament and lack of internal party democracy.<sup>63</sup> Transparency International suggested that lobbyists create self-regulatory standards.

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