

HUMAN RIGHTS COUNCIL  
52nd SESSION OF THE UPR WORKING GROUP  
Review of Estonia  
5 May 2026

**Opening statement on Universal Periodic Review of Human Rights by Jonatan Vsevirov,  
Secretary General of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs**

Mr Vice-President, Excellencies, distinguished delegates,

It is an honour and a privilege to address the UN Human Rights Council Working Group on the Universal Periodic Review as the Head of Delegation and to present the progress on human rights since our last review.

Let me begin by reiterating Estonia's strong commitment to the international human rights system, international law, and the rules-based international order. Estonia is a strong supporter of the work of the Human Rights Council. We welcome that our fourth UPR review coincides with our second Human Rights Council membership. As a member, Estonia recognizes a special obligation to uphold the highest standards in the promotion and protection of human rights. Our current membership of the Council also demonstrates the confidence placed in us by the international community.

Estonia is a well-functioning democracy characterised by open and constructive public debate. Free expression of differing or conflicting views is essential in any democratic society and is well safeguarded in Estonia. I am particularly proud of the fact that Estonia ranks at the very top of independently compiled global indexes that measure media freedom, Internet freedom, democracy, economic freedoms, rule of law and other such critical areas vital for the protection of human rights.

Yet no country is ever perfect, and the advancing of human rights is an ongoing process - one that requires continuous improvement, openness to scrutiny, and collective responsibility among all national stakeholders, with the support of our partners. That is why we strongly value the Universal Periodic Review process, which provides us with an opportunity for introspection and serves as a vital mechanism for the continuous improvement of human rights in practice.

We take this process seriously.

Mr. Vice-President,

Let me say a few words about our preparations and process. The national report was prepared with contributions from all relevant ministries, the National Human Rights Institution and civil society stakeholders. These inputs were very helpful. We are grateful for every stakeholder's engagement and contributions.

I am now pleased to present an update on our progress.

Since our last review in May 2021, Estonia has accepted over 75% of all recommendations made (208), the Government has pursued sustained efforts to implement those commitments through policy reforms, strengthened coordination, and enhanced stakeholder engagement.

To update the Working Group on our position with respect to all 274 recommendations, Estonia submitted a Mid-Term Report in 2024.

By now, I am happy to announce that we've made significant progress and the majority of accepted recommendations have been effectively translated into national law and policies. Work on partially implemented recommendations will continue.

Mr. Vice-President,

I look forward to hearing feedback and recommendations shortly, but I would first like to start highlighting a number of concrete developments from the last few years, including responding to some of the Advance Questions. The remaining questions will be addressed by colleagues when presenting their respective areas of responsibility.

We received recommendations regarding the continued independence of our National Human Rights Institution with the aim of ensuring its highest accreditation status. I am pleased to report that the Chancellor of Justice, as Estonia's National Human Rights Institution, has regained its 'A' status accreditation under the UN Paris Principles, confirming its continued independence and effectiveness in protecting and promoting human rights.

Through amendments to the State Budget Act, we have reinforced the independence of constitutional institutions by providing parliamentary oversight of their financing.

Recommendations to amend the Family Law have been implemented. After amending the law, Estonia now recognizes marriage equality and has joined the growing number of countries where same-sex couples have an equal right to marriage, marking an important step towards equality.

Recommendations to ensure equal access for children of diverse linguistic and ethnic backgrounds to education and employment are in the process of implementation. Most importantly, we are in the process of an education reform that will ensure that all children, regardless of their mother tongue, have access to Estonia's internationally recognized, high-quality education, equal opportunities, and thus better access to suitable employment in the future.

Recommendations were made to reduce the gender pay gap. Gender equality is at the core of Estonian identity, society and policy. I am pleased to report significant progress in reducing the gender pay gap, which in 2025 was at its lowest level ever. This reduction has been supported by education and retraining programmes, including in the fields of technology and IT, focusing in particular on opportunities for girls. We are proud of our achievements in this area, but at the same time acknowledge that achieving true gender equality requires continuous effort and improvement. This, I assure you, continues to be the Government's goal. My colleagues will provide further details later.

Mr. Vice-President,

Estonia has ratified the core international and regional human rights treaties and consistently submits reports on their implementation.

Since our previous dialogue, we have taken forward several recommendations related to international human rights instruments. I am pleased to note that we have acceded to four additional key international human rights instruments.

We ratified the ILO Convention No. 190 on Violence and Harassment.

We acceded to the Optional Protocol to the Convention on the Rights of the Child on a communications procedure and to the Optional Protocol to the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women.

We acceded to the International Convention for the Protection of All Persons from Enforced Disappearance in 2026.

We ratified all amendments to the Rome Statute of the International Criminal Court. We have also ratified 2 important accountability instruments of the Council of Europe: the Enlarged Partial Agreement on the Special Tribunal for the Crime of Aggression and the Convention establishing the International Claims Commission for Ukraine.

While maintaining our strong commitment to international humanitarian and human rights law, in 2025 Estonia decided to withdraw from the Convention on the Prohibition of the Use, Stockpiling, Production and Transfer of Anti-Personnel Mines and on their Destruction, commonly known as the Ottawa Convention. This decision was taken after serious and thorough consideration. It reflects the changing security landscape in Europe and the Baltic Sea region which has significantly deteriorated since the Russian Federation's full-scale war of aggression against Ukraine. Our decision on the Ottawa Convention should not be seen as a yes to land mines, but no to unilateral disarmament, which in light of Russia's ongoing aggression and lacking reciprocity is unfortunately no longer possible.

For Estonia, and considering our historical experience, security and human rights are intimately linked. Having been occupied by a foreign totalitarian power and deprived of the most basic of rights on our own land, we understand that the preservation of freedom for Estonia is a prerequisite for the development of freedoms inside Estonia. We are convinced that advancing security has to take place within the boundaries of international law. Furthermore, we believe that progress on human rights is dependent upon a functioning international order, which is why Estonia will continue to advance multilateralism, accountability and equal respect for human rights both internationally and at home.

Mr. Vice-President,

Let me now turn to some advance questions submitted by Belgium, Costa Rica, Portugal, and the UK.

Regarding the advance question by the UK, I would like to reaffirm that Estonia is fully committed to protecting and promoting freedom of religion or belief. The right to freedom of religion or belief, including the right to choose whether to follow a religion, and which religion to practice, is a fundamental value of our democracy, protected by the Estonian Constitution and guaranteed by law, in line with international human rights law. The legal measures under consideration in our system would not restrict worship, limit the religious practice, nor restrict the *forum internum*.

Regarding Belgium's advance questions on the ratification of international instruments, we believe our domestic law to be sufficient, but continue to analyse the matter.

Regarding the national mechanism for coordinating the implementation of UPR recommendations – the question by Portugal –, Estonia places particular emphasis on ensuring that implementation, reporting, and follow-up are addressed in a coherent and coordinated manner across all relevant authorities. Rather than establishing a stand-alone mechanism, we have chosen an integrated approach, implemented through the country's overall strategic planning framework in line with the competences of the relevant ministries. For a small state such as Estonia, the existing institutional framework has proven effective, enabling close inter-agency cooperation and streamlined communication.

As regards the progress in the national, regional or international implementation of the human right to a clean, healthy and sustainable environment – questions by Costa Rica –, Estonia is consistently ranked among the top countries in the world for clean air, and is one of the few

countries meeting WHO standards. Furthermore, Estonia has played a leading role in global environmental initiatives, having initiated World Cleanup Day in 2008. It has since evolved into a global movement and is now recognised as an international day by the United Nations.

Estonian food is recognized for its high safety standards, with a strong focus on organic farming and sustainability. Also, Estonia has made significant progress in ensuring access to safe drinking water and sanitation, with over 90% of the population connected to public water and sewage systems. The country also maintains very high water quality standards, with about 99.4% of public water supply consumers receiving compliant drinking water.

Mr. Vice-President,

The global human rights landscape is facing significant challenges where disinformation and information manipulation – accelerated by AI and synthetic media – represent systemic threats to democratic processes, public health, and national security in 2026. This development requires sustained efforts to uphold human rights. This remains one of the key priorities for Estonia.

In closing, I would like to thank the members of the Working Group and look forward to our dialogue with all States. We will lend an attentive ear to all recommendations and we will attempt to respond to issues raised to the extent possible in the time available.

My delegation stands ready for the interactive dialogue.

Thank you.