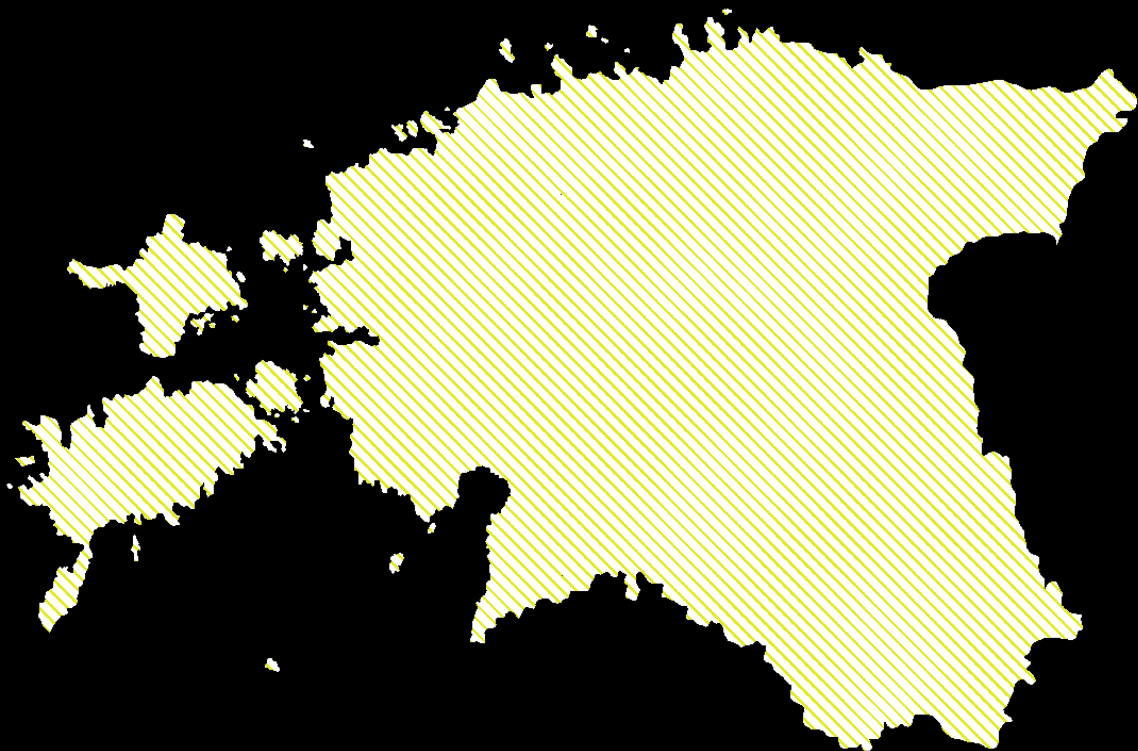


CIVIC SPACE REPORT 2025

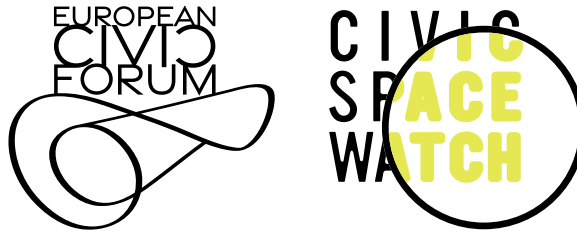
Estonia

By Vabaühenduste Liit (Network of Estonian Nonprofit Organizations, NENO)



NENO

Network of Estonian
Nonprofit Organizations



ABOUT THIS REPORT

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Vabaiühenduste Liit (Network of Estonian Nonprofit Organizations, NENO) is the single and largest Estonian organisation uniting public benefit civil society and non-profit organisations. NENO is an advocacy organisation focusing on an open and sustainable civic space, civil society capacity building and raising civic awareness. NENO's goals are to foster development trends and provide support services to Estonian civil society organisations, increase public awareness, advocate for the interests of its members and other public interest NGOs, and improve working relationships with the public and business sectors. The organisation implements activities to strengthen the role and identity of the civil society sector as a whole and maintains networks of advocacy organisations, voluntary contributors, and fundraisers in order to facilitate cooperation between associations.



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Key civic space trends

-  Budget cuts in the public sector and delays and confusion in the state funding processes are negatively affecting the resources and capacities of civil society.
-  A civil dialogue framework exists but remains fragmented and inconsistent in its implementation.
-  Amendments to the Law Enforcement Act could have concerning civic space implications, restricting public events and protests.

Summary

Civic space in Estonia is rated as open, according to the CIVICUS Monitor.¹ Civil society in Estonia remains fairly strong and functional but faces both internal and external barriers. Inconsistent engagement practices, as well as limited transparency financial resources are key challenges for civil society.

In 2024, Estonia saw the first signs of significant budget cuts affecting civic space, with indications that broader reductions would take effect in 2025. These anticipated cuts have already led to reduced resources for civil society organisations (CSOs) and public sector positions dedicated to civic engagement and open governance. Trust in government and parliament declined sharply, reflecting public dissatisfaction and a perceived lack of meaningful citizen influence. While digital tools like Rahvaalgatus facilitated participation, inconsistent implementation of engagement practices and reduced transparency, such as the overuse of “for internal use” classifications, hindered public trust and access to information. Meanwhile, civil society demonstrated resilience, addressing gaps in transparency and advocating for stronger engagement frameworks, despite the growing financial and institutional constraints.

Some new draft legislation initiated in 2024, such as a draft proposal to amend the Law Enforcement Act, could severely restrict freedoms of peaceful assembly

and expression. While amendments to the Gender Equality and Equal Opportunities Act represented a welcome change, progress on this legislation slowed when the justice minister commissioned a parallel draft from the private sector without prior consultation with CSOs. This raises concerns that the original proposal — developed with CSO involvement — could be sidelined. Based on the content of the European Commission’s 2024 Rule of Law report², some progress was made in Estonia. The report highlights advancements in digital civic engagement tools and the legal framework for transparency. However, challenges noted in the report include gaps in the consistent implementation of open governance principles, delays in public consultations, and limited inclusion of civil society in decision making processes. The findings reflect the need for more robust mechanisms to ensure meaningful public participation and address lingering issues of transparency and accountability. CSOs emphasise that while steps have been taken, significant work is needed to achieve consistent and comprehensive rule of law improvements. CSOs were neither meaningfully consulted nor actively involved in the implementation of the rule of law recommendations in Estonia. While some CSOs participated in other processes, such as the drafting of the next Open Government Partnership (OGP) action plan, their involvement in the specific follow-up and implementation of the rule of law recommendations was notably absent.

1. <https://monitor.civicus.org/country/estonia/>

2. https://commission.europa.eu/document/download/36e4f549-7a98-4dcf-ae61-02be0b15723a_en?filename=18_1_58060_coun_chap_estonia_en.pdf

Institutional, political, and socio-economic landscape

In 2024, obstruction in the Estonian Parliament Riigikogu came to an end, resulting in legislative processes at the national level becoming more predictable and transparent. Based on NENO's data, it can be concluded that seeking feedback on draft laws and involving stakeholders in policymaking processes has slightly improved compared to the previous year. However, the quality of engagement still heavily depends on the capacities of those conducting the engagement. For instance, in the context of drafting the Climate Act, many stakeholders were involved to a significant extent, but the result of the engagement process was widespread dissatisfaction.³ This was due to a lack of transparency in the process, unclear communication of mandates, and the fact that the outcomes of the engagement were not reflected in the Climate Act⁴ currently under discussion at the Riigikogu.

A major source of confusion in 2024 was the civil society funding in the state budget, which has negatively impacted the public perception of CSOs, even though they are not responsible for the confusion. For example,

the Riigikogu's Anti-Corruption Special Committee held hearings on the topic, although the changes do not affect how CSOs are funded from the state budget, but rather how this funding is reflected in the state budget itself.⁵ As a result, although the CSO funding in the state budget remains transparent, some opposition party members turned this into a political issue, suggesting that certain CSOs are secretly receiving funds from the state budget.

In 2024, there were no significant changes regarding the ability to exercise rights and freedoms in public spaces, both offline and online. However, in 2024, an appeal was filed to the Supreme Court against a district court decision that deemed it lawful for the police to fine individuals for participating in a protest under a new provision in the Penal Code adopted in 2022.⁶ This regulation concerns the public display of symbols associated with acts of aggression, genocide, crimes against humanity, or war crimes, when such display supports or justifies these acts.⁷

The regulatory environment for civic freedoms

In 2024, the *Riigikogu* began deliberations on a law that significantly raises the threshold for mandatory auditing requirements for foundations. Previously, any foundation with an annual turnover or asset volume exceeding €15,000 was required to undergo a mandatory financial review. Under the new law,⁸ this threshold will increase to €1 million. The law is set to apply retroactively to the financial reports for the 2024 fiscal year.

A draft law amending the Political Parties Act⁹ has been introduced, aiming to clarify the concept of affiliated organisations connected to political parties. While civil

society generally supports greater transparency in party-related activities, the proposed solution does not significantly enhance transparency in party financing or the operations of affiliated organisations. Among other changes, the proposal suggests imposing a legal form requirement on electoral alliances running in local government elections. This requirement could potentially negatively impact local residents who wish to run for office to develop their communities but are not inclined towards long-term involvement in party politics.

3. <https://www.err.ee/1609417111/kliimaseaduse-eelnou-tekitab-kusimusi-nii-ettevotjates-kui-looduskaitjates>; <https://www.err.ee/1609447906/marcus-ehasoo-kliimaseaduse-loomise-kaasamisprotsess-ei-vastanud-ootustele>

4. https://kliimaministeerium.ee/sites/default/files/documents/2024-12/KKMS_eeln%C3%B5u_2.12.2024.pdf

5. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=r2fEXfpga0>

6. <https://humanrights.ee/2024/09/arutelu-sonavabaduse-ule-jatkub-riigikohtus/>

7. <https://humanrights.ee/2024/09/arutelu-sonavabaduse-ule-jatkub-riigikohtus/>

8. <https://www.riigikogu.ee/tegevus/eelnoud/eelnou/a001d204-a0f0-42a9-b165-c36d43bf4d4a/raamatupidamise-seaduse-muutmise-ja-sellest-tulenevalt-teiste-seaduste-muutmise-seadus/>

9. <https://cms.advokatuur.ee/app/uploads/2024/06/EN-Erakonnaseaduse-jt-seaduste-muutmise-seadus-23052024.pdf>

At the initiative of the Ministry of Justice, a draft intention to amend the Law Enforcement Act¹⁰ was introduced, marking one of the most extensive and significant reforms in the field of law enforcement in recent history. The proposed changes directly impact individuals' fundamental rights, particularly the freedoms of peaceful assembly and expression. The draft includes measures ranging from expropriation to cybersecurity actions aimed at maintaining public order.

According to civil society, the most concerning provisions in the draft relate to public events and protests. For instance, it grants the Police and Border Guard Board additional powers to ban public gatherings as a preventive measure. The wording of this proposal gives police prefects broad discretion to prohibit assemblies based on preliminary information suggesting that something illegal might occur. At the same time, it would be challenging for the organiser to contest such a decision, as the new regulation would require the organiser to prove that they had no intent to break the law during the event.

On a positive note, the draft proposes granting minors the legal right to organise public assemblies, which is currently *de facto* not permitted. Additionally, it has been revealed that, despite the ministries' desire to proceed with the proposals, they are open to dividing these broad topics into smaller components to facilitate more inclusive and transparent debate on the issues.

Estonia's Supreme Court is reviewing the use of the chant "From the river to the sea", applied globally in demonstrations in solidarity with the Palestinian people, in a freedom of expression case involving Leore Lisann Klõseiko, who was fined under Penal Code §151¹¹ for alleged support of crimes like aggression or genocide.¹¹ The law, adopted in 2022 to address Russian aggression, was applied for the first time outside that context after a 2023 Palestine solidarity protest in Tallinn. This case has sparked a wider societal debate about the phrase's meaning and the balance between freedom of expression and public order. The Supreme Court's decision is expected in 2025.

Safe space

In 2024, the Ministry of Social Affairs introduced a draft Gender Equality and Equal Opportunities Act designed to provide stronger protections for minority groups and promote equality across various fields. The proposal eliminates the current hierarchy that offers unequal protection to different groups. Under the current Equal Treatment Act, protection for religion, beliefs, age, disability, and sexual orientation is limited to employment and vocational training. The new law aims to grant uniform protection to all groups listed in the legislation.¹²

However, progress on the bill was slow in the second half of the year when Justice Minister Liisa Pakosta commissioned a parallel draft from the private sector. CSOs only found out about this decision afterwards,

resulting in a situation where two ministries now have competing drafts addressing the same legal changes. Members of the Equal Treatment Network questioned the justice minister, who explained that the private sector draft was necessary to provide an alternative legal perspective on combining the laws and implementing an EU directive.¹³ While the minister has expressed willingness to collaborate with civil society on the revised draft, the future of the legislation remains uncertain.¹⁴

The approval of marriage equality legislation has not led to a significant shift in public attitudes toward LGBTQI+ people. While they now have legal avenues to register their partnerships, hostility and prejudice against them persist in public discourse.

¹⁰. <https://news.err.ee/1609384949/plans-to-give-police-more-powers-and-ease-policing-restrictions-in-estonia>; <https://cms.advokatuur.ee/app/uploads/2024/06/KorS-VTK.pdf>

¹¹. <https://humanrights.ee/2024/09/arutelu-sonavabaduse-ule-jatkub-riigikohtus/>

¹². <https://humanrights.ee/2024/06/eesti-inimoiguste-keskuse-seisukohad-soolise-vordsuse-ja-vordsete-voimaluste-seaduse-eelnou/>

¹³. <https://www.err.ee/1609525471/riik-tellis-uue-soolise-vordsuse-seaduse-eelnou-advokaadiburoolt>

¹⁴. <https://www.err.ee/1609559152/pakosta-vordoiguslikkuse-seadus-vajas-vaadet-erasektorist>

Funding for civil society

Every year, Estonian civil society raises increasing amounts of donations to fund their activities. Human rights organisations have noted that people are willing and eager to donate, but the purpose of the donations often varies. For instance, individuals are far more inclined to contribute to supporting Ukrainian refugees than to address legal issues stemming from the lack of implementation of the Registered Partnership Act.

2024 has been challenging for Estonia's economy, leading to budget cuts in the public sector, which in turn affects funding for CSOs from state budgets. As a result, the capacity of these organisations is likely to diminish in the coming years, as alternative funding sources cannot fully compensate for the reductions. While the specific details of the cuts have not been fully disclosed, it is clear that not all sectors will be impacted equally. For example, while efforts are being made to minimise cuts in higher education, funding for youth organisations will decrease by approximately 32% compared to the previous year.¹⁵ General budget cuts have led to widespread delays and confusion regarding state budget support. In some cases, it remains unclear when public funding rounds will be announced, the size of these funding rounds, or their specific terms. Even strategic partners — organisations that have secured multi-year support agreements — report a lack of clear communication from some ministries. This uncertainty complicates planning and undermines the stability of CSOs reliant on public funding.

Occasionally, the distribution of funds to organisations is used in political rhetoric to gain popularity. While there are accusations that CSO funding lacks transparency, the state has done little to address this issue. Instead, civil society has taken the initiative to organise and publish data. NENO has released a database¹⁶ on civil society funding, allowing the public to verify which organisations are supported by various state institutions and the amounts provided, based on open government data. The Ministry of Interior, responsible for the development of civil society in Estonia, has halved its staff working on civil society issues due to state budget cuts. Previously, the ministry had one deputy secretary general and three officials dedicated to these topics. However, from the second half of 2024, the number of officials has been reduced to two, and the deputy secretary general position has been eliminated. A broader trend across ministries indicates that cuts often target positions related to civic engagement, public information, and open governance. This downsizing risks undermining efforts to foster meaningful collaboration between the state and civil society.

The *Riigikogu* is deliberating a bill to increase state fees,¹⁷ which will also affect civil society organisations. For instance, the costs of establishing non-profits and foundations and updating their related data will rise. However, advocacy efforts have resulted in a compromise where the state agreed to a significantly smaller increase in fees than originally planned. As a result, the changes are not expected to have a strong negative impact on organisations.

Civil dialogue and the right to participation

In Estonia, a civil dialogue framework exists but remains fragmented and inconsistent in implementation. While the government has issued guidelines for public consultations, their implementation varies across ministries and local governments, leading to uneven engagement practices. No significant legislative changes to the civil dialogue framework were introduced in 2024. Concerns

remain about late-stage consultation, where proposals are presented for feedback only after key decisions have been made.

Digital tools, such as the public e-consultation platform *Rahvaalgatus*¹⁸ (Citizen Initiative), has enabled civic participation. These tools have facilitated wider engagement but also highlighted disparities in digital

¹⁵. <https://en.lee/noortevaldkonna-avalik-poordumine/>

¹⁶. Link to the database: https://heakodanik.shinyapps.io/vabayhendused_2022/

¹⁷. <https://eelnoud.valitsus.ee/main/mount/docList/192be41f-3021-4801-85f2-c3528b64f909>

¹⁸. <https://rahvaalgatus.ee/>

access, especially among older and rural populations. Some consultations via digital tools lack feedback loops, leaving participants unaware of how their input was used, thus undermining trust in the process.

Civil society organisations report challenges in national consultations, including short timelines, limited access to draft proposals, and insufficient resources to engage effectively. Information access is legally guaranteed, but delays and procedural hurdles often hinder timely access, especially for smaller organisations. The Public Information Act ensures transparency, yet its implementation can be inconsistent, particularly for sensitive issues. The overuse of “for internal use” classifications, a designation applied to government documents limiting their public accessibility, has led to excessive secrecy, hindering public access to information and eroding trust between citizens and the state.¹⁹

Estonia’s minister of justice and digital affairs, Liisa Pakosta, has initiated a collaborative effort to reduce bureaucracy and streamline legislative processes in alignment with a coalition agreement.²⁰ In a letter to ministers, the government office, the chancellor of

justice, and the auditor general, Pakosta requested proposals on minimising administrative burdens and improving regulatory practices.

As part of the initiative to reduce bureaucracy, some proposals have been submitted that could potentially undermine transparency and limit data accessibility. For instance, the ministry of climate suggested anonymising the names of legislative drafters, which could reduce accountability in the law-making process.²¹ Additionally, there was a proposal to limit constitutional analysis during the drafting of legislation, raising concerns about the thoroughness and legal robustness of future bills.²²

These suggestions have sparked debate, as they contrast with the broader goals of fostering transparency and public trust in governance. Critics argue that such measures could erode the principles of open government and weaken democratic oversight, emphasizing the need for careful consideration to balance efficiency with accountability and transparency in the legislative processes.

Civil society resilience

In 2024, several civil society organisations in Estonia brought attention to open governance issues, such as data accessibility, the quality of civic engagement, and legislative changes. One notable initiative was a collaborative discussion in the *Riigikogu* between civil society and the public sector on the topic of collective petitions.²³ However, due to the lack of regular assessments of public trust in or attitudes towards civil society, it is difficult to determine whether perceptions have shifted compared to previous years. That said, the current public sentiment reflects a demand for a strong civil society, as surveys indicate declining trust in political leaders and a growing feeling among citizens that their voices are not heard.²⁴

While some agencies and officials demonstrate trust-based and meaningful collaboration with civil society, these efforts often depend on individual skills rather than a coherent institutional engagement policy. This inconsistency leads to varying experiences

among organisations regarding the inclusiveness of government agencies. For example, NENO had to highlight twice in 2024 that the Ministry of Justice excluded them and other fundamental rights umbrella organisations from participation in key processes.

Estonia is currently preparing its next Open Government Partnership (OGP) action plan, involving several civil society organisations in the process. There is cautious optimism that this could increase the government’s commitment to implementing open governance initiatives, many of which were left unrealised during the previous action plan period. Civil society remains in a wait-and-see mode, assessing whether ongoing issues, such as inconsistent engagement and lack of inclusiveness, will pose significant challenges.

Efforts to improve open governance through the OGP process represent an opportunity for both civil society and the government to align priorities and

¹⁹. <https://www.err.ee/1609528084/karl-hendrik-pallo-usaldusvaarset-riiki-ainult-asutusesiseselt-ei-ehita>

²⁰. <https://news.err.ee/1609441325/justice-minister-seeking-other-ministers-advice-on-cutting-red-tape>

²¹. <https://www.err.ee/1609468426/alender-ja-svet-tahavad-eelnoude-koostajad-salastada>

²². <https://epl.delfi.ee/artikkel/120323336/allar-joks-kas-eestis-on-uldse-poliitiline-joud-kes-pohiseadust-tosiselt-votab>

²³. Link to the discussion - <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=nIRlalBDPVU>

²⁴. <https://turu-uuringute.eu/tag/institutsioonide-usaldusvaarsus/> - public trust in the Estonian government and *Riigikogu* (parliament) declined significantly in September compared to summer levels. Trust in the *Riigikogu* dropped from 40% to 27%, while trust in the government decreased from 39% to 32%.

address existing gaps. Whether these efforts will lead to meaningful change depends on the political will and institutional capacity to embrace a more structured and inclusive framework for engagement.

The situation suggests that reviewing the content of the Estonian Civil Society Development Concept (EKAK),²⁵ the agreement between civil society and the

parliament, will likely be necessary. This good-faith agreement, established in 2002, aimed to recognise civil society as one of the cornerstones of democracy. However, its practical impact and relevance have been diminishing over time. A renewed focus on revising and strengthening this concept could help address current challenges and reinforce the role of civil society as an essential pillar of democratic governance in Estonia.

Recommendations

TARGETED RECOMMENDATION:

→ **Enforce a concrete civic engagement framework that ensures structured, transparent, and consistent public consultation processes across all levels of government that will be systematically implemented rather than applied inconsistently or arbitrarily. This should be done by the end of 2025.**

- Revise the Public Information Act to reduce the overuse of “for internal use” classifications and promote proactive disclosure of information.
- Ensure equitable and transparent allocation of state funds to NGOs and mitigate the impact of budget cuts by diversifying funding mechanisms.
- Refrain from amending the Law Enforcement Act in a way that creates civic space restrictions and endangers the fulfilment of freedoms of expression and peaceful assembly, protected by international human rights standards.

25. <https://heakodanik.ee/en/estonian-civil-society-development-concept/>

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About European Civic Forum

European Civic Forum (ECF) is a pan-European network of nearly 100 associations and NGOs across 29 European countries. Founded in 2005 by our member organisations, we have spent nearly two decades working to protect civic space, enable civic participation and build civil dialogue for more equality, solidarity and democracy in Europe.

civic-forum.eu



About Civic Space Watch

CivicSpace Watch is an online platform that gathers data and reports on developments in civic space at the national and EU level and analyses national and European trends in civic space. Powered by the European Civic Forum, it collects findings through regular contact and interviews with a strong network of members and partners on the ground, as well as ongoing media and social media monitoring.

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