

Statement at the United Nations Human Rights Council

*By the Estonian Human Rights Centre and the Estonian Equal Treatment Network
13 February 2026 – Palais des Nations, Geneva*

I deliver this statement on behalf of the Estonian Human Rights Centre and the Estonian Equal Treatment Network, which brings together 12 civil society organisations representing minorities and groups such as refugees, the LGBT+ community, women, young people and students, children, and persons with disabilities.

I thank you for the opportunity to contribute to this review and we note positively that both the draft and final versions of the National Report were shared with our Centre.

Estonia has made important progress in human rights protection. It is a safe and democratic country. However, gaps remain in ensuring equal treatment, addressing hate speech and hate crimes, and protecting refugees.

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Discrimination and equality

The situation has remained largely unchanged since the previous review. Although several countries recommended amendments to the Equal Treatment Act, the Act still provides different levels of protection to different minority groups. The state has initiated change in legislation but as of September 2025, the Government's next steps remain unclear.

While discrimination based on nationality, race, or colour is prohibited in most areas of life, but discrimination based on religion or belief, age, disability, or sexual orientation is prohibited only in employment. This leaves individuals without protection in areas such as housing, healthcare, education, social welfare, and access to goods and services. As a result, many victims cannot effectively seek assistance or compensation.

We therefore recommend that Estonia prohibit discrimination in all areas of life. Add new protected grounds in the Act based on Constitution Section 12 but also state of health, gender identity, gender expression and sex characteristics.

Hate speech and hate crimes

This issue was also raised during the previous cycle. Despite recommendations from several countries, progress has been limited.

Section 151 of the Penal Code treats hate speech as a misdemeanour and only when it results in concrete harm, such as threats to life, health, or property. This high threshold significantly limits its practical application.

Furthermore, Estonia lacks a clear legal framework recognising hate crimes, and hate motivation is not treated as an aggravating circumstance.

We therefore call on Estonia to strengthen its regulation of hate speech, recognise hate motivation as an aggravating factor in criminal offences, and open the discussion to expand the list of protected grounds.

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Refugees and asylum seekers

Since Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine, Estonia has provided significant support to people fleeing the war. However, we are concerned about the growing reliance on public order and national security considerations in international protection and residence permit procedures.

In particular, Estonia has declined to process certain residence permit applications from Ukrainian men of conscription age and has required documentation that is often difficult or impossible to obtain.

We recommend that Estonia refrain from using public order and security as blanket grounds for exclusion and ensure that all applications are assessed individually, in full compliance with international human rights obligations.

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Thank you for your attention!