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ANNUAL REPORT ON MIGRATION AND ASYLUM 2023 IN ESTONIA

NATIONAL REPORT (PART 2)

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

This report summarises the most significant developments in 2023 in 11 key areas of migration and asylum in Estonia: legal migration, international protection, temporary protection and other measures in response to persons fleeing the war in Ukraine, unaccompanied minors and other vulnerable groups, integration and inclusion of migrants, citizenship and statelessness, borders, visas and Schengen, irregular migration, trafficking in human beings, return and readmission, and migration and development cooperation.

According to Statistics Estonia, as of January 2024, the population of Estonia grew by 0,04% to a total of 1 366 491. According to preliminary data, in 2023, there were 10,721 births and 15,832 deaths recorded in Estonia. Based on registered migration data, a total of 20,209 people immigrated to Estonia and 14,491 emigrated from Estonia as well. 57% of all immigrants to Estonia – 11,529 people – were of Ukrainian citizenship. On year, the number of immigrants with Ukrainian citizenship had decreased threefold, or by 21,688. According to preliminary figures, 6,515 Ukrainian citizens also left Estonia in 2023.¹

The year 2023 continued to be influenced by the war in Ukraine focusing on accommodating Ukrainian war refugees, maintaining strict visa restrictions for Russian citizens, also focussing on preparedness for crises and population protection, another 40 km of Estonia's eastern border was completed, and the Government updated the National Security Concept of Estonia. Another important development was the introduction of marriage in Estonia.

Statistical information compared to year 2022:

- The total number of first-time issued temporary residence permits (TRP) was 4261, marking a decrease of 29%. The number of TRP-s issued for family migration

¹ Available here: <https://news.err.ee/1609225380/despite-record-low-births-estonian-population-reaches-1-37-million>

decreased by 41%, for studying by 23% and for employment by 17%. Only the number of TRP-s issued for entrepreneurship stayed the same.

- The number of short-term employment registrations decreased by 71%. Foreign workers from Ukraine, Belarus and Russian Federation, who dominated in the past, were replaced by a much more diverse influx from Central Asia.
- Starting from 1st of January 2023, it is possible to apply for a new type of residence permit – temporary residence permit for short-term employment. In 2023, 273 of these permits were issued. TOP nationalities included Ukraine, Uzbekistan, India, Philippines and Moldova.
- Estonia received 3980 first-time applications for asylum, marking an increase of 35% compared to the 2940 first-time applications submitted in 2022. In 2023, 62 third-country nationals received refugee status and 3855 subsidiary protection status. Top three countries by nationality for those who received refugee status were Russian Federation (35), Afghanistan (12) and Belarus (11). Subsidiary protection was granted mainly to Ukrainian nationals (3848).
- Estonia received 8782 applications for temporary protection and 33 215 applications to extend temporary protection.
- Estonian citizenship was granted to 1077 persons which is 34% more than in 2022. Most often the Estonian citizenship was granted to persons with undetermined citizenship (48%) and citizens of the Russian Federation (43%).
- Estonia issued a total of 15 647 visas in 2023, which was a 55% decrease compared to the previous year when in total 34 869 visas were issued.
- In 2023, the total number of issued return decisions (1031 decisions) remained almost the same as in 2022 (decrease was 5%). 83% of these were decisions for voluntary departure.

After the start of Russian aggression in 2022, several sanctions were implemented regarding Russian and Belarussian citizens. However, in 2023, the need to review the regulation no 42 "Imposition of sanctions of Government of Republic in connection with aggression of Russian Federation and Republic of Belarus in Ukraine" arose:

- On 18th of May 2023, a waiver was approved so that citizens of Russian Federation and Belarus, who were in Estonia as students, doctors (including dentists) or researchers before the start of aggression in Ukraine on 24th of February 2022, could apply for a new residence permit if they have passed all necessary Estonian language examinations or completed an Estonian-language curriculum and are proficient in Estonian language at least at level B2.

Several important amendments to the Aliens Act entered into force in 2023:

- In March, an amendment entered into force that allows those Ukrainian citizens who were in Estonia before the start of aggression in Ukraine on 24th of February 2022 and to whom temporary protection may be applied, to formalize their right for temporary stay in Estonia as a long-term visa thus enabling them to travel.
- Starting from 1st of January 2024, it was possible to apply for a new type of residence permit – temporary residence permit for short-term employment. The residence permit is exempt from the annual immigration quota and is issued for up to 2 years.
- Starting from 1st of January, new incentive for hiring foreign labour to a growth company was introduced. Growth companies are companies that have evolved from the startup phase. Companies will be allowed to offer salaries to foreign employees

that are at least 80% of the average salary in Estonia and residence permits issued to foreign employees of a growth company will not be subject to the annual immigration quota.

In the field of digitalization, two new databases went live:

- In March, regulation no 6 "Statute on Migration Surveillance Database" was passed and MIGIS went live in July. MIGIS is an automated migration surveillance IT-solution, which assist officials to track persons compliance with the legal requirements to reside in Estonia and to prevent misuse or irregular stay. Automated checks ensure up-to-date awareness of third country nationals staying in Estonia and thus provides faster ability to react to misuse or irregular stay.
- In November, the Automated Biometric Identification System database (ABIS) was completed. ABIS is a central national database where biometric data gathered in state proceedings is stored. In addition, developments continued to migrate registering short-term employment related procedures to online environment.

Regarding international protection, the main focus in year 2023 was on accommodating the needs of high numbers of war refugees from Ukraine. One of the reasons for not having any overreaching developments was the anticipation of the new Pact on Migration and Asylum, which will entail large scale changes in the Estonian legal system. Some developments in the previous year included creating the possibility for online bookings and for submitting international protection applications in the service points, signing a cooperation agreement between the Police and Border Guard Board and UNHCR. Regarding temporary protection it was decided that in case an application for temporary protection or extension application was made after September 2023, temporary protection would last until March 2025.

Various initiatives and activities were done in the field on integration, but the most significant development was the implementation of preparatory and supportive activities for the transition to Estonian-language education.

In November and December 2023, the Schengen evaluations were carried out in Estonia. A regular Schengen evaluation took place in areas of police cooperation, large information systems, data protection, return, external border and visa policy. The evaluation report produced by the European Commission is expected in January 2024.

On 1 April 2023, the new Victim Support Act came into force, where the status of the presumed victims is changed. For the first time, the provision of psychosocial assistance is provided as a service in the Act.

On 23rd October, Estonia signed a bilateral readmission agreement with Uzbekistan. In Estonia an objective to establish readmission cooperation with third countries is to facilitate return process of persons who has no legal basis to stay in a country.

1. INTRODUCTION

In accordance with Article 9 (1) of Council Decision 2008/381/EC establishing the EMN, each National Contact Point is required to provide an annual report describing the migration and asylum situation in the Member State, which includes policy developments and statistical data.

This report is based on both primary and secondary data obtained via desk research or from the key stakeholders in the field of migration and asylum. Where necessary, publicly available information was used, such as policy papers, statistics, reports, news and public websites. Most of the information has been collected from the stakeholders through formal inquiries and expert interviews.

The key stakeholders involved in the making of this report include:

- The Estonian Police and Border Guard Board (hereinafter PBGB) who is responsible for migration and border management and thus one of the main sources of information and statistical data.
- Relevant ministries, incl. Ministry of the Interior, Ministry of Social Affairs, Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Ministry of Cultural Affairs, Ministry of Justice, Ministry of Economic Affairs and Communications, and Ministry of Education and Research.
- Non-governmental organisations (NGO-s), incl. Estonian Refugee Council, Estonian Human Rights Centre, Mondo, Johannes Mihkelson Centre.
- Other contributing agencies and organisations, incl. Estonian Unemployment Insurance Fund, Social Insurance Board, Statistics Estonia, Enterprise Estonia's "Work in Estonia" program, IOM Tallinn office, UNHCR Representation for the Nordic and Baltic countries, Integration Foundation, Red Cross Estonian Office, Education and Youth Board.

The information and data presented in this report were obtained from these organisations unless specified otherwise. The data collection and desk research were carried out in December 2023 – April 2024.

INSTITUTIONAL FRAMEWORK

The primary institution responsible for policy-making in the area of migration and asylum is the **Estonian Ministry of the Interior**. These policies are mainly implemented by the PBGB), subordinated under the Ministry. The PBGB is involved in processing of all applications of TCNs (including asylum seekers and applicants for temporary protection, persons staying in the country irregularly, as well as applicants for residence permits and applying for Estonian citizenship) as well as the applications of the citizens of the European Union. Although the decision-making capacity (e.g. granting a residence permit, etc.) lies with the PBGB, the decisions are taken in close cooperation with the Estonian Ministry of the Interior, the Estonian Internal Security Service, Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Estonian Unemployment Insurance Fund etc.

The **Ministry of Social Affairs** is responsible for policy-making regarding services for the beneficiaries of temporary and international protection, unaccompanied minors as

well as victims of trafficking in human beings. Its subordinate organisation, the **Social Insurance Board** coordinates organisation of those services.

The **Ministry of Justice** coordinates policymaking in relation to victims of human trafficking and non-discrimination.

In close cooperation with the Ministry of the Interior, the **Ministry of Economic Affairs and Communications** develops policies in relation to skilled migration. The subordinate agencies responsible for executing these policies are **KredEx and EAS brands** (responsible for talent attraction and retention), which also coordinates the **Work in Estonia** programme and the **International House of Estonia**.

The **Ministry of Education and Research** gives its input to Ministry of the Interior concerning study migration and researchers' mobility. In August 2021, the new governmental body the Education and Youth Board (Harno) was established under the administration of the Ministry of Education and Research.

The **Ministry of Foreign Affairs** is responsible for visa issues, development cooperation, humanitarian aid policy, and via the diplomatic corps, advances relations with third countries. Since 2021 the Ministry is also responsible for the diaspora policy (which was formerly task of the Ministry of Interior).

The **Ministry of Culture** is the main institution responsible for developing integration policies, and since spring 2021 also the adaptation policy for newly-arrived migrants. Its subordinate institution Integration Foundation offers for example various language learning possibilities and coordinates the activity of Tallinn and Narva Estonian Language Houses.

In addition, several NGO-s and other organisations play a role in supporting the implementation of migration and asylum policies. The **Estonian Refugee Council** is responsible for providing the support person service to the beneficiaries of international protection. The Estonian branch of the **International Organization for Migration** (IOM) is responsible for providing the assisted voluntary return service for persons with no legal basis to stay. **AS Hoolekandeteenus** is responsible for the Vao and Vägeva reception centres of applicants of international protection. **NGO Mondo** focuses on education/health, subsistence, environmental and digital competence programmes in different countries and global education in Estonia.

THE LEGAL SYSTEM

- The **Aliens Act** regulates the entry of third-country nationals, their stay, residence and employment as well as the bases for legal liability of aliens.
- The **Citizen of the European Union Act** regulates the bases for stay and residence of citizens of the European Union and their family members.
- The **Act of Granting International Protection to Aliens** (AGIPA) regulates the granting international protection to person, the legal status and basis for stay.
- The **Citizenship Act** regulates issues related to citizenship.
- The **Obligation to Leave and Prohibition on Entry Act** (OLPEA) provides the basis and procedures regarding obligations to leave, prohibition of entry and the assistance for travel through Estonia.

- The **State Borders Act** defines the state border, the border regime and the liability for violation and illegal crossing.
- The **Administrative Procedure Act** provides the general principles of administrative procedures.

All of the above-mentioned legislation has been passed by the Estonian Parliament and signed into law by the president. There are also numerous regulations of the ministers responsible for the area.

ABBREVIATIONS

ABIS – Automated Biometric Identification System
AGIPA – Act on Granting International Protection to Aliens
AMIF – Asylum, Migration and Integration Fund
ESTPOL – Estonian Police and Border Guard Board 's special unit
EU – European Union
GDP – Gross Domestic Product
IOM – International Organization of Migration
MIGIS – Migration Surveillance Database
NGO – Non-Governmental Organization
OLPEA – Obligation to Leave and Prohibition on Entry
PBGB – Police and Border Guard Board
SIB – Social Insurance Board
SIS – Schengen Information System
TPD – Temporary Protection Directive
TRP – Temporary residence permit
UNHCR – United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees

2. OVERARCHING AND CROSSCUTTING CHANGES TO NATIONAL MIGRATION AND ASYLUM SYSTEMS

On 22nd of February 2023, a **new Estonian Security Concept** was approved. This strategic framework document for Estonian security policy is based on a broad approach to security. In addition to defense, it includes the cohesion of society and the resilience of the state, economic security, vital services, internal security, as well as international activities. The document of the Security Concept points out that due to the increased military threat of the Russian Federation, spending on military defense must be increased to at least 3% of GDP, added to which is the financing of the cost of Estonia hosting its allies. As with the costs of military defense, the renewed Security Concept requires that the national budget strategy must ensure permanent funding for the development of civil protection to ensure the continuity of the functioning of society as a whole in all possible crises.

In 2023, Estonia continued to take **important steps towards the digitalisation** of migration related procedures. On 22nd of March, regulation no 6 "Statute on Migration Surveillance Database"² was passed and MIGIS went live in July. Growing migration volumes inevitably place a greater burden on migration surveillance. Before the implementation of MIGIS, under conditions of limited manpower, the PBGB had to monitor foreigners manually which made it more difficult to receive up-to-date and real overview of whether foreigners meet the conditions set for them by law. MIGIS is an automated migration surveillance IT-solution, which assist officials to track persons compliance with the legal requirements to reside in Estonia and to prevent misuse or irregular stay. Automated checks ensure up-to-date awareness of third country nationals staying in Estonia and thus provides faster ability to react to misuse or irregular stay.

In November, the Automated Biometric Identification System database (ABIS) was completed. ABIS is a central national database where biometric data gathered in state proceedings is stored. In addition, developments continued to migrate registering short-term employment related procedures to online environment.

On 20th of June 2023, the Government of the Republic of Estonia voted in favour to amendments to Family Law Act and related legislation (including the Aliens Act, the Citizenship Act, the Act on Granting International Protection to Aliens, the Obligation to Leave and Prohibition on Entry Act etc.) which led to the **introduction of marriage equality**. The act established that as of 2024 marriages will be able to be contracted in Estonia between two adults regardless of their gender. Even though same-sex couples have been able to register their relationships as civil partnerships for several years already, the change in the law extends rights for these couples. Both marriage and registered partnerships bring rights and obligations for couples which do not extend to those in de facto relationships. These are mostly linked to home, assets, parentage and obtaining support.

² Available: <https://www.riigiteataja.ee/akt/124032023018?leiaKehtiv>

3. LEGAL MIGRATION

3.1 OVERARCHING AND CROSSCUTTING DEVELOPMENTS

In 2023, legal migration in Estonia continued to be influenced by the war in Ukraine. After the start of Russian aggression in 2022, several sanctions were implemented regarding Russian and Belarussian citizens. However, in 2023, the need to review the regulation no 42 "Imposition of sanctions of Government of Republic in connection with aggression of Russian Federation and Republic of Belarus in Ukraine"³ arose. On 18th of May 2023, the Government of the Republic of Estonia approved an amendment/waiver⁴ to this regulation so that citizens of Russian Federation and Belarus, who were in Estonia as students, doctors (including dentists) or researchers before the start of aggression in Ukraine on 24th of February 2022, could apply for a new residence permit. Waiver of the sanction applies if they have passed all necessary Estonian language examinations or completed an Estonian-language curriculum and are proficient in Estonian language at least at level B2. Academic staff are exempt from the language requirement. Waiver was approved as it was seen necessary to keep all doctors who, when coming to work in Estonia from abroad, have already passed the compliance test and the Estonian language exam and are entered in the Health Board's register with the right to practice as doctors or dentists, regardless of their country of origin. Exception for students who speak Estonian language and have graduated from higher education was set as it does not undermine the aim of the sanction.

Another need for amendment arose regarding Ukrainian citizens with a right for temporary stay in Estonia who have encountered problems whilst travelling within the EU and Schengen area, for example for business or personal reasons. Problems have also occurred whilst visiting Ukraine, as there is no air transportation and land transportation is required. When travelling to other Member States or via another Member state to Ukraine, Ukrainian citizens need to prove that they are legally staying in Estonia. In order to solve that issue, amendment to the Aliens Act⁵ entered into force on 21st of March regarding specifications of provision of legal basis for arrival in Estonia and temporary stay in Estonia. With the amendment, the stay of those Ukrainian citizens who were in Estonia before the start of aggression in Ukraine on 24th of February 2022 and to whom temporary protection may be applied, can formalize their right for temporary stay in Estonia as a long-term visa if justified. The maximum validity period is 12 months or until the application of the TPD.

3.2 STATISTICAL OVERVIEW OF THE YEAR 2023 IN LEGAL MIGRATION

The total number of first-time issued temporary residence permits (TRP) by PBGB was 4261, marking a decrease of almost 29% compared to the previous year. A decrease, which among other reasons, can be explained by sanctions imposed in 2022, occurred in all categories of legal migration except for entrepreneurship. The number of TRP-s

³ Available: <https://www.riigiteataja.ee/akt/108042022003?leiaKehtiv>

⁴ Available: <https://valitsus.ee/uudised/valitsus-kinnitas-kitsa-sanktsioonierandi-vene-tudengitele-arstidele-ja-teadlastele>

⁵ Available: <https://www.riigiteataja.ee/en/eli/ee/505092022004/consolide/current>

issued for family migration decreased by 41%, for studying by 23% and for employment by 17%. Only the number of TRP-s issued for entrepreneurship stayed the same.

Table 1. First-time TRP-s issued by PBGB by type of migration, 2019-2023 (Source: PBGB)

	2019	2020	2021	2022	2023
First-time TRP-s	5984	4710	6087	5989	4261
Employment	2218	2089	2249	2463	2054
Studying	1330	533	1078	551	424
Family migration	2272	1958	2642	2867	1686
Entrepreneurship	134	111	106	85	85

The Top 5 nationalities to whom first-time TRP-s was issued, were Ukraine (1229), Russian Federation (499), India (294), Turkey (252) and Uzbekistan (164).

Table 2. First-time TRP-s by type of migration and TOP 5 nationalities, 2023 (Source: PBGB)

First-time TRP	Ukraine	Russia	India	Turkey	Uzbekistan
Employment	Ukraine	India	Uzbekistan	USA	Brazil
Studying	Pakistan	China	Azerbaijan	India	Turkey
Family migration	Russia	Ukraine	Turkey	India	Belarus
Entrepreneurship	Turkey	Iran	India	USA	Azerbaijan

The full-scale aggression in Ukraine has significantly changed the landscape of labour migration into Estonia. Foreign workers from Ukraine, Belarus and Russian Federation, which dominated in the past, are being replaced by a much more diverse influx from Central Asia. Before, Ukrainian citizens constituted the largest share of foreign workers in Estonia: almost half in terms of residence permits and more than 70% in terms of short-term employment. In the light of Russian aggression, however, the picture has changed. The first factor is the sanctions adopted by the government in the aftermath of the war, restricting both Russian and Belarusian citizens from working and moving to Estonia. The second variable is the ban on military-aged men in Ukraine to leave the country. In addition, the war has affected economy as a whole. If the number of first-time temporary residence for employment decreased by 17% compared to 2022, then the number of short-term employment registrations decreased 71%. However, it is important to note that amendments were adopted in 2022 so that requirements for registering short-term employment for Ukrainian nationals fleeing the war were dropped.

Third-country nationals whose short-term employment was registered in 2023, were most often still citizens of Ukraine (2087), Moldova (1489), Uzbekistan (790), Georgia (411) and India (317). Top 5 areas of occupation for registering short-term employment

were manufacturing, construction, agriculture and forestry, service and transport sector.

Table 3. Number of short-term employment registrations 2019-2023 (Source: PBGB)

	2019	2020	2021	2022	2023
Short-term employment registrations	32 245	22 110	32 927	24 388	7061

The number of people who hold long-term resident's residence permit decreased by 2%. The largest three groups among the long-term residence permit holders are citizens of Russian Federation (51%) and persons with undetermined citizenship (44%), followed by 3% of citizens of Ukraine.

Table 4. Number of persons holding long-term residence permits, 2019-2023 (Source: PBGB)

	2019	2020	2021	2022	2023
Long-term residence permits	157 681	155 262	150 943	147 345	143 827

3.3 WORK-RELATED MIGRATION

The number of permanent residents of Estonia has decreased compared with 2023, thus, the immigration quota for the year 2023 was 1307 and for the year 2024 is 1303. However, once again the government set the maximum annual immigration quota that the Aliens Act allows. Since 2022, the quota has been divided between sectors to reserve a fair proportion of the quota based on residence permit statistics and short-term employment registrations from recent years. This form of distribution provides relief in areas where labour shortages are most pressing, thus inhibiting the growth and development of companies. Immigration quota in Estonia regulates labour migration and provisions were made for specific industries and by the order of the Minister of the Interior⁶, the quota was divided as follows:

- 200 TRP-s for employment in transport and warehousing sector;
- 35 TRP-s for employment as a journalist accredited by the Ministry of Foreign Affairs;
- 34 TRP-s for employment in the professional activities in the capacity of a sportsman, coach, referee or sports official by summons of a respective sports federation;
- 15 TRP-s for employment in a performing arts institution as person engaged in creative activities;
- 5 TRP-s on the basis of a treaty.

⁶ Available here: https://www.koda.ee/sites/default/files/content-type/content/2023-11/EN_SIM_maarus_piirarvu%20jagunemine%2031.10.2023.pdf

Thus, out of the 2024 quota, 289 residence permits are reserved for the above areas, but over a thousand are freely allocated. In 2023, the situation was the opposite, i.e. only about 300 residence permits were available for free distribution.

Two new exemptions entered into force in 2023 that are not subject to the immigration quota: TRP for short-term employment and TRP for employees working in a growth company. Other exemptions include ICT workers and foreigners working in startups or engaged in startup entrepreneurship. The quota also does not cover family-related immigration, immigration for study or work as an academic, for the purpose of acting as a major investor or working as a top specialist receiving 1.5 times the average salary in Estonia. Additionally, the quota does not include citizens of the European Union and their family members, citizens of the United States, United Kingdom and Japan, or people seeking international protection.

HIGHLY QUALIFIED WORKERS

Even though there were no major legal amendments regarding highly qualified workers, several strategical steps were taken. As the Work in Estonia (WIE) action plan for 2021-2025 is coming to an end, work started on drawing up the new action plan for 2026-2030 as well as gathering inputs from other stakeholders. As part of the action plan, WIE together with the Institute of Baltic Studies conducted a study on the recruitment and need for foreign talents in the field of manufacturing⁷. The study focused on understanding the readiness of Estonian manufacturing industry companies (especially in machinery, metal, and electronics sectors) to recruit foreign specialists from abroad, their actual labour needs, and the main challenges related to employing foreign specialists. Based on the findings, WIE will be able to choose focus directions and activities that would help companies reduce the labour shortage in the manufacturing sector and provide the necessary support for recruiting foreigners, thereby better supporting Estonian entrepreneurs in engaging higher value-adding foreign specialists and easing the shortage of qualified labour in Estonia.

In November, Enterprise Estonia (EAS) and Work in Estonia held a foreign talent forum "How to ensure Estonia's competitiveness in the global talent race?"⁸. Forum addressed issues related to the restrictiveness of the immigration quota and the growing need for ICT specialists and engineers. It was argued that talent policy is part of broader economic policy decisions, such as whether or not to build energy-intensive businesses in Estonia in the coming years. As part of the growing debate, Ministry of Economic Affairs and Communications, EAS and Work in Estonia prepared proposals for possible amendments in the Aliens Act concerning the immigration quota, fast-track procedures etc.

MEDIUM AND LOW SKILLED WORKERS

In the beginning of 2023, an amendment to the Aliens Act entered into force introducing new temporary residence permit for short-term employment. The employer must meet certain requirements in order for the employee to be eligible for this type of residence permit, such as being trustworthy and having paid the employee a corresponding salary

⁷ Available here: <https://eas.ee/wp-content/uploads/2024/04/work-in-estonia-toostussektori-valisspetsialistide-varbamise-ja-vajaduse-uuring.pdf>

⁸ Available here: [Work in Estonia Välialendipoliitika foorum 28.11.2023 \(youtube.com\)](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=...)

during the period of short-term employment. The residence permit is exempt from the annual immigration quota but cannot be extended. Since the annual immigration quota fulfils quickly, registering short-term employment is used more and more. However, as recruitment from abroad and training on the post is time consuming and the employer must meet salary criterion, the timeframe of actual short-term work (365 days for 455 days period) was found unproportionable short. In the beginning of the year, PBGB was prepared to receive high volumes of applications as the new residence permit was believed to alleviate the labour shortage. However, the number of applications remained quite modest but is expected to increase in the following years. In 2023, 273 new temporary residence permits for short-term employment were issued. TOP 5 nationalities included Ukraine, Uzbekistan, India, Philippines and Moldova.

ENTREPRENEURS AND START-UPS

In the beginning of 2023, a new amendment to the Aliens Act entered into force introducing a new incentive for hiring foreign labour to a growth company. Growth company is defined as a company registered in Estonia with the purpose to continue developing a business model with high global growth potential, innovative and replicable that shall significantly contribute to the development of the Estonian business environment. Growth companies will be allowed to offer salaries to foreign employees that are at least 80% of the average salary in Estonia and residence permits issued to foreign employees of a growth company will not be subject to the annual immigration quota. Until relevant amendment was introduced, Aliens Act stipulated special incentives for hiring foreign labour to start-up companies. At the same time, several innovative and fast-growing start-ups operate in Estonia that have grown out from the start-up phase and who have been in the market for more than 10 years but to whom favourable conditions for recruiting foreign employees no longer apply. Thus, with this amendment technology-based growth companies will have similar benefits for hiring foreign labour as is available for start-ups. To provide more favourable salary criterion for the recruitment of foreign specialists, an employer of the growth company is obligated to pay the employee at least 80% of the average salary in Estonia as last published by Statistics Estonia.

Growth companies are:

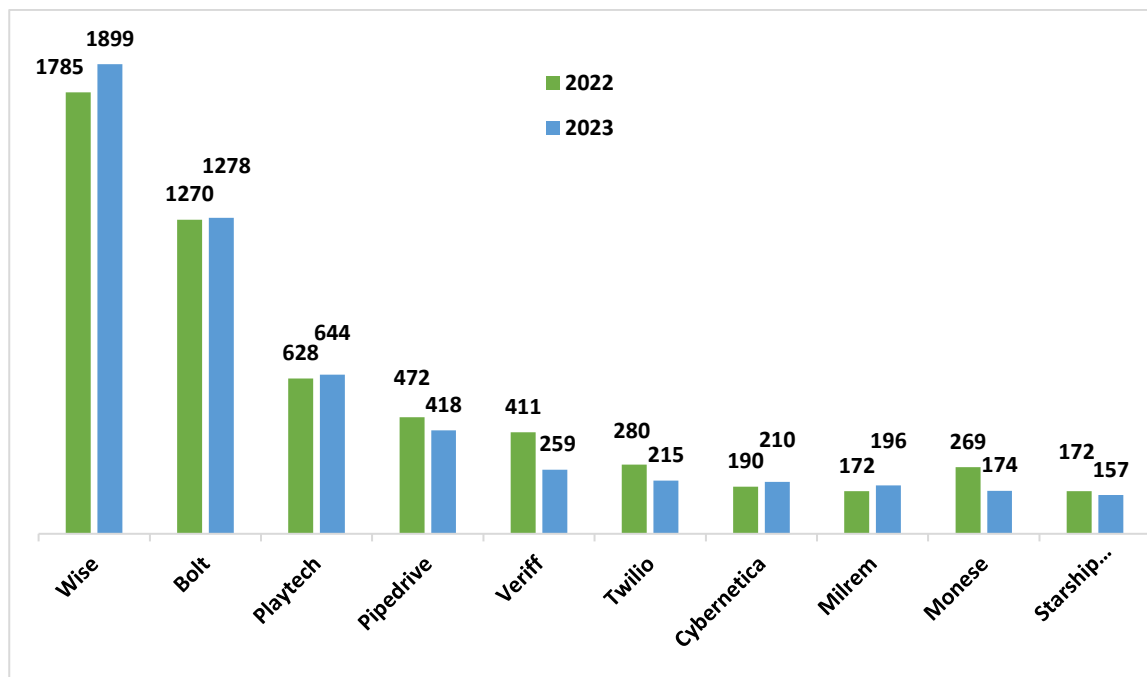
Matured startups – companies that have evolved from the startup phase and are older than 10 years which comply with the following conditions:

- has at least 50 employees work in Estonia;
- has paid labour taxes in Estonia in the last year for at least one million euros and
- has the cumulative increase in labour taxes during the last three years is 20 per cent.

According to Estonian Tax and Customs Board statistics, Estonia's startup sector has faced a 4% workforce reduction due to economic downturns, now numbering 12 484 employees from last year's 13 057. Approximately 69% of the employees work in startups, while growth companies employ 31%. According to the Estonian Tax and Customs Board, the top ten companies, including Wise (1899 employees), Bolt (1278 employees), and Playtech (644 employees), are responsible for 46% of the jobs created in the startup sector. According to the statistics by the Estonian Tax and Customs Board,

companies in the Estonian startup sector paid 323 million EUR in employment taxes, up 18% from the previous year's 273 million EUR. 65% of the taxes were contributed by startups, and 35% were paid by growth companies. The top 10 contributors create 50% of all sector employment taxes for the state, with well-known ecosystem leaders like Bolt (36,9 M EUR), Wise (34,9 M EUR), Playtech (17,8 M EUR), and Pipedrive (16,4 M EUR) yielding to the state.

Figure 1. TOP 10 biggest employers among Estonian startups by employee count, 2022-2023 (Source: Startup Estonia)



Requested by Startup Estonia, two studies were carried out. In July 2023, a report on Deep technologies, their alternative combinations, potential breakthroughs and their impact to Estonia⁹ was published. The study examined six deep technologies or their combinations, the potential breakthroughs of which are expected to have the greatest impact in Estonia: alternative meat production, wood biorefining, digitalized development of cell strains, embedded systems and nanochip technologies, artificial intelligence and machine learning, and hydrogen technology. Second study "The Future Maker's Journey: Will Tomorrow's Skills Come from School, Hobby or Youtube"¹⁰ with the aim understand what influences young people to develop a deeper interest in STEAM fields and to participate in activities that develop enterprisingness, and which role formal and hobby education, as well as self-learning play in the development of the interest.

In 2023, 12 temporary residence permits for working in the growth company were issued. TOP 5 nationalities included Brazil, China, Egypt, Philippines and Indonesia.

⁹ Available here:

https://media.voog.com/0000/0037/5345/files/S%C3%BCvatehnoogiate%20arengutrajektoorid%20ja%20nende%20t%C3%A4hendus%20Eestile%20l%C3%B5ppraport_juuli2023.pdf

¹⁰ Available here:

https://media.voog.com/0000/0037/5345/files/Future%20Makers%20Journey_inglise%20k.pdf

E-RESIDENCY

In 2023, the number of issued e-resident's digital IDs decreased by 13% compared to previous year. In 2023, the TOP 5 countries where e-residents were from, were Spain, Ukraine, Germany, Finland and Turkey. The total number of e-residents was 109 245 and TOP 5 citizenships Ukrainian, German, Finnish, Russian and Spanish.

Table 5. The number of issued e-resident's digital ID-s, 2018-2023 (Source: PBGB)

	2019	2020	2021	2022	2023
E-resident digital IDs	16 630	12 955	13 977	12 636	14 309

OTHER DEVELOPMENTS

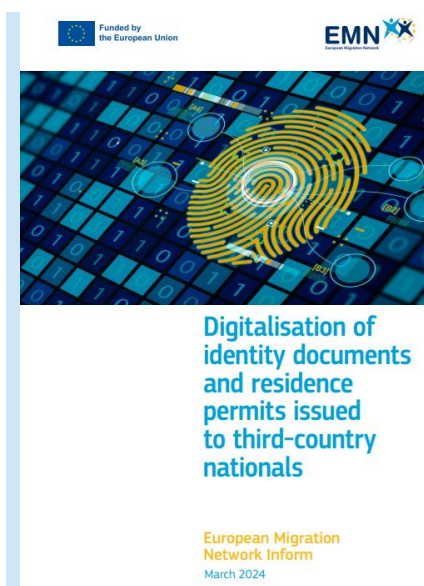
In December 2023, a new regulation was passed "Statute on Database of Registering Short-term Employment of Aliens in Estonia". New regulation was necessary as the PBGB is carrying out development activities which will result in the introduction of a new procedure for registering short-term employment in Estonia. Registering short-term employment will be migrated to a new online environment/database, which will make automated checks against other databases, keeps the data entered up-to-date and helps making registering procedures paperless.

Applications for registering short-term employment can be submitted via self-service and applicants can see the status of their application. In the near future, applicants can also communicate with PBGB's case managers via the same self-service portal. Digital improvements have been spurred by the need to improve the country's capacity to collect, manage and exchange data, make the procedures for registering short-term employment paperless, reduce manual workforce and make registering process more user-friendly. For the context, within the last 5 years from 2018 to 2022, an average of 30 000 short-term employment registrations have been made each year.

EMN Inform "Digitalisation of identity documents and residence permits issued to third-country nationals¹¹"

The inform sheds light on the motivations behind adopting digital-only documents in certain EMN Member and Observer Countries, where high numbers of arrivals and applications for residence stemming from Russia's war of aggression against Ukraine prompted a shift towards digital solutions. Countries like Estonia followed

¹¹ Available here: <https://www.emn.ee/en/publication/digitalisation-of-identity-documents-and-residence-permits-issued-to-third-country-nationals/>



suit by digitalising the procedure to apply for temporary protection – aiding with the administrative burden approximately 41,000 applications in December 2022. Likewise Lithuania successfully avoided the production of more than 42,000 physical documents through full digitalisation.

The inform also underscores particular concerns surrounding digital-only documents, emphasizing the importance of addressing issues related to digital literacy, potential fraud, and the need for interoperability during border checks. One of the aspects that the reporting EMN Members and Observer Countries emphasized was the importance of ensuring that vulnerable populations are not left behind and highlights the necessity for fallback solutions and common EU standards if digital-only documents are to be widely adopted.

3.4 STUDENTS AND RESEARCHERS

The number of TRP-s issued for studying decreased by 23% in 2023 compared to 2022. Main reason behind the decrease is Russian aggression against Ukraine, imposed sanctions and halting cooperation with higher education institutions in Russian Federation. Before the aggression, Russia was one of the destination countries for Estonian universities and higher education institutions. Large number of students used to come from Pskov, St Petersburg and Moscow. However, due to sanctioning, “Russian market” has disappeared. Thus, Education and Youth Board in cooperation with Ministry of Education and Research started to prepare for a new funding period and looking for new target countries.

In the academic year of 2023/2024, there are 4340 foreign students in Estonia from 125 countries. In total, foreign students make up 9,7% of the Estonian student population. The number of students coming from China, Latvia, Italy and Kazakhstan have grown the most. In the 2023/2024 academic year, Estonia received 1191 new international students, which is 20% less than last year. 3 most popular fields of study among foreign students are business, administration and law, and humanities and arts. Majority of foreign students study in English—language programmes. 5% study in Estonian-language undergraduate and postgraduate programmes.

Statistics Estonia, commissioned by the Education and Youth Board, analysed for the fifth time the economic contribution of working international students and international

graduates¹². Although the number of international degree students in Estonia was down from the previous years, international students paid 16.6 million euros in income and social tax in the academic year 2022/23, and graduates from the year before contributed 6.9 million euros. For students, this is 2.5 million euros more than in the previous academic year, while for graduates it is 1.5 million euros less. The study also found that:

- More than half (56%) of the international students in Estonia work during their studies; among local students, whereas 86% of the local students do.
- The majority of international graduates who stay in Estonia work in Tallinn.
- In the academic year 2022/23, labour taxes paid for international students working in Estonia amounted to 16.6 million euros.
- The previous year's international graduates contributed 6.9 million euros in income tax. This amount has decreased in a year, mainly due to a decline in the number of international graduates staying in Estonia to work.
- The most likely to work while studying are international students in information and communication technologies (ICT) or engineering, manufacturing and construction, as well as business, administration and law. 70% of international ICT students worked during their studies in the academic year 2022/23. majority of international graduates who stay in Estonia work in Tallinn.

In terms of legal developments, it is important to note the waiver to regulation no 42 "Imposition of sanctions of Government of Republic in connection with aggression of Russian Federation and Republic of Belarus"¹³ regarding students and researchers. Firstly, the sanction does apply to citizens of the Russian Federation and Belarus who hold a long-term visa for studying, a temporary residence permit for studying or a right of temporary stay in Estonia resulting from expiry of the said permit, who were in Estonia before the start of the aggression on 24th of February 2022 and who have completed studies on the basis of an Estonian-language curriculum or who have a proficiency in Estonian of at least level at B2. The waiver was introduced to provide students who arrived in Estonia to study before the beginning of the aggression in Ukraine, who have learned Estonian and wish to stay in Estonia with a possibility to continue their studies or work.

Secondly, the sanction does not apply to citizens of the Russian Federation and the Republic of Belarus who have a legal basis for staying in Estonia, who were in Estonia before the start of the aggression on 24th of February 2022 and who work as academic staff within the meaning of § 33 of the Higher Education Act and who apply for a temporary residence permit to work as academic staff (professor, lecturer, research fellow, teacher etc.). Academic staff is exempt from the language requirement. The waiver was introduced to provide academic staff (including researchers) who arrived in Estonia before the beginning of the aggression in Ukraine and wish to stay in Estonia with a possibility to continue their studies or work.

¹² Available: <https://www.stat.ee/en/news/working-international-students-and-graduates-contributed-over-23-million-euros-taxes-previous-academic-year>

¹³ Available: <https://www.riigiteataja.ee/akt/106062022002?leiaKehtiv=>

3.5 FAMILY REUNIFICATION

On 20th of June 2023 the Government of the Republic of Estonia voted in favour to amendments to Family Law Act and related legislation (including the Aliens Act, the Citizenship Act, the Act on Granting International Protection to Aliens, the Obligation to Leave and Prohibition on Entry Act etc.) which led to the introduction of marriage equality. The act established that as of 2024 marriages will be able to be contracted in Estonia between two adults regardless of their gender. On 6th of July 2023 relevant amendments were passed in the Aliens Act (in force from 1st of January 2024) to ensure coherence with other amendments e.g. the term “registered partner” was added alongside with spouse allowing registered partners to obtain a residence permit and visa.

Even though same-sex couples have been able to register their relationships as civil partnerships for several years already, the change in the law extends rights for these couples. Both marriage and registered partnerships bring rights and obligations for couples which do not extend to those in de facto relationships. These are mostly linked to home, assets, parentage and obtaining support.

4. INTERNATIONAL PROTECTION

4.1 STATISTICAL OVERVIEW OF THE YEAR 2023 IN INTERNATIONAL PROTECTION

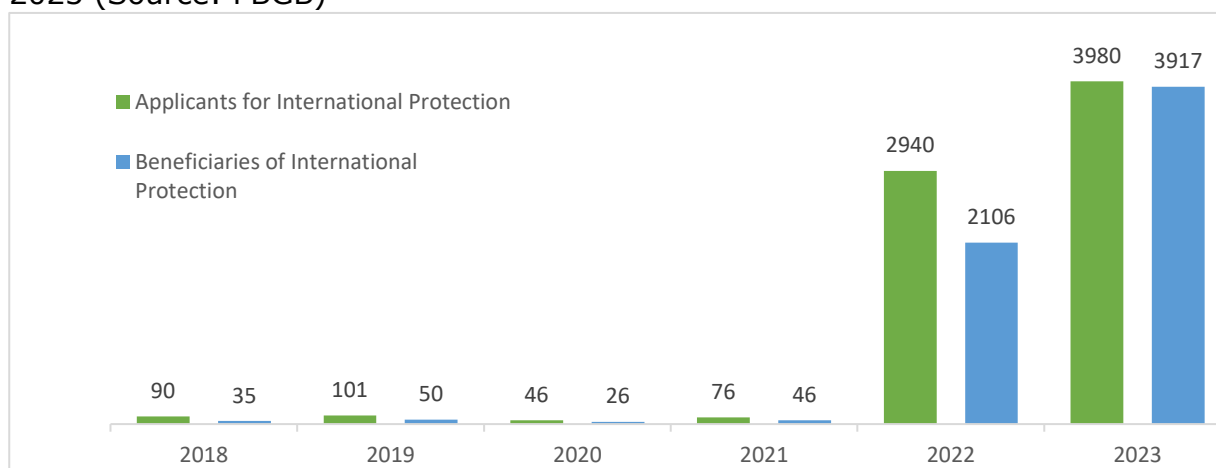
In Estonia, the number of asylum applicants and beneficiaries of international protection has remained relatively low, except during the war in Ukraine and the EU's decision to implement the temporary protection directive to provide Ukrainian refugees with residence permits in a streamlined process that does not overly burden national asylum systems.

Since 1997, a total of 8244 third-country nationals have applied for international protection (except temporary protection) in Estonia. International protection (refugee status and subsidiary protection status) has been granted to 6626 foreigners, including 213 persons who received protection and came to Estonia as part of the EU migration agenda. In total, 470 third-country nationals have received refugee status and 6156 subsidiary protection. In 2019 Estonia decided not to continue with resettlement and relocation activities¹⁴. Therefore, there were no persons resettled or relocated to Estonia within the framework of European Agenda on Migration in 2023.

In 2023, Estonia received 3980 first-time applications for asylum, marking an increase of 35% compared to the 2940 first-time applications submitted in 2022. In 2023, 62 third-country nationals received refugee status and 3855 subsidiary protection status. Top three countries by nationality for those who received refugee status were Russian Federation (35), Afghanistan (12) and Belarus (11). Subsidiary protection was granted mainly to Ukrainian nationals (3848). The increase in the number of asylum applications can be attributed to the ongoing armed conflict in Ukraine and the need to provide legal basis for stay in the country for those Ukraine nationals who left Ukraine before 24th of February (e.g. already stayed in Estonia) and were now unable to return but did not fall under the scope of the TPD.

¹⁴ Resettlement: In the EU context, the transfer, on a request from the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) and based on their need for international protection, of a third-country national or a stateless person, from a third-country to an EU Member State, where they are permitted to reside with one of the following statuses: (i) refugee status within the meaning of Art. 2(d) of Directive 2011/95/EU (Recast Qualification Directive), (ii) a status which offers the same rights and benefits under national and EU law as refugee status (see EMN Glossary).

Figure 2: Number of applicants and beneficiaries of international protection 2019-2023 (Source: PBGB)



4.2 INTERNATIONAL PROTECTION PROCEDURE

There were no overarching or crosscutting legal or policy developments in relation to international protection in 2023. The main focus was on accommodating the needs of high numbers of war refugees from Ukraine. One of the reasons for not having any overarching developments was the anticipation of the Pact on Migration and Asylum which the European Parliament voted in favour for on 10 April 2024. The new migration rules will entail large scale changes in the Estonian legal system. Additionally, there will be an evaluation from EUAA in 2024-2025, which will give an important input to the legislative system regarding international protection.

With the ongoing Russian aggression in Ukraine and the increase of asylum seekers from Ukraine, the international protection procedure continued to be conducted in a simplified manner for Ukrainian citizens taking up to a month. In 2023, in order to enhance the access to the procedure for international protection, the PBGB service points started to accept online bookings and it was possible to apply for international protection at the service points. Additionally, the PBGB made various preparations. For example, preparations for made for taking into use the Dublin leaflets prepared by the Commission and to follow the Commission's Dublin roadmap. Preparations were also made to deal efficiently with border procedures in case of mass influx of migrants due to the instrumentalization of migrants by Russia at the Finnish border.

In June 2023, the decision¹⁵ by Tallinn Administrative Court entered into force. The court found that a person with special needs must be guaranteed adequate support in international protection proceedings. The court found that the special needs assessment conducted by PBGB was formal and did ascertain what kind of support the applicant might need due to his mental health problems. Additionally, UNCHR made suggestion to the PGBG about creating a vulnerability assessment working group. As a result, the PBGB started preparing for vulnerability assessment working group with an aim to improve the vulnerability assessment in international protection procedures and guarantee well-functioning of the system.

¹⁵ Decision number 3-22-2684 (Tallinn Administrative Court)

In December 2023, the Supreme Court decided¹⁶ regarding a case of international protection that the lower-level courts themselves should have made an assessment of the circumstances that had emerged at the time of the judgment and based on that upheld the PPA's decision or - if convinced of the need for protection - obliged the PPA to grant international protection to the applicant. The decision represents an important change in the court practice.¹⁷

4.3 RECEPTION OF APPLICANTS FOR INTERNATIONAL PROTECTION

In 2023 the Social Insurance Board started amending the regulation on internal procedure rules of the accommodation centre. The amended regulation will enter into force in 2024. The aim of the development was to make sure that the house rules meet the needs of daily life in the reception centre, and possibly also be applicable to temporary facilities (for instance in case of increased migratory trends).

On 20 June 2023, the Supreme Court of Estonia decided and declared unconstitutional and invalid the provision in the Regulation "Internal Rules of Detention Center" that concerned prohibiting mobile phones for all residents in detention center. The Court ruled that it should be a discretionary decision if the mobile phone should be allowed based on personal and other relevant circumstances. On the one hand the security of the detention center and the rights of the persons staying there and on the other hand the fundamental rights of the foreigner staying in the detention center should be considered. Due to the decision, the regulation was changed. According to the new provisions in the Internal Rules of Detention Center the foreigner is allowed to use a mobile phone and a computer at least one hour a day during free time in the condition that it is not possible to make photos or videos with the device. It is possible to forbid the usage in case it might be a threat to the detention centre's internal order or hamper the return.

4.4 INITIATIVES BY NGO-S, INTERNATIONAL ORGANISATIONS AND THINK-THANKS

In 2023 the Institute of Balti Studies published an analysis¹⁸ on **counselling service for international protection applicants and returnees**. The analysis was ordered by the Ministry of the Interior and co-financed by the Ministry and AMIF. The analysis pointed out various recommendations, e.g. defining the specific objectives, content and the boundaries of the service, defining confidentiality, objectivity and neutrality etc. The PBGB started to plan changes to the counselling service based on the recommendations and updated the information materials.

In January 2023, Estonian Refugee Council organised a demo day of the "**Empowering Women**" mentoring programme in Tallinn in cooperation with Garage48 aimed at female refugees who wish to rebuild their future in Estonia through entrepreneurship. Within the entrepreneurship programme, participants were introduced to the Estonian business environment and were given the opportunity to develop their business ideas based on problem-solving and design thinking principles. The program first started in

¹⁶ Decision number 3-22-2509

¹⁷ Available: <https://humanrights.ee/2024/02/margiline-kohtuotsus-saastab-inimesi-topeltmenetlusest/>

¹⁸ Available: <https://www.ibs.ee/publikatsioonid/rahvusvahelise-kaitse-taotlejate-ja-tagasisaadetavate-noustamisteenuse-analuus/>

the fall of 2022, and as a result, ten new and successful female refugee entrepreneurs are operating in Estonia. In September, another programme was started with the same name, and the final event took place, where the 16 best business ideas were selected. The best teams were awarded the opportunity to participate in a 6-month mentoring program that also included mental health support. The programme was conducted in English and Russian.¹⁹

In the summer of 2023, Estonian Refugee Council organised five **youth camp** exchanges, in which more than 120 children and young people participated. The Refugee Council also paid school support for all refugee children starting school in Estonia until the end of April 2023. In 2023, 370 children received support.²⁰

Estonian Refugee Council also started offering the **MindSpring** programme to refugees all over Estonia. It is a group-based program for refugees that supports coping in a foreign country. Participating in the programme raises group members' awareness and provides new knowledge and skills, and an expert leads them with an experience similar to the group participants. The first groups started in March, and by the end of the year, there were 21 groups in Keila, Haapsalu, Viljandi, Pärnu, Sillamäe, Tallinn and Tartu. A total of 163 people participated in the groups.²¹

Estonian Red Cross opened a **help center** for refugees in Tallinn, where refugees receive reliable support from Red Cross staff and volunteers. In the center, the Red Cross ensures access to various important services based on the needs of refugees. Help is available to all those who have arrived to Estonia. Red Cross help centers provide both humanitarian aid and share necessary information. Services and activities may vary from aid point to aid station depending on regional needs and capabilities.²²

Starting from 2023, all new clients of Tallinn's social welfare system with a foreign background (regular migrants, beneficiaries of international and temporary protection) who require social assistance and additional support for integration and independent living are directed to the **Tallinn Migration Centre**. To achieve this, the Migration Centre collaborates closely with the asylum seekers' Accommodation Centre. Within the framework of the AMIF project, coordinators operate in the centre, providing support services to beneficiaries of international and temporary protection. Additionally, in August, the position of integration manager was established at the Tallinn Migration Centre, with the support of ESF+ funding.

In the fall, the Estonian Refugee Council, in collaboration with the Labour Inspectorate, organized the "**Employability**" labour market programme aimed at helping refugees enter the Estonian job market. During the programme, various aspects of the Estonian job market trends, legal issues, and application opportunities were introduced, CV writing skills and preparing oneself for a job interview were taught. The programme helps to reduce the vulnerability of refugees, as due to their lack of knowledge about the local job market they may face challenging situations. Fifty people participated in the two-week-long labour market programme, and after completing the programme,

¹⁹ Available: <https://www.pagulasabi.ee/en/estonian-refugee-councils-2023-recap>

²⁰ Available: <https://www.pagulasabi.ee/en/estonian-refugee-councils-2023-recap>

²¹ Available: <https://www.pagulasabi.ee/en/estonian-refugee-councils-2023-recap>

²² Available: https://redcross.ee/uudised/avasime-tallinnas-abikeskuse-pogenikele?fbclid=IwAR1SzUdysueY6ck1hyZDkEmlbuDMbYZJuzPE0ZJY_WjxSk19v1ULD3jHhao_aem_AU7Ih--aHOUhLyqPIepLJg1X-AVOjIDkxLx4AEI8QP68r9eTNEiMabMsUHCqTsN62xYNAdnDe5t8tVTqbed-CqHH

they could consult with mentors for three months. Participation in the programme was free, and if needed, transportation and accommodation costs for the participants were covered. The training sessions were conducted in English and Russian.²³

4.5 OTHER DEVELOPMENTS

In August 2023, the Police and Border Guard Board (PBGB) signed a cooperation agreement with UNHCR.²⁴ The cooperation agreement stipulates, among other provisions, monitoring activities. UNHCR focuses on organisation of entry of refugees to Estonia, their access to asylum and their protection against return. Additionally, UNHCR supports measures aimed at enhancing the knowledge and skills of PBGB staff regarding refugee law and refugee protection standards. Under the agreement, UNHCR has the right to oversee the activities of PBGB concerning individuals in need of asylum at border points, at asylum interviews and in accommodation centres for asylum seekers.

In November, the Automated Biometric Identification System database ABIS was completed. The corresponding legislation was adopted in 2021. ABIS is a central national database where biometric data gathered in state proceedings is stored, it allows to compare biometric data using artificial intelligence, thereby increasing the reliability of verifying personal identification and verification of identity. This gives even better assurance that a person can only have one identity in Estonia.

On 20.06 2023 (entry into force 01.01.2024) amendments to the Family Law Act and other related acts were adopted. With the amendments marriage equality was established and same-sex couples were granted the right to marry. In connection to establishing the marriage equality in Estonia, the provisions regarding family members in the Act on Granting International Protection to Aliens were amended. According to the new provisions family members of an applicant for international protection are: 1) his or her spouse; 1¹) their registered partner; 2) his or her unmarried minor child, including an adopted child; 3) an unmarried minor child, including an adopted child, of them and their spouse or registered partner; 4) his or her parent or guardian if the applicant is a minor for the purposes of the Estonian law, except in the case his or her active legal capacity has been expanded for the purpose of getting married and his or her spouse is considered to be his or her family member.

Family members of a refugee and of a person eligible for subsidiary protection are: 1) his or her spouse; 1¹) their registered partner; 2) an unmarried minor child, including an adopted child, of them and their spouse or registered partner; 3) an unmarried and minor child, including an adopted child, under their custody or under the custody of their spouse or registered partner. In the case of shared custody the agreement of the other party sharing custody is required; 4) an unmarried adult child of them or their spouse or registered partner in case the child is unable to cope independently due to the child's state of health or disability; 5) a parent or grandparent maintained by them or their spouse or registered partner in case the country of origin does not provide support resulting from other family ties. Even though same-sex couples have been able to register their relationships as civil partnerships for several years already, the change in the law extends rights for these couples. Both marriage and registered partnerships bring rights and obligations for

²³ Available: <https://entrepreneur.pagulasabi.ee/estonia/employability-programme-2023>

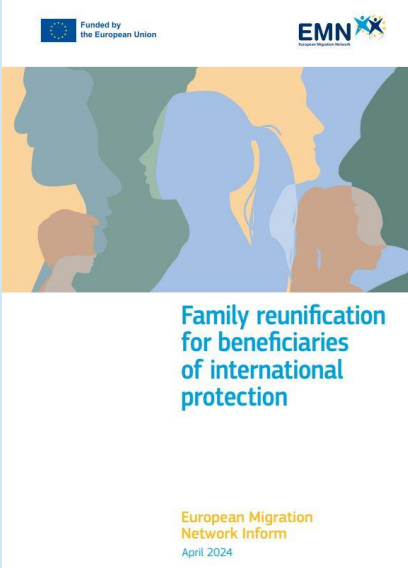
²⁴ Available: <https://www.politsei.ee/et/uudised/ppa-allkirjastas-koostoeoeleppe-ue-ro-pagulaste-uelemvoliniku-ameti-pohja-ja-baltimaade-esindusega-11428>

couples which do not extend to those in de facto relationships. These are mostly linked to home, assets, parentage and obtaining support.

Throughout the course of 2023, UNHCR and partners regularly provided information and legal counselling to asylum-seekers and refugees regarding asylum procedures, access to temporary protection and access to rights and services to aid their inclusion and integration. By the end of 2023, UNHCR's partner, the Estonian Human Rights Centre (EHRC), had assisted 510 individuals with in-person legal counselling.²⁵

By the end of 2023, a total of 5,266 individuals had been reached through outreach activities via UNHCR and partners, the majority courtesy of the Estonian Refugee Council (ERC). This figure also includes those reached through UNHCR and Mondo: a total of 355 refugees and asylum-seekers and 1,765 host-community members participated in workshops at schools, focusing on two-way communication between local and refugee communities.²⁶

By the end of the year, UNHCR and partners - predominantly Estonian Refugee Council - had conducted a total of 315 protection monitoring interviews at various locations including Tallinn, Pärnu, Jõhvi, Kohtla-Järve and Narva.²⁷



EMN Inform “Family reunification for beneficiaries of international protection”²⁸”

The inform highlights the overall process of family reunification, documentary evidence needed, and family reunification with or for children coming of age. It also addresses the different practices between minor and the specific case of dependent adult children. The inform analyses the documentary evidence required in EMN Member and Observer Countries. Proof of pre-existing family ties between the sponsor and the family member is the main type of documentary proof required for family reunification reporting countries, such as marriage or birth certificates. Variation also exists in the definition of eligible family members, however, in instances where these documents are unavailable, the inform provides an overview of the alternative evidences that can be provided. These can include interviews, DNA testing, or written declarations, in some cases photos or letters are also admitted.

Lastly, there is consideration for family reunification with or for children coming of age, aligning with recent CJEU judgments. The judgments emphasize using the application submission date, not the decision date, to determine a child's minority status during reunification proceedings.

²⁵ Available: <https://data.unhcr.org/en/documents/details/107807>

²⁶ Available: <https://data.unhcr.org/en/documents/details/107807>

²⁷ Available: <https://data.unhcr.org/en/documents/details/107807>

²⁸ Available: <https://www.emn.ee/en/publication/digitalisation-of-identity-documents-and-residence-permits-issued-to-third-country-nationals/>

5. TEMPORARY PROTECTION AND OTHER MEASURES IN RESPONSE TO PERSONS FLEEING THE WAR IN UKRAINE

5.1 TEMPORARY PROTECTION FOR PERSONS FLEEING THE WAR IN UKRAINE

On 24 February, Russian Federation invaded Ukraine which instigated Europe's largest refugee crisis since World War II. The Temporary Protection Directive (TPD), which was adopted following the conflicts in former Yugoslavia, was triggered for the first time by the European Council's response to the unprecedented Russian invasion in Ukraine in order to offer quick and effective assistance to people fleeing the war. On 2 March, the European Commission rapidly proposed to activate the TPD and on 4 March, the Council unanimously adopted the decision giving those fleeing the war in Ukraine the right to temporary protection.²⁹

Estonia activated the TPD on 9 March with a Decree of the Government³⁰, which allows the citizens of Ukraine and their family members as well as beneficiaries of international protection in Ukraine and their family members, who fled the country after Russian military aggression started on 24th of February, to apply for temporary protection.

In order to provide a quick response to the start of the aggression in Ukraine and foresee necessary exemptions for legal entry and stay for those fleeing the war as well as for those already in Estonia who were now unable to return, exceptions for Ukrainian citizens and their family members to enter into and stay in Estonia were made based on the order of the Director General of the PBGB on 24th of February 2022 no 1.1-4.1/810 . The order was in force from 24th of February until 30th of June and allowed:

- Ukrainian citizens and their family members to enter into Estonia and stay in Estonia who did not have a biometric passport or whose basis for stay in Estonia should otherwise have expired; '
- Ukrainian citizens and their family members who lived in Ukraine until 24th of February and left Ukraine on or after 24th of February, who did not have a valid Estonian visa and had not yet received a residence permit of temporary protection;
- Persons and their family members who had been granted international protection in Ukraine, irrespective of their citizenship and who did not have a valid visa and had not yet received a residence permit of temporary protection;
- Ukrainian citizens who were legally staying in Estonia before 24th of February 2022 and who did not have a valid visa.

The PBGB's order was replaced by amendments to the Aliens Act, which were passed on May 14th and specify the legal basis for entry arrival and temporary stay in Estonia. Legal basis for entry into and stay in Estonia as of 24th of February 2022 was granted to persons eligible for temporary protection and Ukrainian citizens who stayed in Estonia prior to 24th of February 2022.

²⁹ Available: https://home-affairs.ec.europa.eu/policies/migration-and-asylum/common-european-asylum-system/temporary-protection_en 9

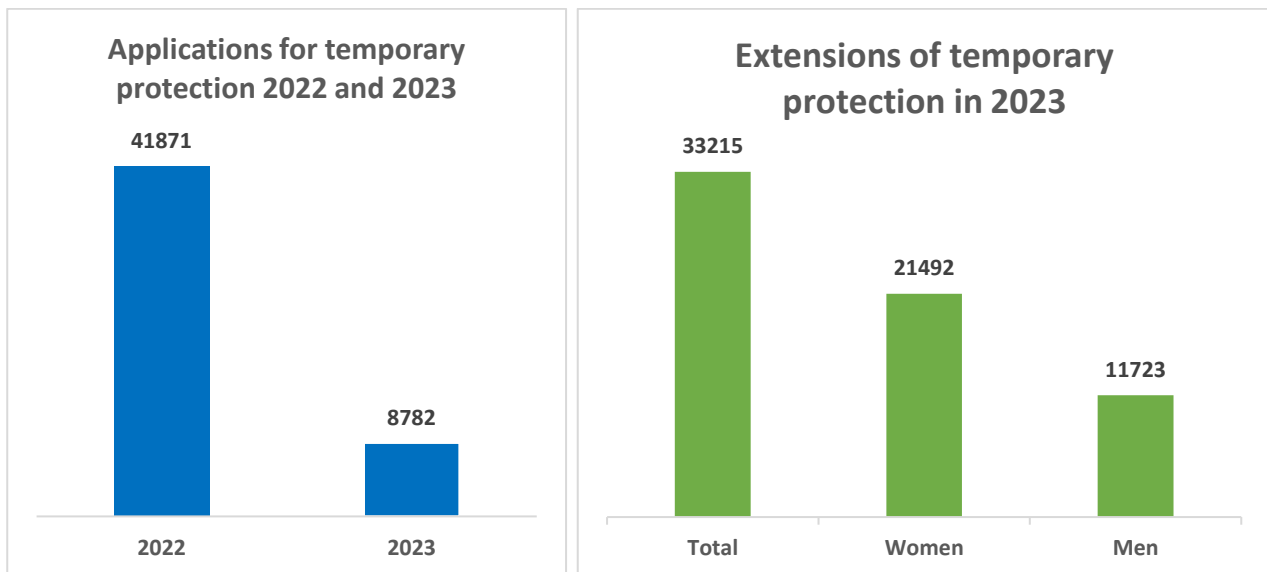
³⁰ Available: <https://www.riigiteataja.ee/akt/308032022010>

On 21st of March 2023, an amendment to the Aliens Act entered into force that allows those Ukrainian citizens who were in Estonia before the start of aggression in Ukraine on 24th of February 2022 and to whom temporary protection may be applied, to formalize their right for temporary stay in Estonia as a long-term visa thus enabling them to travel.

In September 2023, EU Council decided to extend the temporary protection for people fleeing from Russia's war of aggression against Ukraine from 4 March 2024 to 4 March 2025. In Estonia, it was decided that in case an applications for temporary protection was made after the decision, temporary protection would last until March 2025. Before that deadline, temporary protection lasted for a year, after which the person had to submit a new application for an extension. Similarly, if an extension application was submitted in September 2023 onwards, temporary protection would be extended until March 2025. The aim of this amendment was to reduce administrative burden by avoiding the need to extend the residence permits again for a few months until the temporary protection ends in March 2025.³¹

With the decision to extend temporary protection until March 2025, the PBGB decided to amend the renewal process. Starting from September 2023, individuals seeking to extend temporary protection must visit a PBGB service office to have a new photo taken at a speed capture kiosk. Additionally, they may be required to answer additional questions regarding their request to extend their status.

Figure 3. Applications for temporary protection 2022 and 2023 and extensions of temporary protection in 2023 (Source PBGB)



5.2 RIGHTS

Accommodation

³¹ Available: <https://www.politsei.ee/en/instructions/information-on-the-war-in-ukraine/extension-of-temporary-protection>

In the first half of 2023, the Social Insurance Board continued with an exception where, in certain cases, other Ukrainian refugees (such as those in transit or those already holding residence permits in Estonia) were allowed to access short-term accommodation provided by the Social Insurance Board. This exception aimed to alleviate the pressure on local municipalities and their obligation to provide immediate assistance.

As a principle, the Social Insurance Board states that when individuals possess residence permits, there are typically no barriers to them pursuing independent living. Therefore, the Social Insurance Board focused on supporting the transition from short-term accommodations to more permanent solutions, such as rental apartments or similar arrangements. This support included counseling and empowerment provided by professionals at the short-term accommodation sites to help individuals find permanent residences.

In 2023 there was a gradual decline in the number of Ukrainian refugees arriving in Estonia. Due to the lower number of incoming individuals, the Social Insurance Board closed its four information points (in Jõhvi, Tartu, Pärnu, and Tallinn) and gradually reduced the number of short-term accommodation sites because there was less demand.

Starting from November 2023, beneficiaries of temporary protection are integrated to regular reception system (=reception centre etc). The aim was to return to the regular system after the mass influx, reduce the costs and ensure that all refugees are guaranteed same rights and access to services on the same grounds.

Healthcare

In May 2023, the Ministry of Social Affairs allocated some funding to support the mental health of Ukrainian refugees and facilitate the integration of refugee communities.³²

Organizations and institutions that offer or wish to provide mental health services or community support to refugees are eligible to apply for this support. The mental health service support aims to provide assistance in the native language to those in need, alleviating the negative impact of trauma, crisis, or psychiatric disorders. The services offered are intended to support the coping mechanisms of war refugees and their families, helping to prevent the development of severe psychiatric disorders that would ultimately place an additional burden on the healthcare system.

The community support funding is allocated to promote the integration of refugees into communities and to support their well-being. Refugees who have arrived in Estonia may not yet be familiar with Estonian society and its legal system. Their access to necessary services is hindered by language barriers, as well as legal, cultural obstacles, and a lack of awareness. Additionally, newly arrived individuals in Estonia may lack a supportive network and may require external assistance in their daily activities.

As of 01.10.23 no further voluntary primary health checks were carried out free of charge. The BTPs were integrated into regular health care system. The aim was to return to the regular system after the mass influx, reduce the costs and ensure that all refugees are guaranteed same rights and access to services on the same grounds.

³² Available: Regulation RT I, 02.05.2023, 1 by the Minister of Social Protection "Sõjapõgenike vaimse tervise teenuste ja kogukondliku toe toetus aastal 2023" [Support for mental health services and community support for war refugees in 2023].

War refugees from Ukraine who arrived in Estonia after 24.02.2022 were offered the opportunity to receive need-based **psychological counselling**, psychotherapy (including couple and family therapy), individual and group creative therapy free of charge through Johannes Mihkelson Center. All services were offered in Tartu, Tallinn and, depending on need, in other regions of Southern Estonia. The service is provided by mental health specialists with appropriate training and work experience, all of whom are Russian-speaking, including one Ukrainian-speaking psychologist.³³

In the previous academic year, NGO Mondo supported 214 Ukrainian children in Estonia with **art therapy workshops**. the art therapy workshop is a great opportunity for students to express their emotions and analyze them together with the instructor. The teacher expressed the hope that his students will have the opportunity to participate in art therapy activities later on, because long-term intervention is more effective. The project was supported by the Estonian Center for International Development.³⁴

Education

In March, May and August 2023, the Ministry of Education and Research allocated additional financial support to local governments and private general education schools and kindergartens to provide assistance in continuing the educational for children and young people who arrived from Ukraine this year. All children living in Estonia are subject to compulsory school attendance from the age of 7 until the acquisition of basic education or until the age of 17, and local governments ensure a school place for all children of age as soon as possible. Additionally, local governments need to ensure kindergarten placement to its residents upon request. Activating the TPD granted similar rights and obligations to Ukrainian refugees with local residents, thus local governments and schools needed additional funding to provide their services.

This support is provided at a rate of 465 euros per child attending a kindergarten or nursery and 506 euros per month per student in general education schools, with the funds transferred to the school or kindergarten operator. The funding can be used for the following purposes:

- establishing primary and general education facilities (including the remuneration of teachers and assistant teachers, procurement of educational materials and technological resources, and organizing study trips);
- providing additional basic-level Estonian language instruction;
- Organizing educational support services (interpreters, speech therapists, psychologists, etc.);
- arranging support services for education (e.g., student transportation, catering);

³³ Available: <https://www.jmk.ee/toetame-ukraina-sojapogenike-vaimset-tervist/>

³⁴ Available: <https://mondo.org.ee/mondo-toetab-ukraina-lapsi-eestis-kunstiteraapia-tootubadega/>

- offering extracurricular activities, hobby education, or youth work.^{35 36}

The workload of teachers is alleviated by Ukrainian education professionals. In addition to Ukrainian refugee students, many educational institutions have also welcomed employees from Ukraine who can help alleviate the additional workload resulting from Ukrainian children. They assist by translating educational materials, teaching classes, acting as mentors to students, and more.³⁷

Employment

In May 2023, the Estonian government allocated €4.7 million in funding for the provision of Estonian language courses and other supporting activities.³⁸ In cases where proficiency in the Estonian language is necessary for gaining employment, individuals can also access more advanced Estonian language training through the Estonian Unemployment Insurance Fund.³⁹ Therefore, additional funding has also been allocated from EU REACT resources to offer Estonian language instruction as part of employment services in 2023.⁴⁰

In October 2023 the Estonian think tank Foresight Center published a report on Ukrainian refugees in the labour market. The report concluded that Ukrainian refugees have integrated in the labour market in Estonia more successfully than they have in other countries, but there remains room for improvement in matching the qualifications of those arriving from Ukraine with appropriate jobs. More than a third of the refugees from the war in Ukraine who have arrived in Estonia have found a job, and 27,000 people have entered the local labour market. Ukrainians with jobs are now about 4% of the Estonian labour force.⁴¹

In December, the four-month entrepreneurship programme **Boost** or "Developing Ukrainian-founded Businesses" business development programme, created in cooperation with Estonian Refugee Council and the Baltic Innovation Agency, came to

³⁵ Available: Estonian Ministry of Education and Science (2023). Haridusasutuste pidajad saavad täiendavat toetust Ukrainast saabunud laste abistamiseks [Educational institutions receive additional support to help children who have arrived from Ukraine]. Press release 05.05.2023. <https://www.hm.ee/uudised/haridusasutuste-pidajad-saavad-taiendavat-toetust-ukrainast-saabunud-laste-abistamiseks> (last accessed: October 5, 2023)

³⁶ Available: Estonian Ministry of Education and Science (2023). Haridus- ja Teadusministeerium eraldab haridusasutuste pidajatele täiendavat toetust, et tagada Ukrainast saabunud laste haridustee jätkumine [The Ministry of Education and Research allocates additional support to educational institutions in order to ensure the continuation of the educational path of children who arrived from Ukraine]. Press release 03.03.2023. <https://www.hm.ee/uudised/haridus-ja-teadusministeerium-eraldab-haridusasutuste-pidajatele-taiendavat-toetust-et> (last accessed: October 5, 2023)

³⁷ Available: Foresight Centre (2023). Ukraina lapsed Eesti hariduses [Ukrainian children in Estonian education system]. <https://arenguseire.ee/raportid/ukraina-lapsed-eesti-hariduses/> (last accessed: October 5, 2023)

³⁸ Available: Postimees (2023).

Valitsus eraldas reservist 4,7 miljonit Ukraina põgenike keeleõppeks [The government allocated 4.7 million from the reserve for language training of Ukrainian refugees]. 17.05.2023. <https://haridus.postimees.ee/7776286/valitsus-eraldas-reservist-4-7-miljonit-ukraina-pogenike-keeleopppeks> (last accessed: October 5, 2023)

³⁹ Available: Estonian Ministry of Social Affairs (2023). Ukraina sõjapõgenikud on tööturul hästi hakkama saanud [Ukrainian refugee have performed well in the labour market]. Press release 15.05.2023. <https://www.sm.ee/uudised/ukraina-sojapogenikud-tooturul-hasti-hakkama-saanud> (last accessed October 5, 2023)

⁴⁰ Available: Web-based questionnaire filled by official from the Estonian Ministry of Economics and Communications (received on September 5, 2023)

⁴¹ Available: <https://arenguseire.ee/en/news/refugees-from-the-war-in-ukraine-have-done-better-in-the-labour-market-than-expected/>

an end. The aim of the programme was to provide Ukrainian entrepreneurs, who were forced to discontinue their businesses in their home country, with the opportunity to continue their activities in Estonia so that they could create value for themselves and the society as a whole. The programme consisted of eight training sessions that taught management and strategic thinking, marketing, digitalization and company development opportunities in Estonia. More than 30 Ukrainian entrepreneurs with different experiences received support from the programme to develop or continue their businesses. The Boost programme was aimed at refugees living in Tartu and Jõhvi. The jury selected the three best, who received a 1,000-euro grant to promote their business.⁴²

5.3 OTHER DEVELOPMENTS

On 20.06 2023 (entry into force 01.01.2024) amendments to the Family Law Act and other related acts were adopted. With the amendments marriage equality was established and same-sex couples were granted the right to marry. In connection to establishing the marriage equality in Estonia, the provisions regarding family members in the Act on Granting International Protection to Aliens were amended. According to the amended provision family members of a person eligible for temporary protection are: 1) his or her spouse; 1¹) their registered partner; 2) an unmarried minor child, including an adopted child, of them and their spouse or registered partner. The amendments ensured that marriage equality is also guaranteed to the beneficiaries of temporary protection.

In January 2023 Estonian and Finnish Ministries of the Interior reached an agreement whereby Finland would receive up to 100 Ukrainian war refugees per week, if the refugees express their wish to do so. In Finland, war refugees will be able to apply for temporary protection and are guaranteed the relevant support services. As Estonia was reaching its limit in receiving Ukrainian war refugees, Estonia and the Finnish government decided to cooperate by offering some of the refugees the option to move on to Finland.

As of 2023, Estonia is included in the Ukraine Regional Refugee Response Plan, complementing the government-led response. The plan is coordinated by UNHCR and has been developed by 14 humanitarian organisations in Estonia.⁴³

From March to December 2023, IOM Estonia carried out surveys with refugees from Ukraine to improve the understanding of the profiles of Ukrainian refugees residing or transiting through Estonia, including their displacement patterns, intentions and needs in Estonia. The results were published in interim reports and the annual report.⁴⁴ Since April 2022, IOM Displacement Tracking Matrix (DTM) has been regularly surveying people who are residing in the eleven countries included in the Regional Refugee Response Plan for Ukraine. In Estonia, DTM was activated in March 2023.

⁴² Available: <https://www.pagulasabi.ee/en/estonian-refugee-councils-2023-recap>

⁴³ Available: <https://data.unhcr.org/en/documents/details/101450>

⁴⁴ International Organization for Migration (IOM), Apr 11 2024. DTM Estonia — Surveys with Refugees from Ukraine: Needs, Intentions, and Integration Challenges — Annual Report (2023). IOM, Estonia. Available: <https://dtm.iom.int/reports/estonia-surveys-refugees-ukraine-needs-intentions-and-integration-challenges-annual-report?close=true>

In 2023, with the aim of raising awareness about refugees from Ukraine in Estonia, through Mondo 69 communication interventions and/or content pieces were produced promoting a positive narrative about refugees and their active role in society.⁴⁵

On January 9th, the Integration Foundation opened a call for proposals aimed at supporting the organization of Ukrainian-language cultural events for young Ukrainian refugees. This initiative is carried out in collaboration with Ukrainian cultural societies, Estonian NGOs, and cultural institutions. Additionally, the grant supports the teaching of the Ukrainian language and culture, as well as the publication of children's and youth literature in Ukrainian. The objective of the grant is to ensure that young Ukrainian refugees up to the age of 19 in Estonia have opportunities to engage with the Ukrainian language and culture through community activities. Preserving national identity is crucial for both the adaptation of Ukrainian youth in Estonia and their potential return to their homeland.

In furthering its commitment to fostering social inclusion of refugees from Ukraine in Estonia, IOM Estonia organized a specialized summer camp in Kihelkonna, Saaremaa Island. This initiative, catering to 31 children, blended language learning with diverse activities. The positive feedback from both children and parents serves as a testament to the success of this collaborative effort. Additionally, IOM Estonia responded to a request from Saaremaa municipality and provided 1,000 reflectors to refugees, aimed at enhancing pedestrian safety during extreme weather conditions.⁴⁶

⁴⁵ Available: <https://data.unhcr.org/en/documents/details/107807>

⁴⁶ Available: https://www.iom.int/sites/g/files/tmzbdl486/files/documents/2024-02/iom_ukraine_neighbouring_countries_2022-2024_2_years_of_response.pdf

6. UNACCOMPANIED MINORS AND OTHER VULNERABLE GROUPS

6.1 OTHER VULNERABLE GROUPS

There were no significant changes regarding unaccompanied minors.

In early June, the decision of the Tallinn Administrative Court entered into force, which found that adequate support must be provided to a person with special needs in the international protection process and that, in the case at hand, the assessment of special needs conducted by the PBGB had been formal and did not identify what support the applicant might need due to their mental health issues. As a result of failing to assess vulnerability, the PBGB significantly violated the applicant's right to be heard in the international protection process. Due to the shortcomings identified by the decision of the Tallinn Administrative Court and suggestions by UNHCR, a vulnerability assessment working group was created in the PBGB. The objective of the working group was to enhance overall vulnerability assessment in international protection procedures and to ensure improved system performance.

On June 12, the government initiated a bill amending the Penal Code, the Code of Criminal Procedure, and the Code of Misdemeanour Procedure, aimed at better regulating incitement to hatred and hate-motivated crimes. Incitement to hatred is already prohibited in Estonia under current legislation, but it does not provide real protection to minority groups, as it requires a specific consequence to the victim: a threat to life, health, or property. The new bill provides for penalties for individuals who incite hatred in a manner that may endanger public order. A new protected group added to the bill are persons with disabilities. By the end of 2023, the updated legislation had not yet been adopted, and its final content and effective date are still unknown.

7. INTEGRATION AND INCLUSION OF MIGRANTS

7.1 NATIONAL INTEGRATION STRATEGY

On the 26th of January, the Minister of Culture signed the order "Supporting Local Governments in Providing Integration and Adaptation Services." The objective was to increase the role of local governments and enhance their capacity in providing services to newly arrived immigrants, individuals with different language and cultural backgrounds, and returnees. For this purpose, over the next six years, a total of over 6.1 million euros will be allocated from the European Social Fund+ and national co-financing.

From July 1st, there was a change in the responsibilities of various ministries, including the domain of employment, which encompasses equality policy and addresses issues concerning the integration of immigrants into the labour market and equal treatment. This responsibility moved from the jurisdiction of the Ministry of Social Affairs to the Ministry of Economic Affairs and Communications.

In 2023, the web-service 'Settling in Estonia' was initiated.⁴⁷ The objective of the service is to facilitate the process of newly arrived immigrants settling in Estonia by ensuring they are well-informed about the available services. The service acts as a hub for all crucial information on existing services for newly arrived immigrants. The platform is structured as a roadmap, guiding the user from one service to another. The information service is available in three languages – English, Russian, and Estonian. It includes instructions on how to register the place of residence, register with a family physician, participate in the adaptation programme, find a suitable Estonian language course, change driving licence, find a school for a child, and apply for family allowances provided by the state. The information service can be found on the state portal eesti.ee, and the information can be accessed with or without logging into the portal. Over time, the platform will be developed into a personalized digital service, also known as a proactive government service, where users will see a personalized view of the services and benefits that the state offers and to which they are entitled.

Several studies and evaluations of integration policy measures were conducted in 2023, providing important insights and input for formulating and adjusting integration policy measures in Estonia. Firstly, 'The final evaluation of the adaptation and integration measure of the European Social Fund in 2014–2020' was published.⁴⁸ The objective of the evaluation was to assess the success of the implementation of the adaptation and integration measure by analysing the relevance, efficiency, effectiveness, and sustainability of the measures. Secondly, the results of the study 'Organization of Estonian language learning for adults in restricted language environments' were published.⁴⁹ The purpose of the study was to analyse the language learning experiences, motivation, and obstacles of poorly integrated permanent residents, new immigrants, and beneficiaries of temporary protection living in restricted language environments.

⁴⁷ Available: <https://www.eesti.ee/syndmusteenused/en/settling-in-estonia>

⁴⁸ Available: <https://www.kul.ee/sites/default/files/documents/2023-12/1%C3%B5pparuanne.pdf>

⁴⁹ Available: https://www.kul.ee/sites/default/files/documents/2023-11/IBS_keeleeuring_2023_loppraport.pdf

The study identified profiles of language learners and prioritized target groups for language learning in the coming years. This allows for a more informed approach to these groups, providing Estonian language education and related activities, preferably with the most suitable teaching methodologies for them. Thirdly, the final evaluation⁵⁰ of two activities under the Operational Programme for Cohesion Policy Funds 2014-2020 — 'Network-based support services model for new immigrants' and 'Adaptation program trainings and materials' — was conducted and published. The objectives of the evaluation were to (1) evaluate the impact and sustainability of the network-based support service provision model and (2) assess the courses and materials of the adaptation programme 'Settle in Estonia'. Finally, Estonian integration monitoring was conducted in 2023.⁵¹ The monitoring takes place every two to three years and analyses the adaptation and integration processes in Estonian society.

7.2 INVOLVEMENT OF STAKEHOLDERS

In January, the Integration Foundation announced an open call for proposals to support cultural and sports initiatives aimed at integration. The goal of the open call was to promote daily interaction and collaboration among people of different cultural backgrounds and to increase participation in Estonian culture and information space. Initiatives were supported with a total of 100,000 euros.

In spring, the Ministry of Culture transferred the organization, development, and related awareness work of the national adaptation programme "Settle in Estonia" to the Integration Foundation. The Integration Foundation implements integration activities, including those related to adaptation, with the aim of supporting the formation of a cohesive society in Estonia. In recent years, the adaptation programme has been organized by the Ministry of Culture. Since the program consists of training sessions, it was deemed appropriate to transition the practical provision of services from the policy-making level to the implementation level. This change did not bring forth any changes for the target audience of the adaptation programme.

Several initiatives targeted the cohesion of different stakeholders specifically in Ida-Viru County, which is an ethnically and linguistically highly segregated region in Estonia, with 81% of people being of ethnicities other than Estonian (compared to 33% of the national average). For instance:

- In March, a call of proposals was launched for organizing culture and sports events promoting integration in Ida-Viru County. The objective was to enhance the cohesion of residents with different native languages from Estonian through the organization of cultural and sports events. Support was provided for concert and cultural series, film festivals, exhibitions, literary events, activities supporting sports competitions, and physical activities. The budget for the application round was 1 million euros, and 11 projects received funding.
- The Ministry of Culture initiated a pilot project called the Ida-Viru Creative Fund, organized by the Ida-Viru Entrepreneurship Centre (IVEK). The aim of the project is to increase social cohesion in Ida-Viru County, strengthen communities, enliven cultural life, and promote entrepreneurship in the cultural and creative sectors by involving additional resources from the private sector. In 2023, a one-

⁵⁰ Available: <https://www.kul.ee/sites/default/files/documents/2023-12/1%C3%B5pparuanne.pdf>

⁵¹ Available: <https://www.kul.ee/EIM2023>

time state grant of 100,000 euros was provided to IVEK for the establishment of the Ida-Viru Creative Fund to prepare for the sustainable activities of the fund in the following years, including conducting training for the target group, etc. The fund's activities will be launched by the end of 2023. A website for the fund (<https://loomefond.ee/>) and application forms have been prepared.

7.3 EDUCATION AND TRAINING

The most significant development in the field of integration was the implementation of preparatory and supportive activities for the transition to Estonian-language education. In 2022, the Estonian Government decided to transition to Estonian-language education, aiming to provide all children in Estonia with quality education in Estonian. The transition takes place in several stages and begins in 2024, but in 2023, several supporting activities were implemented:

- Schools offering increased amounts of Estonian language and Estonian-language instruction were additionally supported with over four million euros. The aim was to support the teaching of Estonian language to students with a different native language. Additional funding was allocated to both immersion schools for language learning, to support Estonian language learning for new immigrants, and to schools implementing partial Estonian-language instruction.
- On March 16, the Government approved on a regulation amending the national curriculum for pre-school education in connection with the transition to Estonian-language education. Due to the transition to Estonian-language education, starting from September 2024, the language of instruction in Estonian municipal kindergartens will be exclusively Estonian. According to the adopted national curriculum amendment, as of September 1, 2024, Estonian-language kindergartens must support the acquisition of Estonian language by children with a different home language since the age 3 through integrated educational and developmental activities, and if necessary, through separate language activities.
- On March 24, the regulation of the Minister of Education and Research came into effect, establishing additional salaries for teachers, principals, and support specialists working in preschools, general education schools, and vocational education institutions in Ida-Viru County, starting from the autumn semester of 2023. The aim of the initiative is to ensure that educational institutions in Ida-Viru County have education professionals with proficient Estonian language skills, which is necessary for the transition to Estonian-language instruction starting in the autumn of 2024. The regulation establishes higher salaries for teachers instructing in Estonian in Ida-Viru County compared to nationwide salary levels, with a coefficient of 1.5 for schools and 1.3 for kindergartens. The higher salary should increase the interest of Estonian-language teachers in working in schools in Ida-Viru County.
- In April, strategic advisors began working to provide support to local government education leaders and specialists, as well as educational institution leaders and teachers, regarding the transition to Estonian-language education. The aim was to support municipalities and educators in transitioning to Estonian-language education. Advisors aid educational institutions in staff development, creating a work environment that enables employees to participate in training and studies, organizing documentation, and drafting an action plan for the transition to Estonian-language education.

- In August, Minister of Education and Research approved the Estonian language teaching development program, which allocates nearly 46 million euros over six years to the teaching of Estonian as a second language, including activities related to transitioning to Estonian-language education. The main objectives of the programme include improving the quality of Estonian language teaching and enhancing the accessibility of Estonian language learning and language-related e-services. Additionally, within the program, language teaching methodologies will be developed, and assessment and testing methods will be improved, integrating modern language technology. Another important goal of the programme is to promote the next generation of language professionals, including offering Estonian language courses to at least 2500 education professionals.
- In autumn, the Ministry of Education and Research signed agreements with the University of Tartu, Tallinn University, and the substitute teacher programme, allowing schools and kindergartens transitioning to Estonian-language education to order free substitute teachers and invite students to become assistant teachers across Estonia. The transition to Estonian-language education and supporting students with a different native language require teachers to enhance their skills and knowledge. The measure allows current teachers to participate in further education, such as language courses, methodology training, and internship programs, and to have their classes covered by substitute teachers from Tallinn and Tartu Universities, as well as from the substitute teaching program, at the expense of the state.
- The Ministry of Education and Research initiated the programme "Shaping a Value-Based Educational Culture in Local Governments to Support the Transition to Estonian-Language Education," which is being implemented by the Ethics Centre of the University of Tartu. The aim of the programme is to support the development of a shared value-based educational culture in kindergartens in Ida-Viru County by creating an action plan for each of the eight municipalities and selected kindergartens in Ida-Viru County for the transition to Estonian-language education. In 2023, eight development groups from Ida-Viru County are participating in the programme, and value development seminars, trainings, consultations, and good practice sharing in kindergartens are held. In addition, municipalities are advised on planning value-based development activities in local education.

Additionally, in April, the Integration Foundation published a textbook for advanced learners of Estonian titled "Finally, I Found You", which was created in collaboration with Estonian language teachers and around 70 language learners living in various locations across Estonia. The web version of the book is available for free. What sets this book apart from other language textbooks is that it tells funny and unusual stories of language learners' experiences in learning the language. Engaging reading is followed by exercises that help better understand the cultural background of the story or some grammatical aspect of the Estonian language.

The city of Tallinn has dedicated the 2023/24 academic year to the exploration of various languages and cultures. The thematic year is divided into theme months, during which the Tallinn Education Department supports and organizes various activities, including the transition to Estonian-language education. As part of the initiative,

September 2023 was designated as Language Learning Month, during which various language days were organized in Tallinn educational institutions, and events were held to celebrate European Language Day, among other activities. October was designated as Tribe Month, during which representatives of various tribe organizations were invited to educational institutions. November was designated as Global Education Month, during which, among other activities, lessons related to migration were conducted in Tallinn educational institutions, and representatives of different nationalities were invited to visit.

7.4 LABOUR MARKET AND SKILLS

On March 5, the global convention on the recognition of qualifications related to higher education came into force in Estonia. The aim of the Convention is to ensure the correct, easier and fair recognition of qualifications (certificates, diplomas, and academic degrees) issued in different regions of the world, thereby promoting international cooperation in higher education. Citizens of other countries who have joined the convention will find it easier to have their qualifications recognized in Estonia.

In the second half of 2023, the NGO Johannes Mihkelson Centre, the Tartu People's University Foundation, and the Tartu City Government implemented a collaborative project called "Smart steps to work" to support people in finding and maintaining employment. As part of the project, free Estonian language lessons at level A2 were provided to individuals from Ukraine, offering additional, higher-level language instruction than the A1-level language training provided by the state to all recipients of temporary protection.

In the fall, the Estonian Refugee Council, in collaboration with the Labour Inspectorate, organized the "Employability" labour market programme aimed at helping refugees enter the Estonian job market. During the programme, various aspects of the Estonian job market trends, legal issues, and application opportunities were introduced, CV writing skills and preparing oneself for a job interview were taught. The programme helps to reduce the vulnerability of refugees, as due to their lack of knowledge about the local job market they may face challenging situations. Fifty people participated in the two-week-long labour market programme, and after completing the programme, they could consult with mentors for three months. Participation in the programme was free, and if needed, transportation and accommodation costs for the participants were covered. The training sessions were conducted in English and Russian.

In September, the Empowering Women entrepreneurship programme began for yet another round, aimed at female refugees who wish to rebuild their future in Estonia through entrepreneurship. The programme supported both newly established businesses and existing ones continuing in the Estonian context. Within the entrepreneurship programme, participants were introduced to the Estonian business environment and were given the opportunity to develop their business ideas based on problem-solving and design thinking principles. The most promising ideas were selected for a two-week entrepreneurship programme, resulting in the creation of a business plan. The best teams had the opportunity to participate in a six-month mentorship programme, supporting initial funding and business startup. The programme was conducted in English and Russian, and activities took place in the evenings and on weekends. Participation in the entrepreneurship program was free, and transportation and accommodation costs for on-site events in Tallinn were reimbursed for participants as needed.

From October to December, for the fourth consecutive year, a practical training programme took place, where more than 30 students with different native languages than Estonian gained work experience in Estonian state institutions through internships, serving as a potential stepping stone for future employment. These internships also benefited state institutions by providing experiences valuable to residents with different native languages than Estonian. Internship positions were offered by the Ministry of Culture, Ministry of Education and Research, Ministry of Economic Affairs and Communications, the Chancellery of the Riigikogu (Estonian Parliament), the Police and Border Guard Board, the Language Inspectorate, the Labour Inspectorate, the Land Board, the Astangu Vocational Rehabilitation Centre, and the Integration Foundation. Students could choose internship placements in their preferred fields and carry them out in various cities across Estonia.

7.5 ACTIVE PARTICIPATION OF MIGRANTS AND RECEIVING SOCIETIES IN INTEGRATION

The Cultural Ambassador Programme was initiated in Ida-Viru County. The aim of the Cultural Ambassador Programme was to support children in Ida-Viru County in perceiving and actively participating in diverse Estonian culture, as well as in developing a unified sense of history and societal awareness. Through the program, children, young people, and their teachers from Ida-Viru County can visit various cultural events and institutions outside their county.

On August 20th, the Integration Foundation organized a Singing Picnic, aimed at bringing together people from ethnically segregated Ida-Viru County, showcasing the cultural richness of county's largest town Narva, and learning Estonian together through singing to celebrate Estonia's Independence Day. Over 3000 people participated in the event.

7.6 FIGHTING RACISM AND DISCRIMINATION

In 2023, two mainstream anti-discrimination activities were initiated in Estonia e. g. they are targeted at the general public and not specifically at migrants.

First, the EU Anti-Racism Action Plan 2020-2025 calls on member states to increase efforts in combating racism. In early 2023, the Ministry of Social Affairs, the Ministry of Justice, the Ministry of Culture, the Ministry of Education and Research, and the Ministry of Economic Affairs and Communications signed an informal cooperation agreement to coordinate the implementation of the EU anti-racism action plan 2020-2025 in Estonia. The aim of the activities is to promote anti-racism efforts in Estonia in accordance with the EU anti-racism action plan 2020-2025, by increasing policymakers' knowledge of racism and enhancing mutual exchange of information. This includes managing reporting on results, led by the Department of Equality Policy (which has been part of the Ministry of Economic Affairs and Communications since July 1, 2023). Each ministry is responsible for activities within its respective field. In October 2023, the first meeting of the network for the anti-racism action plan took place, attended by representatives from various ministries that had joined the cooperation agreement. This is a mainstream anti-discrimination activity, not specifically aimed at migrants.

8. CITIZENSHIP AND STATELESSNESS

8.1 ACQUISITION OF CITIZENSHIP

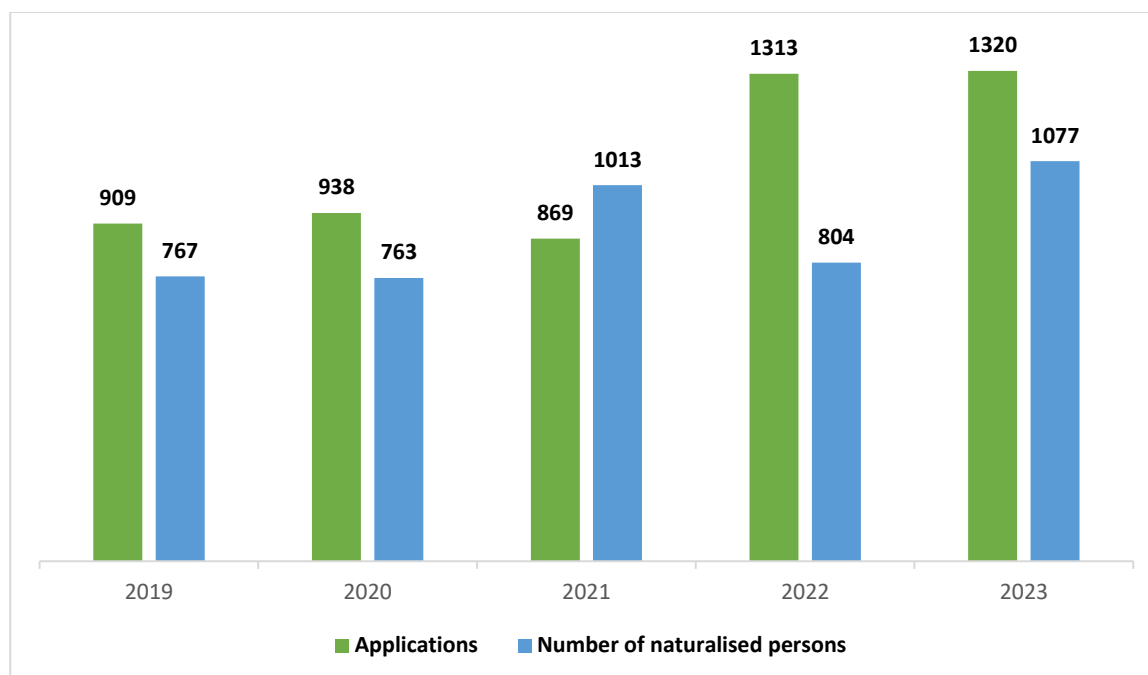
Estonian citizenship is a legal covenant between the Estonian citizen and the Estonian state that entails rights and obligations for both parties. No one may be deprived of citizenship by birth. An Estonian citizen may not simultaneously hold the citizenship of any other country. Estonian citizenship is lost by accepting the citizenship of another country. A child may hold more than one citizenship if his or her parents have different citizenships, but upon reaching 18 years of age, the child must within three years give up either his or her Estonian citizenship or the citizenship of the other country. Estonian citizenship can be:

- acquired by birth if at least one parent has Estonian citizenship;
- obtained through naturalisation;
- reinstated in the case of persons who lost Estonian citizenship as minors;
- lost by way of release of Estonian citizenship, depriving one of citizenship or by accepting the citizenship of another country.

Russian aggression in Ukraine still affected the field of citizenship in 2023. Over the last years, the number of citizens of the Russian Federation who have acquired Estonian citizenship has steadily increased. In 2022, a total of 1313 persons applied for Estonian citizenship and in 2023, a total of 1320 which marked a small increase. In 2023, Estonian citizenship was granted to 1077 persons. Most often the Estonian citizenship was granted to persons with undetermined citizenship (48%) and citizens of the Russian Federation (43%), Belarus (1,6%), Ukraine (1,1%) and Latvia (0,8%).

The number of persons with undetermined citizenship has been decreasing year by year. After the restoration of Estonian independence in 1991, 32% (494 000) of the population of Estonia had undetermined citizenship. By the end of 2023, this number had dropped to 65 894 persons (4,7% of the population). The main factors for the decrease have been the acquisition of Estonian citizenship, acquisition of some other citizenship or, since the group includes many elderly people, death of the person.

Figure 4. Citizenship applications and number of naturalised persons 2019-2023 (Source: PBGB)



Estonia does not allow dual citizenship, and in order to obtain Estonian citizenship, one must first renounce one's citizenship of another country. For Russian citizens, this means contacting the Russian embassy and submitting an application for resumption of Russian citizenship. Due to the increasing volume of applications after the war broke out in Ukraine, there were soon reports that the Russian Embassy in Estonia was delaying the procedure or in some cases, preventing the renunciation of citizenship. In early 2023, the Russian Embassy in Estonia announced that due to staff reductions, citizenship procedures were temporarily suspended.

Regarding legal developments, there were no other major amendments than the one related to voting in favour amendments to Family Law Act and related legislation (including the Citizenship Act) which led to the introduction of marriage equality. In accordance, amendments were introduced to the Citizenship Act⁵² on 6th of June 2023: firstly, if current law permits a minor to obtain Estonian citizenship upon the request of one parent when that parent raises the child alone, the amendment specified the definition of a single parent to include situations related to registered partnerships. Secondly, regarding the existing law's refusal to grant citizenship or its restoration to the spouse of a foreign armed forces serviceman and allowing citizenship for a foreign armed forces serviceman married for at least five years to an individual who acquired Estonian citizenship by birth and whose marriage has not been dissolved, the amendment expanded the exceptions for granting citizenship or refusing it to the registered cohabiting partner, considering the close relationship between registered cohabitants. Amendments went into force from 1st of January 2024. Amendments clarified the wording of Citizenship Act to be in accordance with the Family Law Act by adding the term 'registered partnership' and 'registered partner' to provisions where necessary.

⁵² Available: <https://www.riigiteataja.ee/en/eli/523012024006/consolide>

9. BORDERS, VISA AND SCHENGEN

In 2023, the main focus in regarding border management, visa and Schengen was on continuing restrictive measures in connection to the aggression of Russian Federation in Ukraine and Schengen evaluations, which took place in 2023.

9.1 EXTERNAL BORDER CONTROL MANAGEMENT

Due to start of Russian military war in Ukraine, Estonia strengthened its border surveillance at the external border with Russian Federation. In 2023, there were a few legislative changes in the area of external border management:

As of 1st January 2023, the amendment to the State Border Act⁵³ Article 9⁴ p 2¹ and 3 was made, regarding the control over state borders. According to the amendment, the border control on land and on transboundary water bodies is performed by the police. Border control at sea is performed by the Estonian Defence Forces (EDF). When performing border control, the police participate in guarding of the sea border and the airspace. The objective to this change is to improve situational awareness and responsiveness within the Estonian maritime area.

In parallel to the abovementioned legislative change, as of 1 January 2023, the PBGB maritime patrol vessels became a part of the Estonian Navy (structural unit of the EDF) following a merger between the two services. The EDF now has sole responsibility for maritime situational awareness. Until now, that responsibility had been shared. The PBGB will still have responsibility over marine pollution at sea and on bodies of water, using aircraft. Rescue at sea also remains responsibility of the Ministry of the Interior, but where necessary, making use of naval ships in resolving events.⁵⁴

As of 13th September 2023, Estonia prohibited motor vehicles with Russian Federation license plates from entering Estonia at the external border, as they fall under the scope of current sanctions.⁵⁵ The ban on entering with a motor vehicle applies regardless of the basis of its owner's or user's stay in Estonia or the European Union. Motor vehicles bearing a number plate of the Russian Federation were allowed to leave Estonia through its external border or cross the internal borders of the European Union. Objective to this development was Council Regulation (EU) No 833/2014 concerning restrictive measures in view of Russia's actions destabilising the situation in Ukraine.

On 9-13th January 2023 the Estonian Maritime Academy (which is a structural unit of Tallinn University of Technology) in cooperation with Frontex organised a training session for border guards on interviewing those third-country nationals who crossed the border illegally. In total 44 border guards from five MSs participated in the training. Border guards who completed a training will start working in different EU external border points. The training helps them to conduct interviews during border control.

⁵³ Available: <https://www.riigiteataja.ee/en/eli/503102023003/consolide>

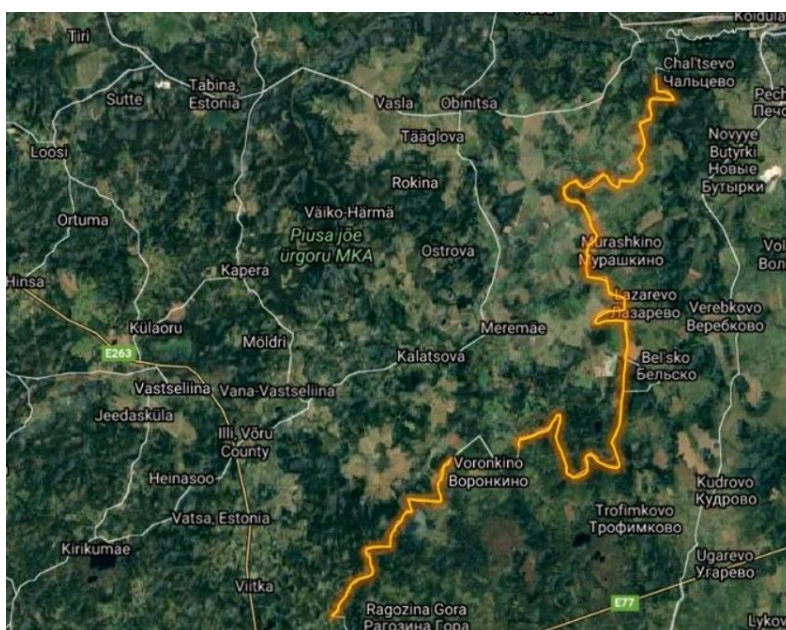
⁵⁴ Available: <https://news.err.ee/1608838723/gallery-four-former-ppa-vessels-now-under-naval-command>

⁵⁵ Available: <https://www.siseministerium.ee/en/news/estonia-prohibits-entry-russian-motor-vehicles>

Construction of the South-Eastern border:

In December 2023, the second part of the fully developed South-Eastern border section was completed, as a result of which about 40 km of border infrastructure was finalized. In total, approximately 63 km of border infrastructures have been completed by the end of 2023 (the length of South-Eastern border is approximately 136 km, thus almost half of land border with Russia has been built). The border construction includes establishment of a patrol road and access roads, an obstacle fence and animal fence, sand strip, power supply, data link, and monitoring/surveillance equipment.

Border infrastructure finalised in 2023, covering border areas in Võru County, from the three-country border point to Võmmorski.



Source: the Police and Border Guard Board [homepage](#)

9.2 COOPERATION AMONG EU MEMBER STATES AND WITH THIRD COUNTRIES AT THE EXTERNAL BORDER

In July 2023, the PBGB sent its police unit ESTPOL7 to Lithuania to help Lithuanian colleagues ensure security on the Lithuanian-Belarus border during the NATO Summit.⁵⁶

From 20 September until 15 November 2023, the PBGB sent its police unit ESTPOL8 to Latvia to help tackle irregular Migration at the Latvian-Belarus border. ESTPOL8 consisted of four teams 12 persons of each at 2-week intervals, in total 48 persons were deployed. The assistance was provided on the basis of Cross-Border Cooperation, so-called Host Nation Support Agreement, which was signed between the Latvian Border Guard and the PBGB on 19.09.2023.⁵⁷

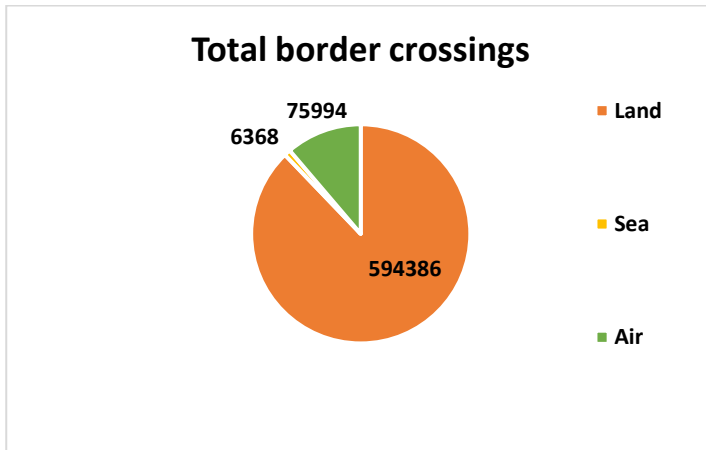
⁵⁶ Available: <https://www.politsei.ee/et/uudised/ppa-saatis-estpol7-meeskonna-leedu-valgevene-piiri-valvama-11354>

⁵⁷ Available: <https://www.politsei.ee/et/uudised/ppa-saatis-laeti-valgevene-piirile-appi-estpol8-politseiueksuse-11501>

9.3 BORDER-CROSSING STATISTICS

The number of external border crossings (those who are entering Estonia) was also in 2023 significantly affected by the situation in Ukraine. The total number of border crossings (on entering the country) was 676 748. Majority of which were border crossings by land (594 386 crossings), by air (75 994 crossings) and by sea (6368 crossings).

Figure 5. Third-country nationals border crossings (entering Estonia), 2023 (Source: PBGB)



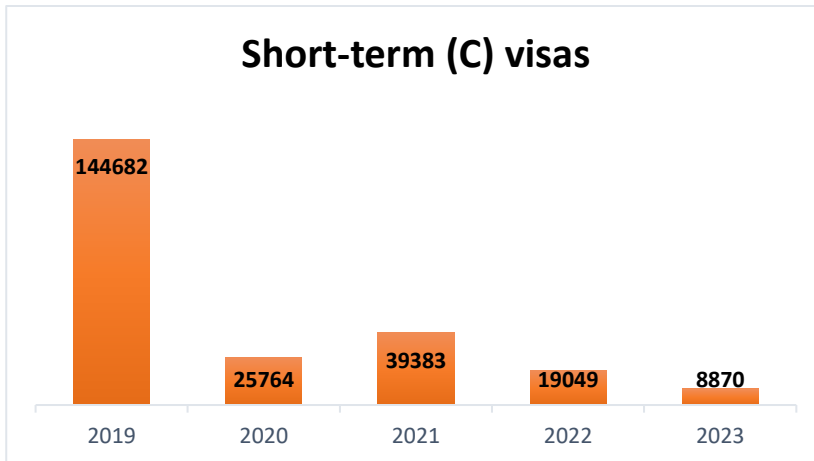
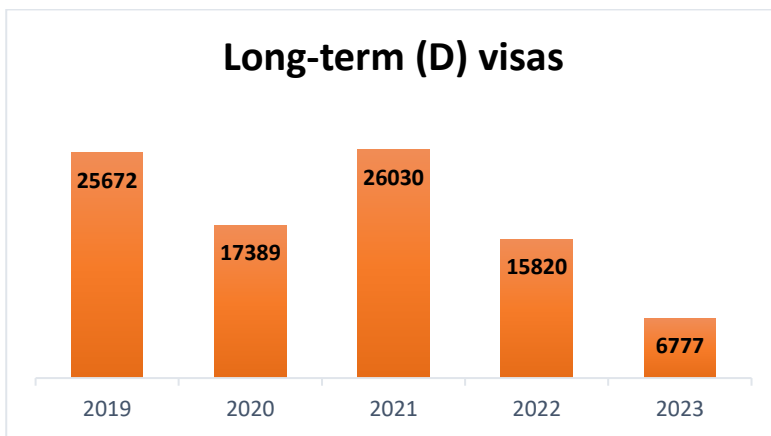
71 % (419 986) of land border crossings were made by Russian Federation citizens. By air the majority border crossings were made by citizens of United Kingdom.

9.4 NATIONAL VISA STATISTICS

According to the statistics provided by the PBGB, Estonia issued a total of 15 647 visas in 2023, which was a 55% decrease compared to the previous year when in total 34 869 visas were issued.

As during 2020-2021 the cross-border movement of people around the world, including Estonia, was impeded by the COVID-19 pandemic, then the years 2022-2023 were mostly affected by the restrictions and sanctions imposed on citizens of the Russian Federation in relation to the war in Ukraine. Also, as several Estonian embassies in Russian Federation and in Belarus suspended accepting visa applications since 2022, a record low number of C visas were issued in 2023 – 8870 (a decrease of 53% compared to last year). Also, number of issued D visas decreased to 6777 visas (decrease 57% compared to last year) in 2023.

TOP 5 nationalities for short-term (C) visas were citizens of Russian Federation, India, Belarus, Turkey and China. TOP 5 nationalities for long-term (D) visas were citizens of Moldova, Ukraine, Russian Federation, Uzbekistan and Georgia.

Figure 6. Short-term (C) visas issued in 2019-2023 (Source: PBGB)**Figure 7.** Long-term (D) visas issued in 2019-2023 (Source: PBGB)

TOP 3 reason to issue C visas were visiting relatives, tourism and business. TOP 3 reason to issue D visas were short-term employment, visiting relatives and studying.

Since 2020, Estonia is issuing visas for teleworking or so-called digital nomad visas, which may be issued to a person whose purpose of temporary stay in Estonia is to perform work duties in Estonia as a location-independent employee. In 2023, in total of 149 long-term digital nomad visas were issued, which is 22% decrease compare a year before. Main citizens who became holders of nomad visas were from the United States, United Kingdom, Turkey, Armenia and Canada.

9.5 VISA ACTIVITIES

On 21th May 2023 the Government of the Republic of Estonia approved amendment to the regulation on "Imposition of sanctions of Government of Republic in connection with aggression of Russian Federation and Republic of Belarus in Ukraine"⁵⁸. Legislative change foresees, that the regulation does not apply to citizens of the Russian Federation and the Republic of Belarus who have a long-term visa for study or a temporary

⁵⁸ Available: <https://www.riigiteataja.ee/akt/120052023004>

residence permit for study and who have completed their studies based on the Estonian curriculum or who have knowledge of the Estonian language at least at B2 level. Although the intention of sanctions is reducing the number of Russian citizens allowed to enter and stay in Estonia, visas on a basis of humanitarian reasons and for other purposes that are not related to employment or business, are still issued.

As of 1st January 2023 amendments to the Article 5 (1) of the national regulation "The procedure and terms for and the extent of sufficient funds required for the issue of a long-stay visa, the formalisation of a period of stay and extension of a period of stay" were made. According to amendment the list of documents and sufficient financial means when applying for a national long-stay visa (applies also for Schengen visa) was supplemented. It is now required that person applying for a long-stay visa provide documents certifying the existence of sufficient funds during the stay in Estonia along with documents certifying the objective of the trip and the intent of a long-term stay in Estonia. The minimum financial requirement for each day of stay in Estonia is set to 70 euros.

During the period 27.03-01.04.2023, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs organized a training for consular officers processing Schengen visa applications in New Delhi. This training was conducted within the framework of project the ISFB-50, which is supported by the EU Internal Security Fund. In total 18 officials participated: 10 from Estonian embassies in Abu Dhabi, Ankara, Astana, Cairo, Kiev, Minsk, in Moscow and Tbilisi; 4 from administrative area of the Ministry of the Interior and 4 employees from the consular department. Driver for such training was common practice for Schengen Member States.

At the end of 2023, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Estonia changed the service contracts concluded as a result of public procurement in 2022 between the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and VF Worldwide Holdings Ltd (VFS Global). With the changes new locations were added to the agreements for accepting Schengen visa and Estonian long-term visa applications (the United States (the Consulates General in New York and San Francisco process the applications) and New Zealand, Papua New Guinea and Fiji (the Embassy in Canberra processes the applications)). Thus, as of the beginning of 2024, Estonia will be providing services in 18 countries.

All contracts entered into force as of 01.01.2024 and are valid until 31.08.2027 (except in USA, where the contract remains in force until 31.07.2024).

There was also one change in practice: as of 1st February 2023, the use of the stamp on the stickers of C and D-visas issued by Estonia will be waived. Objective for this was to unify Schengen Member States practice.

9.6 SCHENGEN GOVERNANCE (INCL. SCHENGEN EVALUATION MISSIONS, SCHENGEN INFORMATION SYSTEM SIS)

In November and December 2023, the Schengen evaluations were carried out in Estonia.

A regular Schengen evaluation took place in areas of police cooperation, large information systems, data protection, return, external border and visa policy. The evaluation report produced by the European Commission is expected in January 2024.

The adoption of the evaluation report and the implementation of the recommendations arising from it will remain as activities of 2024.

Schengen evaluation on visa policy took place on 13-14th November in the embassy in New Delhi, and the data protection evaluation took place on 12-17th November in Tallinn. Both evaluations were preceded by a long preparatory period. In the field of visas, the preparatory period involved filling out the European Commission's questionnaire, updating of the websites of the New Delhi embassy and the external service provider, and preparation of the embassy staff and the staff of the external service provider's New Delhi visa center. In the field of data protection, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs participated in the domestic visa procedure audit organized by the Data Protection Inspectorate.

In February 2023, the ETIAS Regulation was adopted, and legislative amendments were made accordingly in the Police and Border Guard Act, the Criminal Procedure Code, the Aliens Act and the Obligation to Leave and Prohibition on Entry Act. With the regulation travel permits, the conditions and procedure for granting or refusing to grant travel permits are enacted. Driver for the changes to national legislation are driven from the directly applicable Regulation (EU) 2018/1240.

On 07th March 2023, transition of the SIS information system to the new SIS regulation (Recat live) took place. The current SIS II legal framework was replaced by the SIS legal framework, which is based on three regulations (EU 2018/1860, 2018/1861, 2018/1862) and which focuses on requirements for the information system and data exchange. As part of the transition, requests for databases related to border control and migration management, as well as identity documents, were updated. The legal framework necessary for the transition was already made in 2022, when the regulations of the Minister of the Interior were amended in connection to the Obligation to Leave and Prohibition on Entry Act, the Police and Border Guard Act and the State Borders Act.

On 21st March 2023, the amendments were made to the Police and Border Guard Act⁵⁹, which enables the implementation of the Interoperability (IO) framework. According to change, the Police and Border Guard Board, the Estonian Internal Security Service and the Tax and Customs Board will have access (upon making a request to access) to a common identity repository (CIR). Driver for this change was full implementation of the EIF regulation.

On European Integrated Border Management (IBM) the operational cooperation with neighbouring states and Frontex continued at the external border in reinforced manner smoothly. Enhanced maritime activities were introduced via participation at Baltic Sea Multipurpose Maritime Operation led by European Maritime Safety Agency (EMSA) in cooperation with Frontex and European Fisheries Control Agency. With participation in joint operation covering different coast guard functions and participation by all relevant national agencies - Police and Border Guard Board, Estonian Navy and the Estonian Transport Administration, the cooperation practices and procedures were developed in order to tackle possible events in maritime domain.

⁵⁹ Available: <https://www.riigiteataja.ee/en/eli/ee/526072023007/consolide>

10. IRREGULAR MIGRATION

10.1 PREVENTING AND TACKLING IRREGULAR MIGRATION IN LEGAL MIGRATION CHANNELS

False travel documents:

In recent years there is a trend that persons do not falsify identity documents, but rather original documents which should be submitted to obtain a residence permit (for example, there has been problems with falsified Indian original documents).

At Estonian external border, the detection of forged documents increased in 2023 in almost all document categories. The largest categories were related to forged vehicles related documents and identity documents. At external borders only detection of fake residence permits decreased, also no fraudulent visas were detected. Citizen passports were forged mostly by citizens of Georgia, citizens of Russia and Estonia (less than five each), the passports of Georgia, Russia and France were forged the most. In total 18 falsified passports were discovered in 2023.

The detection of falsified ID cards increased (detected in 13 cases). Most frequently falsified ID cards were French (by citizens of Senegal, Guinea and Mali) and the Belgian ID card (by citizens of Egypt).

The use of an authentic document belonging to another person has also increased (in 2022 there were only one such case, but in 2023 already 10). In majority they were French and German authentic passports and Belgian and Spanish ID cards used by citizens of Mali, Kongo DV, Cameroon, Guinea and India.

10.2 FIGHT AGAINST FACILITATION OF IRREGULAR MIGRATION (SMUGGLING) AND PREVENTING IRREGULAR STAY

Preventing the arrival of irregular migrants:

On 28.11-29.11.2023 to increase Estonian capacity to react in case of mass influx, the PBGB carried out, as an annual follow-up to the HOLP (national emergency response plan), a practical exercise, which took place in Narva. The purpose of this exercise was to practice in collaboration with the PBGB and the courts established procedures in case of mass influx. Exercise resulted in the more efficient cooperation processes between these institutions. Activities were carried out in a framework of the AMIF supported project 2021-23 "Increasing the capacity of reception and return of persons entering the country on mass influx".

The PBGB strengthen its defence and capacity do deal in possible hybrid threats, by obtaining several anti-drone devices. These anti-drone devices will be actively used at the Estonian external border.

On 13-14.12.2023 an expert meeting of the EE-FI-LV-LT-PL police and border guard agencies took place in Tallinn with aim to enhance information exchange in the region. During the meeting the possibilities and shortcomings of information exchange were mapped. Special attention was paid to information exchange between boards during the

urgent crisis situation. Aim of such meeting is high risk of hybrid attack in the region. Activity was carried out in a framework of the AMIF supported project 2021-23 "Increasing the capacity of reception and return of persons entering the country on mass influx".

Due to ongoing military conflict in Ukraine, the PBGB migration contact officer continued its tasks to ensure that exchange of information and communication within Estonian, Latvian, Lithuanian, Polish and Ukrainian police and border guard structures would be operational and the contact network in the mentioned countries expanded. One of the major tasks was also communication with Estonian foreign missions.

Prevention of irregular stay:

On 21st March 2023 legislative amendment to implement the Migration Supervision Database (MIGIS) was adopted by the Riigikogu and it came into force in the Aliens Act § 291¹. 1st stage of MIGIS went live on 20th July 2023. Development of the system is funded by the ESF. The MIGIS is an automated migration surveillance IT-solution and tool, which enable automatic and manual data-based checks against different databases, create risk profiles, plan and report inspections, draw statistics and exchange of information with other state authorities. Tool assist officials to track persons compliance with the legal requirements to reside in Estonia and to prevent misuse or irregular stay. It also helps officials to plan their activities in more targeted manner (plan inspections, visits etc.).

The PBGB continued its long-term and active cooperation with the Estonian Tax and Customs Board and the Labour Inspectorate to prevent and tackle illegal employment in Estonia and to ensure that foreign labour-force, employed in Estonia, will pay their taxes in Estonia. Information on the employer's responsibilities when hiring foreign labour-force was also shared among employers. The driver to continue with preventive activities is the continually high number of violations of working conditions in Estonia.

The Estonian labour market has become an attractive destination for many third-country nationals from Georgia, Uzbekistan, India, Azerbaijan, Tajikistan, Moldova. In 2023, 285 different employers were involved in labour disputes concerning foreign workers (in 2022 the number was 148). Of the total applications received by the labour dispute committee 21% (484 cases; 185 of them were Ukrainians), were related to foreign labour. In 2022, there were 7% fewer applications from foreigners. Most of the claims were financial – claims for unpaid wages, holiday pay or compensations. Applicants were mostly from the construction sector (30%), administration and support activities – temporary agency work and cleaning services (14%) and transport and storage (8%). Of the 484 applications concerning foreign workforce submitted to the labour dispute committee, 79 were fully satisfied for a total of 298,495 euros and 105 were partially satisfied for a total of 738,409 euros. Thus, the total amount of claims in labour disputes related to foreigners was 1.3 million euros. Compromises were approved for 75 petitions for a total amount of 281,335 euros. 34 applications are pending and the remaining 142 applications were closed.

In 2023, the Estonian Labour Inspectorate continued to pay attention to inspecting the working conditions, including labour relations, of employees from the Ukraine, as they might be a vulnerable group in the Estonian labour market. The Labour Inspectorate received additional budget funds for supervision and control of the working conditions

of Ukrainian war refugees, but also to support and counsel employees personally to prevent their misuse and exploitation.

Labour Inspectorate conducted 3,544 supervision procedures, of which Ukrainians were employed in 158 companies. The number of Ukrainian employees covered by the inspection was 611. In 2023 inspections of Ukrainian employees made up approx. 4% of the total supervision (2022 it was 20%). During inspections deficiencies were identified in nearly 60% of companies. The main problems were: failure to inform about working conditions, problems related to guidance and training, and various violations of working and rest time. Ukrainian employees turn to the labour dispute commission mostly with claims for unpaid wages and benefits. Nearly 800 tips have been received during the year 2023 (in 2022 – 721 tips and in 2021 this number was 411). Almost 100 of them were related to migrant workers, and 23 tips were also related to Ukrainian workers.

In October-November 2023, the Labour Inspectorate carried out the information campaign "You are not alone at work". This is a continuation of the media campaign that took place in 2022, within the framework of which Ukrainian war refugees were informed about the service and help provided by the Labour Inspectorate. The purpose of the campaign was to raise the awareness of Ukrainian war refugees (but also other foreign workers) about the existence of the Labour Inspectorate, to help support a change in people's behaviour, to consolidate the knowledge that the Labour Inspectorate can be contacted for help and clarification free of charge. All campaign materials were also translated into Ukrainian and Russian. The campaign was carried out on social media (Facebook, Instagram, TikTok, YouTube), online publications (media, Google ads), TV, radio, and great emphasis was placed on outdoor advertising, i.e. media surfaces located in public spaces (digital screens, posters in urban spaces, advertising spaces in shopping centres, public transport, etc.) In 17 different cities (where most war refugees live).

In the second half of the year, the Labour Inspectorate conducted a survey among Ukrainian war refugees and their employers with the aim of finding out the concerns of war refugees and the areas in which they would need help. To find out the awareness and attitudes of Ukrainian war refugees regarding the opportunities offered by the supplier, what is the current level of people's awareness of the services offered, what are the attitudes and willingness to contact the Labour Inspectorate and use the services. The results of the survey served as input for the preparation of an information campaign for war refugees.

In 2023 the Labour Inspectorate created 15 animation clips to target primarily Ukrainian war refugees who arrived in Estonia (wider target group was the entire working population of Estonia). The aim of these clips was to create animation clips that help raise awareness of the Labour Inspectorate and visually explain issues related to labour relations and the working environment⁶⁰.

Employees posted to Estonia must be registered by the employer before the employee actually starts working in Estonia. Since July 2023 the notification of posting must be submitted in the self-service environment of the Labour Inspectorate (TEIS). Previously,

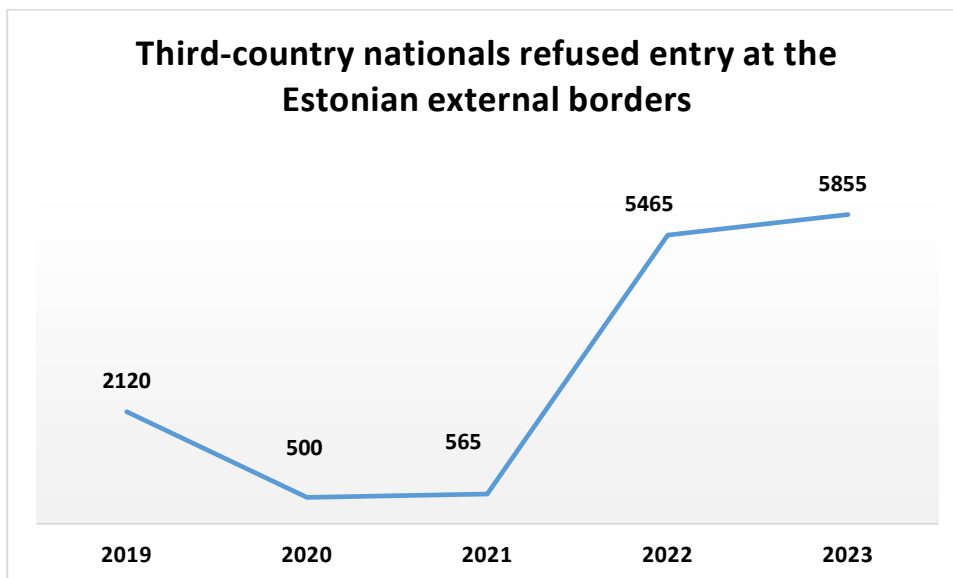
⁶⁰ The Labour Inspectorate homepage, available: <https://www.tooelu.ee/en/392/ukrainian-war-refugees-and-employment-relations>

employees posted to Estonia had to register by filling in a registration form found on the website of the Labour Inspectorate and forwarding it to the Labour Inspectorate by e-mail. In 2023, the number of posted employees has increased significantly compared to the numbers of previous years. During the year, 2,361 posted workers were registered, which is 40% more than the year before. Most workers arrived from Latvia, Poland, Lithuania and Germany. In terms of professions, electronic mechanics, hearth potters, welders and electricians are most in need.⁶¹

Monitoring and identifying irregular migration routes:

Situation in Estonian external borders reflect also in the statistics. As during the years 2020-2021 Estonia refused entry at the external border mainly regarding COVID-19 restrictions⁶², in 2022-2023 the external border crossings were influenced by the Russian invasion to Ukraine, concluding by refusals of Russian citizens at the Estonian external border.

Figure 8. Third-country nationals refused entry at the Estonian external borders, 2019-2023 (Source: Eurostat, MIGR_EIRFS extract made on 25.04.2024)

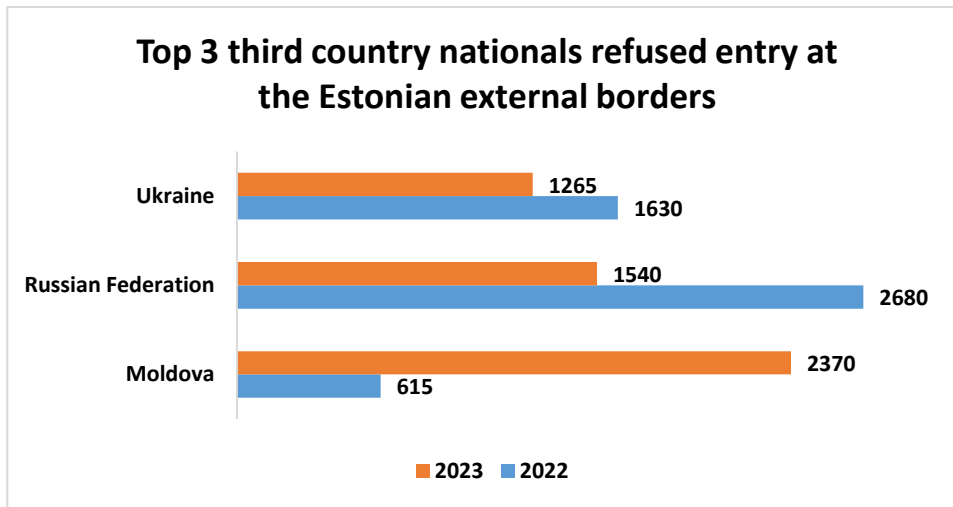


⁶¹ Yearbook of the Labour Inspectorate 2023, available:

<https://www.ti.ee/sites/default/files/documents/2024-04/TI%20aastaraamat%202024%20ENG.pdf>

⁶² These refusals were not included in the EUROSTAT statistics, as majority of them were made at internal borders and the bases were not the same as in the Schengen border regulation.

Figure 9. Top 3 third country nationals refused entry at the Estonian external borders, 2022-2023 (Source: Eurostat (MIGR_EIRFS, extract made on 25.04.2024))



In 2023 a new trend was investigated at the Estonian external border – dozens of Moldovan citizens turned to border crossing point with no interest to enter Estonia. These Moldovans are coming from Russia and seeking exit stamps in their passports. According to their testimonies, Russia has a rule that migrants must leave the country every 90 days – with proof of an exit stamp – and then they can immediately return. This needs to be done several times before person gets a residence permit or citizenship in Russia. All this creates additional work for Estonia's border guards, as an entry ban has to be issued to a person every time he comes to border (entry bans can be issued more than once).⁶³

⁶³ ERR News, on 29.12.2023 available here: <https://news.err.ee/1609207826/ppa-issuing-dozens-of-entry-bans-at-narva-border-crossing-every-day>

11. TRAFFICKING IN HUMAN BEINGS

11.1 NATIONAL STRATEGIC POLICY DEVELOPMENTS ON DETECTION AND IDENTIFICATION OF VICTIMS OF HUMAN TRAFFICKING AND PROVISION OF SERVICES

In 2023, there were 14 registered crimes of victim of trafficking in human beings according to the Penal Code⁶⁴ §133. From total 14 victims one case was investigated for sex trafficking and 13 cases were investigated for forced labour. One individual was convicted for Penal Code §133 p 3⁶⁵.

In 2023 one criminal case of reflection period has been asked by the prosecutor for the victims of THB. The permits were granted by the Police and Border Guard for the period of one year. The case itself is still in investigative phase. The reflection period is regulated by Articles 204 and 205 of the Aliens Act, which provide for the so-called "cooling-off period" which may be granted to a foreign victim or witness of THB and related offences by a prosecutor or an investigator upon a prosecutor's request. The "cooling-off period" may last from 30 to 60 days and has the purpose of allowing the person concerned to decide whether he/she wishes to co-operate with the investigative authority or prosecution. The Aliens Act stipulates that the Prosecutor's Office or an investigative authority shall notify the alien of the services offered during this period and the possibility and conditions for being issued with a temporary residence permit for the purpose of his/her participation in criminal proceedings or an international protection procedure. The "cooling-off period" is granted only to victims or witnesses in an open criminal procedure. Under Article 14(5) of the Obligation to Leave and Prohibition on Entry Act, the return of a third-country national is suspended for this period.

On 1 April 2023, the new Victim Support Act⁶⁶ came into force. In the Act, the status of the presumed victims is changed, but the services for the target group who are not identified as victims of trafficking in human beings, but are linked to other related crimes, will remain. The act stipulate services that have not yet been legally regulated, along with their purpose, content and requirements for the service provider. In practice, if the Social Insurance Board or Labour Inspectorate suspect the case to be a trafficking case, then services will be provided without the investigation period for 14 days. If the victim is a third-country national, the reflection period by the Aliens Act will be given to the person, as well as services, until the deadline set within the reflection period. For the first time, the provision of psychosocial assistance is provided as a service in the Act. Offering services to third-country nationals will not give them a legal status to stay in Estonia. If the person is not allowed to stay in Estonia or has left the country, then provision of services is terminated. Temporary residence permit may be given to the third-country national who is a victim in the trafficking related crimes (Penal Code §133–133/3, 138–140, § 145/1, 175, § 260/1). If the person is a witness in these crimes, then residence permit can be given when the prosecutor considers its relevance

⁶⁴ Available: <https://www.riigiteataja.ee/en/eli/508042024002/consolide>

⁶⁵ Penal Code § 133 Trafficking in human beings; § 133(1) Support to human trafficking; § 133(2) Pimping; § 133(3) Aiding prostitution

⁶⁶ Available: <https://www.riigiteataja.ee/en/eli/503042023004/consolide>

(previously victims and witnesses were equally justified to receive temporary residence permit for participation in criminal proceedings). Temporary residence permits related changes came into force in the Aliens Act on 1st of April 2023.

Trainings have been one of the priority objectives over the last years on state level and have been organized throughout the years by the government, also with the support of the foreign financing. Normally there are every year one bigger joint training organized by different partners to the stakeholders working with THB matters.

In 2023 joint training to the specialists (investigators from police and prosecutors' offices, labour inspectors, inspectors of tax and customs board, also victim support specialists and NGO representatives from Eluliin) working with THB and related crimes, had around 100 participants. The training concentrated attention both to labour and sexual exploitation and also on support measures in organizations related to trauma informed care and also tips were given on the psychological coercion and interviewing techniques.

ISF project „Prevention of serious undercover crime“ started in 2023, within which 2 ABC trainings were held in Tallinn (81 participants) and Tartu (51 participants). These trainings were aimed at the widest possible audience and attracted both specialists and newcomers who are now equipped with new knowledge and able to identify possible THB cases and to seek adequate help from THB specialists. Participants were mainly from police, social insurance board, labour inspectorate, local governments, prosecutors' office and youth organizations but also other interested parties. This type of trainings will continue in 2024.

A special ABC training was held for hotels and restaurants sector representatives, 25 hotel managers attended. An e-course is being developed and will be added as part of onboarding program for workers at hotels and restaurants.

A pilot training on THB was held for schoolteachers (13 participants), these trainings will be continued in 2024 and also class materials and video training for students will be prepared.

OSCE trainings in January and June on recommendations related to refugees from Ukraine and on Addressing Technology-Facilitated Trafficking in Human Being, around 70 participants in total.

Social Insurance Board started doing THB prevention school lessons in high-schools all around Estonia. Ca 500 students have participated so far, the lessons will continue in 2024 and the goal is to reach ca 1/3 of the age group.

To improve Estonian specialists' knowledge on identification and assistance of victims of human trafficking, in 2023, the Estonian Academy of Security Sciences in cooperation with its College of Justice started a three-year project. Within project a virtual learning tool will be developed, including series of training courses carried out. Project is targeted for specialists working in the field of prevention, detection, identification and assistance of victims of human trafficking. Leading role in this project lies with the Ministry of the Interior and project is financed by ISF project the "Increasing the development cooperation to identify and assist victims of human trafficking in Estonia".

11.2 PROVISION OF INFORMATION TO THIRD-COUNTRY NATIONAL VICTIMS OF HUMAN TRAFFICKING

Estonia has been actively raising awareness on trafficking in human beings among the population.

To improve detection, identification of and provision of information about third-country national THBs, in 2023 in lead of the Ministry of Justice ISF project on „Prevention of serious undercover crime“ started, with the aim to prevent THB. One of the priorities in the project is to focus on cooperation with the third countries to prevent THB. First study visit took place in 2023 to Uzbekistan. Ten experts from different Estonian authorities participated in the study visit to Tashkent, Uzbekistan (Ministry of Justice, Ministry of Social Affairs, Ministry of Interior, Police and Border Guard, Social Insurance Board and Labour Inspectorate). There were roundtable meetings with representatives from Ministry of Interior, Prosecutors Office, National THB prevention committee and migration agency representatives.

This country was selected because there is an increase in the number of persons from Central Asia who come to Estonia for employment and are forced to pay high recruitment fees to recruiters who are typically from the same country as the victims and have ties to organized crime. Working in a foreign country, finding a job and moving for work reasons causes financial burden not just for the worker but puts also pressure on the family. Related family members might be especially vulnerable to trafficking.

Cooperation after study visit follows in compiling short guidance document on safe labour migration, working rights and assistance in Estonia to Uzbek nationals and information about assistance in Uzbekistan. Further collaboration with NGOs is planned to support Uzbeks who have moved back to home country. Project is financed by the ISF project on „Prevention of serious undercover crime and fight against human trafficking“.

In 2023, Estonia carried out some awareness raising activities on trafficking or supported third countries financially. In total, financial contributions in the sum of 319 000 euros were made during 2023. For instance, by supporting the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC) for humanitarian response in Armenia and Azerbaijan; the International Organization for Migration (IOM) to alleviate the humanitarian crisis in Syria resulting from earthquake in Syria and Turkey; to the Office of Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA) to alleviate the humanitarian crisis in Ethiopia, Somalia and Syria; to the UN High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) to alleviate the humanitarian crisis in Sudan and surrounding region; the International Federation of Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies (IFRC) to alleviate the humanitarian crisis in Morocco resulting from earthquake in Morocco; to the UN Children’s Fund (UNICEF) to alleviate the humanitarian crisis in Syria resulting from earthquake in Syria and Turkey.

12. RETURN AND READMISSION

12.1 GENERAL POLICY DEVELOPMENTS AND ACTIONS IN THE AREA OF RETURN

To enforce the cooperation within EU member states, as of 8th March 2023, Estonia and other member states using the Schengen Information System (SIS), exchange information on third-country nationals' return decisions. Also, SIS enables to monitor whether third-country nationals for whom return decisions are issued have left the territory of EU.

According to the decision of the Minister of the Interior 1.2-6/5-1 24.01.2023, as of 1st March 2023, the PBGB is authorized to decide entry ban annulment, shortening the period of its validity and limiting it to the territory of Estonia in case where an entry ban was accompanied by a return decision (stipulated in the Obligation to Leave and Prohibition on Entry Act § 7⁴).

12.2 RETURN-RELATED STATISTICS

In 2023, the total number of issued return decisions remained almost the same as in 2022. According to the PBGB data, they issued 1031 return decisions, which is 5% decrease compare a year before. 83% of these were decisions for voluntary departure. Top 3 nationalities to whom return decision were issued was Russian Federation, Uzbekistan and Moldova. All decisions are made on a case-by-case basis and forced return is applied mainly when there is risk of absconding. Number of persons who actually left the country remained high with the return rate being 94%.

The number of persons returned with support provided by IOM Estonia VARRE project (assisted voluntary return programme) increased compared to previous year 122%, from 41 in 2022 to 91 in 2023. Top 3 nationalities to whom return assistance was provided were Uzbeks, Georgians and Tajiks.

Table 6. Number of TCNs in return procedures (including TCNs returned as part of an assisted return programme), 2019-2023 (Source: PBGB)

	Enforced return	Returned voluntarily	Among TCNs returned voluntarily, the number of TCNs returned as part of an assisted return programme
2019	208	1000	132
2020	108	989	128
2021	104	1089	40
2022	111	971	41
2023	170	861	91

12.3 VOLUNTARY RETURN, ASSISTED VOLUNTARY RETURN AND REINTEGRATION MEASURES

In 2023 Estonia significantly improved its national system on voluntary return.

In order to analyse the current and functioning counselling system, the Ministry of the Interior ordered in end 2022 - early 2023, in-depth study⁶⁷ from the Institute of Baltic Studies to find out how the counselling could better support the return procedure and what are the expectations of returnees as well as partners organisations to this service. Analyse made also a practical suggestions and recommendations for improving the service. Carrying out the study was supported by AMIF project "Ensuring procedural capacity and compliance to ensure person obligation to leave the country".

The study „Analysis of counselling services for applicants for international protection and returnees“ had two broad objectives:

- To analyse and assess how the counselling service provided by the Police and Border Guard Board meets the expectations of the parties involved (applicants for international protection, returnees, processors, legal aid providers, human rights monitoring organisations and institutions).
- Based in the information gathered during the analysis, draw up recommendations and proposals how best to support the target group of foreigners through the counselling service and improve and develop international protection and return procedures.

On 29th September 2023 the PBGB signed SLA on participation of Frontex Joint Reintegration Services. The PBGB officials (2 return counsellors, 2 coordinators, OM) have passed the RIAT online trainings and are currently in on-boarding phase to use Frontex JRS via RIAT. There are 2 return counsellors working in the PBGB since September 2023 who will offer Frontex JRS and if necessary, offer more comprehensive counselling to returnees. Through counselling it should be ensured that returnees receive individualized, objective and easily accessible up-to-date information regardless of their place of stay during the entire period of their return process.

The PBGB worked out a handbook for return counsellors. Handbook is for internal use only.

In Estonia, voluntary return is encouraged mainly through the IOM Voluntary Assisted Return and Reintegration Programme (VARRE). Estonia started with the VARRE project in 2010 and within these years more than 700 persons voluntary return was supported. In 2023 within IOM VARRE project 91 persons (17 women, 74 men) left the country. Compared to year 2022, it was quite significant increase in supported returnees (in 2022 IOM supported 41 persons return). The main reason for increase was complex from various factors. First, restrictions related to the spread of COVID19 eased and international traffic was livelier. Secondly, the information about the IOM VARRE reintegration support spread among the irregularly staying Tajikistan and Georgian citizens, thus many of them approached for non-financial support. Thirdly, the PBGB directed to IOM VARRE services more citizens of Uzbekistan than before. These Uzbeks were caught from illegal working during inspection raids made by the authorities. The VARRE programme is carried out by IOM and it is co-funded by the EU Asylum, Migration and Integration Fund (AMIF) and by the Estonian Ministry of the Interior.

⁶⁷ Available: <https://www.siseministerium.ee/ministeerium-ja-kontaktid/ministeerium-ja-minister/uuringud-ja-analuusid#kodakondsus-ja-ranne>

12.4 FORCED RETURN AND DETENTION

To increase a capacity to react in case of mass influx, the PBGB conducted several activities within AMIF project 2021-23 "Increasing the capacity of reception and return of persons entering the country on mass influx":

- On 28.11-29.11.2023, as an annual follow-up to the HOLP (national emergency response plan), a practical two-days exercise took place in Narva. The purpose of this exercise was to practice in collaboration with the PBGB and the courts established procedures in case of mass influx. Exercise resulted in the more efficient cooperation processes between these institutions.
- The PBGB organized a training "The preparation of the PBGB officials for work in high-risk areas (miniHEAT)", which supports officials working in Hotspots (tasks were related to deportation and return procedures).
- Special clothes and small equipment were purchased for the officers of the PBGB DEPA officials (deportation officials), for the border and migration surveillance and deportation services.
- The PBGB compiled a manual for DEPA officials (the PBGB deportation officials) on "Transportation of deportees from the Detention Center to the plane in Tallinn Airport". Manual describes the process on how to deport a person in the airport without going through the terminal. The objective to this manual was to provide to a deported person a more dignified manner to leave the country. Operating following the manual will also reduce the security risks.

On 13th October 2023, amendment to the Detention center internal rules regulation No. 44 were made, concerning the use of mobile phones in detention center. Changes was based on the Supreme Court´s 20th June 2023 decision 5-23-16, which declared Article 25 (11) of the Detention center internal rules Regulation No. 44 on "use of mobile phones" unconstitutional and invalid. Now the use of mobile phone and use of detention center computer are described and regulated in more detail. Previously internal rules prohibited the use of personal mobile phone in center. Use of center computer was limited to restricted pages. By this change the consistency of the internal rules with the constitutional rights are ensured.

12.5 ENHANCING RETURN MIGRATION MANAGEMENT INCLUDING COOPERATION AMONG EU MEMBER STATES AND WITH THIRD COUNTRIES OF ORIGIN AND TRANSIT ON RETURN READMISSION AGREEMENTS

The PBGB organised on 8th November in Warsaw and on 9th November in Berlin in Estonian embassies, information days related to legal migration pathways and return for representatives of third countries. In Warsaw there were participants from seven third countries and in Berlin from one third country. Objective of these informative days is to establish direct contacts with officials of third countries, with whom Estonia cooperate in field of return. They were organised within AMIF supported project TAG4 "Cooperation with third countries in the field of return" to facilitate a return process of persons who has no legal basis to stay in a country.

On 23rd October, Estonia signed a bilateral readmission agreement with Uzbekistan.

In September 2023, the first round of negotiations for the conclusion of a bilateral readmission agreement with Tajikistan took place.

Negotiations continue with Kyrgyzstan.

An overall objective to establish readmission cooperation with third countries is to facilitate a return process of persons who has no legal basis to stay in a country.

13. MIGRATION AND DEVELOPMENT

NEW DEVELOPMENTS AIMED AT FACILITATING SYNERGIES BETWEEN MIGRATION AND DEVELOPMENT IN THIRD COUNTRIES

In March 2023, the project 'Digital Explorers II', financed by the European Commission, began. The aim of the project is to address one of the main root causes of migration: unemployment and the lack of suitable talents in developing countries. In the spring of 2024, 20 young people from Kenya (final-year university students) will come to Estonia for four months to gain IT-related work experience in Estonian companies and receive training at Tallinn University in their respective fields. In addition, a 6-member delegation from Kenya will come to Estonia with the aim of familiarizing themselves with the architecture of Estonia's e-Government, education, and the labour market, focusing again on IT. The composition of this delegation has not been confirmed yet, but the goal is to involve policymakers in immigration, labour, and education, advocates for employers (Kenya Employers Federation), as well as employers in the IT and/or digital field in both the private and public sectors.