



ESTONIA

BIAS-MOTIVATED SPEECH AND VIOLENCE

The UN Human Rights Committee expressed concern in April that the current hate crime and hate speech legislation does not protect LGBT people effectively. It called for legal reform, effective investigation and prosecution, data collection on SOGI-based hate crimes, and awareness raising.

EDUCATION

In November, the Estonian LGBT Association published the summary results of their survey focusing on safety in education, conducted among LGBT students in elementary, secondary, and vocational school. This was the first survey of its kind. The survey found that 68 per cent of LGBT students have experienced harassment in school due to their sexual orientation, gender identity or gender expression. 61 per cent said that school staff never intervened when someone made hateful remarks. Only 42 per cent reported that LGBT topics were mentioned in their school.

EQUALITY AND NON-DISCRIMINATION

After the parliamentary elections in the spring, a coalition was formed between the liberal party Keskerakond, the conservative Isamaa and the extreme right Estonian Conservative People's Party (EKRE). As part of the coalition agreement, the parties agreed that a referendum would take place proposing the definition of marriage as a union between a man and a woman. Constitutional amendments are not common in Estonia, so legal scholars already expressed the need for a thorough legal analysis before any vote.

FAMILY

In August, the Estonian Constitutional Court ruled that the sections of the Aliens Act on family reunification is unconstitutional for it only grants residence for partners in a marriage. The Court affirmed that residence must also be provided if the couple is in a registered partnership, entered in Estonia.

Tallinn's Administrative Court ruled in September, that sections of the Social Tax Act are also unconstitutional, whereby they only granted tax benefits to married couples. The Court stated that the same benefits must be extended to those in a registered partnership.

FREEDOM OF EXPRESSION

The far right EKRE has significantly increased its power in the past years, and gained 18 per cent of the votes during the parliamentary elections in March. In the current political landscape, EKRE is the only party, whose support base has grown since the last elections. EKRE stands firmly against immigration and LGBT rights (see under **Family**).

EKRE's growing power had a negative impact on freedom of expression this year. Media outlets and journalists have been urged to report conservative content across the board and self-censorship has been detrimental. Some reporters and journalists have resigned. As a response, Estonia's citizens have taken to wearing a "pink slime", which was used to describe liberal and left wing people by EKRE. The slur has been reclaimed and is uniting people for freedom of expression.

In January, the Rakvere City Council again refused to grant the full amount of funding that NGO SevenBow requested to organise its annual LGBT+ film festival. The Estonian Human Rights Centre sued the City Council in 2018 and again this year. In June, the Administrative Court revoked the City Council's decisions from both years and obliged them to pay the full sum.

HUMAN RIGHTS DEFENDERS

Several attacks targeted the Estonian LGBT Association this year, with the aim of intimidating and silencing human rights defenders. Most of these attacks were carried out by the far-right party EKRE and its members, and created a climate of fear within the LGBT community.

Anti-LGBT articles and news stories were published on a daily basis, for instance, regarding EKRE's plans to stop the provision of project funding to the LGBT+ Association. The Association, along with other NGOs, has received funding from the Ministry of Social Affairs in the past few years to deliver services complementing the Ministry's work. EKRE's own news channel also included several anti-LGBT+ stories. The feminist news portal Feministeerium was also targeted.

On 18 October, members of EKRE, including its district leaders in Pärnumaa and Saaremaa, disrupted the Estonian LGBT Association's event in Pärnu, which aimed to introduce the organisation's work to the local community. On 1 November, a



member of EKRE from Tartu, along with members from Pärnu, held a demonstration against an LGBT - themed youth centre event, intimidating youth workers as well as young LGBT people.

In October, the Foundation for the Protection of Family and Tradition (SAPTK) started a petition against the Estonian LGBT Association and spread misinformation about its work. NGO Ühiskonnauuringute Instituut conducted a survey on the topic of the Association's state funding, including questions based on false and derogatory claims.

The Prime Minister, whose party is in coalition with EKRE, made some statements against these actions, but these did not stop the attacks.

Civil society is deeply concerned that a governing party is set on the purpose of intimidating LGBT rights workers and the whole community, while its coalition partners are standing by. The Estonia LGBT+ Association stated that attacks against one community are an attack on the safety of the entire Estonian society. The NGO appealed to the public to urge the Prime Minister to stand firm against hate and harassment.

PUBLIC OPINION

The annual study commissioned by the Estonian Human Rights Centre found that for the first time this year, the supporters of the Registered Partnership Act outnumbered its opponents, 49 per cent to 39 per cent. Overall, however, public attitudes towards lesbians and gay men has not changed much in the past years. The acceptance rate has remained around 40 per cent. Respondents estimated the acceptance rate to be much higher, 60 per cent.