



# Republic of Estonia

## Country Report

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## Executive Summary

*One of the three Baltic States occupied by the Soviet Union from 1940 until 1991, Estonia has made impressive economic and political progress since regaining independence. Thanks to reforms and its commitment to joining Euro-Atlantic institutions, Estonia was accepted into both NATO and the European Union in 2004.*

*Estonia's ties to the Nordic countries are particularly strong, due to centuries of rule by Danes, Swedes, and Germans.*

*Estonia's Jewish community was severely depleted as a consequence of Estonia's occupation by both the Soviet Union and Nazi Germany. The current Jewish population is small and relatively self-contained, though several American Jewish groups are active in the community. While the Estonian government has good relations with the Jewish community and anti-Semitism is not prevalent, fierce controversy persists around the issue of World War II Estonian veterans, who fought with the Germans against the Soviets. Many Estonians view these men as patriots and freedom fighters rather than as Nazi collaborators.*

## History

Estonia, slightly smaller in area than New Hampshire and Vermont combined, is bordered by Latvia, Russia, the Baltic Sea, and the Gulf of Finland. Ruled for centuries by Denmark and then by a German knightly order, Sweden conquered Estonia in the 17<sup>th</sup> century. The “golden era” of Swedish rule ended with Estonia's occupation by the Russian Empire during the Great Northern War in 1721. Under Tsarist rule until the 1917 Russian Revolution, Estonia declared independence in 1918, only to be forcibly annexed by the Soviet Union in 1940, occupied by Germany in World War II, and re-conquered by the Red Army in 1944. The United States never recognized the Soviet annexation of Estonia, and neither did many Estonians, some of whom fought with the German army against the Soviets, and then waged a guerrilla resistance campaign in the early postwar years. During Stalin's rule, Estonia initially suffered draconian ethnic and political purges that killed as many as 10% of its prewar population. Under the Soviets, Estonia experienced an influx of Russian-speaking settlers, who manned local industry and helped staff the large Soviet military presence.

The Soviets used Estonia – widely viewed during the Soviet period as the most Western in culture and outlook of all the Soviet Republics – as a laboratory for economic experiments. During *perestroika*, Gorbachev allowed Estonia a significant amount of private enterprise and even some foreign direct investment from Finland. Such economic advantages fueled a growing mass movement for independence in the late 1980s. Historic and cultural ties to the West proved instrumental in allowing Estonia to quickly rebuild economic and political ties with Western Europe after regaining independence in August 1991. Estonia is widely considered as the most economically stable and politically free former Soviet republic. Along with Latvia and Lithuania, Estonia acceded

## Statistics

**Population:** 1,306,000 (July 2020 est.)

**Size:** 45,228 sq. km.

**Capital:** Tallinn

**Major cities:** Tallinn, Tartu, Narva, Kohtla-Jarve, Pärnu

**Jewish population:** 1,900-2,000

**Head of State:**

President Alar Karis

**Head of Government:**

Prime Minister Kaja Kallas

**Foreign Minister:**

Eva-Marie Liimets

**Ambassador to United States:**

Ambassador Kristjan Prikk

**U.S. Ambassador to Estonia:**

Ambassador Brian R. Roraff

**Freedom House Rating:**

Free

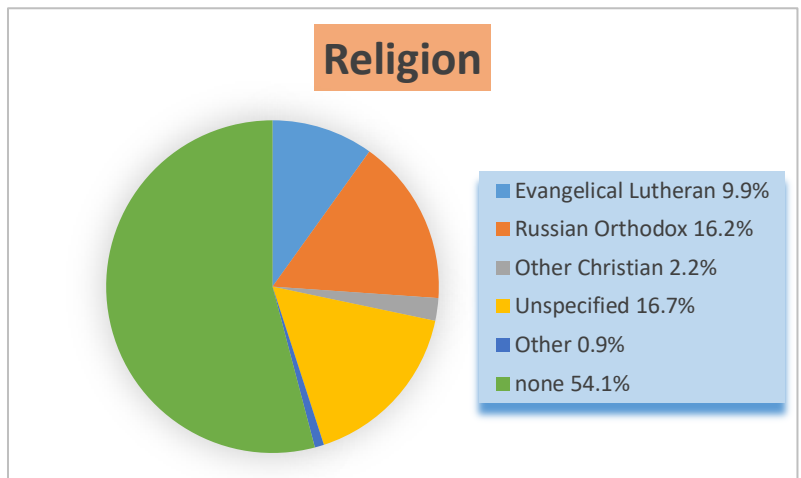
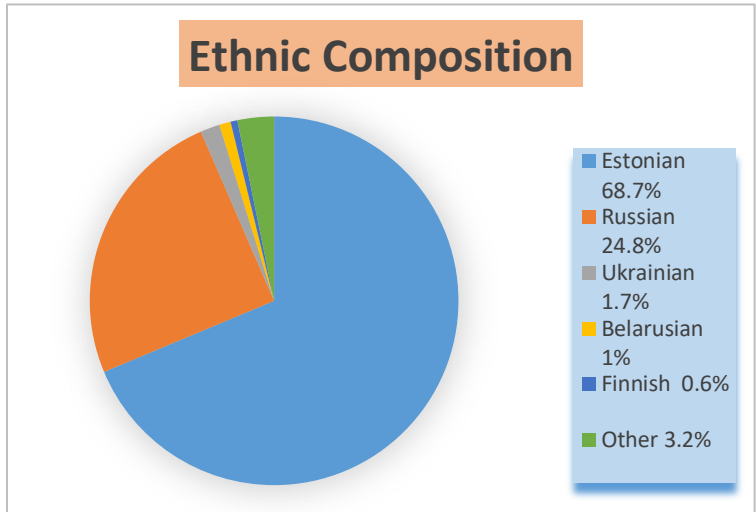
to both NATO and the European Union in 2004. EU membership has greatly benefitted Estonia’s economy, as has its 1999 entry into the World Trade Organization.

### Government and Politics

Estonia is a mature, stable parliamentary democracy with legislative, executive, and judicial branches, of which the unicameral Parliament (Riigikogu) holds the most power. Its 101 members are popularly elected every four years. The Parliament appoints and confirms the Prime Minister and elects the President every five years.

The judiciary is generally free from state interference. Freedoms of speech, press, assembly, association, and religion are constitutionally guaranteed and are respected in practice. Estonia’s Supreme Court of 19 justices, including the chief justice, is organized into civil, criminal, administrative, and constitutional review divisions. Its Cabinet of Ministers is appointed by the prime minister and approved by Parliament.

Estonia’s civil liberties issues largely center on the status of its large Russian-speaking minority and transitioning from Russian to Estonian as the official language. Government documents are written solely in Estonian and effectively disenfranchise non-Estonian-speakers from citizenship, employment, and the right to vote. Changes to the 1998 Citizenship Law made all Estonian natives born since February 26, 1992, eligible for citizenship – but only if both parents are stateless. Non-citizens comprise 6% to 7% of the population.



In March 2015 parliamentary elections, the Reform Party received the most votes and won 30 seats. Next came the Centre Party with 27 seats and the Social Democratic Party with 15 seats. Overall, six parties entered the parliament including the Pro Patria and Res Publica, Free Party, and the Conservative People’s Party.

In October 2016, the Parliament of Estonia chose independent candidate Kersti Kaljulaid as its fifth President, and first female President of Estonia.

Parliamentary elections were held in Estonia on 3 March 2019. The Reform Party remained the largest party, gaining 4 seats for a total of 34 and the Conservative People's Party had the largest gain overall, increasing their seat count by 12 to a total of 19 seats.

In a move which sparked protest in society, Jüri Ratas of the Centre Party turned down an offer by Kaja Kallas of the winning Reform party to form a joint coalition, instead forming a coalition between the Centre Party, EKRE, and Pro Patria. This became Jüri Ratas' second cabinet.

## Economy

Widely considered the economic success story of the former Soviet Union, Estonia has transitioned successfully to a modern market economy and has become strongly integrated into Western institutions. Several years of economic decline followed independence in 1991, marked by disputes with Russia over agricultural, trade, and imports of energy and raw materials. The 1998 Russian financial crisis caused unemployment to spike. Conditions improved as EU trade increased and as EU accession became more probable. These conditions fueling a strong recovery that began in 2000. In 1999, Estonia joined the World Trade Organization. Estonia became the first post-Soviet Baltic State to adopt the euro currency in 2011.

The global economic crisis of 2008 led to a sharp collapse of Estonia's export capacities and tightened credit markets. In spite of this downturn, Estonia's economy had a 7% annual growth rate from 2000-2008. During this eight-year period, Estonia significantly improved its living standards, increasing its GDP per capita from 45% of the EU-27 average in 2000 to 67% in 2008.

In 2009, the country implemented an austerity program, increasing taxes and reducing public sector salaries, which caused a dramatic spike in the 2010 unemployment rate. However, the country's GDP began growing again in 2010, and in 2011. GDP grew by more than 7%. After two years of robust recovery in 2011 and 2012, the Estonian economy faltered in 2013 with only 1.6% GDP growth, mainly due to continuing recession in much of the EU. GDP growth in 2014 was 2.9% but dropped to 1.2% in 2015 due to lower demand in key Scandinavian export markets.

Known for its strong technology sector, Estonia has one of the highest per capita rates of internet connections among EU member states. The economy benefits from strong electronics and telecommunications sectors and strong trade ties with Finland, Sweden, and Germany.

## Foreign Policy

Estonia has good relations with its Baltic neighbors and is a member of the Council of Baltic Sea States and of the Baltic Assembly. Cooperation with Lithuania and Latvia has grown; the three Baltic States operate joint infantry and naval units as part of their contributions to NATO peacekeeping operations. Estonia participates in regional cooperation among Nordic and Baltic states under the NB8 formula, discussing and coordinating common economic, foreign policy, and regional issues.

The Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE) closed its Estonian mission in 2001 in view of Estonia's successful transition to democracy.

The Nordic countries and the United States welcomed Estonia's 2004 accession to NATO and the EU. Estonia has hosted several military training exercises and programs jointly with NATO and the United States on its territory.

**Currency:** €0.84 = \$1

**GDP:** \$23.13 billion (2016 est.)

**GDP per capita:** \$17,574 (2016 est.)

**GDP Growth:** 1.6% (2016)

In May 2015, Estonia hosted the largest-ever military trainings conducted under NATO auspices, and a special NATO air unit arrived in Estonia for permanent placement. In 2016, Estonia hosted NATO's largest-ever cyber defense exercise. Estonia spends more than 2% of its GDP on defense, per NATO guidelines.

Estonia's close relations with Western Europe contrast with its strained relationship with Russia. Since 1991, Estonian-Russian relations have often been tense due to persistent bilateral irritants: friction over visa requirements; recurrent clashes over interpretations of the Soviet Union's role in Estonia during World War II; and the status of Estonia's Russian-speaking residents. After years of negotiations, Estonia and Russia finally signed a treaty on boundaries demarcation in February 2014.

In 2006, bilateral relations suffered when Russia (and Russian-speaking Estonians) criticized a proposal to remove a controversial and prominent Soviet-era Red Army war monument in central Tallinn ("the Bronze Soldier"). The actual relocation of the "Bronze Soldier" in late April 2007 to the Tallinn military cemetery triggered two nights of rioting. One person was killed, over 150 were injured, and hundreds were detained before order was restored.

Intermittent tensions with Russia continue. In February 2012, Aleksei Dressen, a senior official within Estonia's state security agency, was arrested on suspicion of spying for Russia's Federal Security Service. He was convicted of treason and sentenced to sixteen years in prison.

In September 2014 the FSB detained Eston Kohver, an Estonian Internal Security Service officer on the border under disputed circumstances. This situation created a major political rift in Estonia-Russia relations. Russia convicted Kohver of espionage and sentenced him to 15 years in prison. In September 2015 Russia returned him to Estonia in a prisoner exchange.

The incursion of Russian troops into Crimea and eastern parts of Ukraine reignited the Estonian government's and the international community's concern about Russian intentions in the Baltic region. Incursions of unauthorized Russian aircraft into Estonia's airspace have taken place since the beginning of the Ukraine crisis. Russia has also heightened its critical rhetoric over perceived violations of the rights of Russian-speakers in Estonia.

## **Relations with Israel**

Estonian-Israeli relations are friendly; diplomatic relations were established in early 1992. An Estonian consulate operates in Tel Aviv. The Israeli Embassy in Helsinki, Finland, handles Estonian relations. Tourism between the two nations is relatively small but growing. Estonian-Israeli parliamentary groups exist in both countries' legislatures.

In 2014, trade with Israel reached 18.2 million euros (0.1% of total trade), ranking Israel 48th among Estonia's trade partners. According to Bank of Estonia data, as of March 2016, Israelis have invested 9.8 million euro in Estonia, mainly in real estate, finance and insurance, and wholesale and retail markets.

In March 2017 Minister of Foreign Affairs Sven Mikser visited Israel. In January 2017, Knesset Speaker Yuli-Yoel Edelstein visited Estonia.

In August of 2018 Prime Minister Netanyahu made a three day trip to Vilnius, Lithuania for a Baltic summit through which he said he hoped to deepen ties with eastern European nations. Netanyahu met the leaders of Lithuania, Latvia and Estonia together in Vilnius during his visit. He also paid tribute to Lithuania's once vibrant Jewish culture and its tragic end during the Holocaust.

## **Relations with the United States**

The United States never recognized the incorporation of Estonia into the Soviet Union, and continued to recognize Estonia's pre-war mission in the United States as a legal representative of the Republic of Estonia throughout the 1940-1991 period of Soviet occupation.

Since re-opening the U.S. Embassy in Tallinn in 1991, the United States and Estonia have maintained strong relations, particularly on trade and defense. The 1998 U.S.-Baltic Charter strengthened multilateral ties among the United States, Lithuania, Latvia, and Estonia. Estonia is part of the Northern European Initiative (NEI), a U.S. program encouraging broad-based cooperation among the Baltic States, Poland, Russia, the EU, and Norway. In place since 1997, it also commits the United States to bolstering trade and investment in NEI countries. The United States is one of Estonia's largest direct investors. Although U.S. exports to Estonia are small, Estonian imports to the United States have surged in recent years, and the U.S. is now Estonia's eighth-largest export market.

In conjunction with the U.S. Commission for the Preservation of America's Heritage Abroad, Estonia and the United States signed an agreement in 2013 to establish frameworks for protecting and preserving cultural sites.

Following the September 11, 2001 attacks, Estonia declared its national support for the global war on terrorism. Estonia sent a small delegation from the Estonian Rescue Board to aid U.S.-led coalition forces in Afghanistan, in addition to providing unconditional overflight and landing rights. The U.S. was instrumental in the decision to accept Estonia as a full member of NATO during the 2002 NATO summit in Prague. Estonia officially joined the North Atlantic alliance in March 2004.

In spring 2003, the Estonian government proclaimed its support for U.S.-led military action in Iraq. Estonia was part of the "Vilnius 10," a group of Central and Eastern European countries that pledged support for the U.S. position. The Estonian government sent troops to Kuwait, Qatar, and Iraq to help provide security in the region after the war. Small numbers of Estonian troops currently participate in coalition and peacekeeping activities in Iraq, Afghanistan, Kosovo, and Bosnia.

The United States and Estonia have a bilateral investment treaty. Principal imports from the United States include computer and electronic products; chemicals; machinery; transportation equipment; and wood products. U.S. imports from Estonia include computer and electronic products; petroleum products; chemicals; electrical equipment; and optical, medical, and precision instruments. Estonia participates in the Visa Waiver Program, which allows travel to the United States for business or tourism for 90 days without obtaining a visa.

In June 2015, Secretary of Defense Ashton Carter visited Estonia and met with Prime Minister Taavi Rõivas and Defense Minister Sven Mikser. President of Estonia Toomas Ilves visited Washington in September 2015 and January 2016. In March 2016, Prime Minister Rõivas was in the U.S. on a working visit, accompanied by a business delegation. In July 2017, U.S. Vice President Mike Pence visited Estonia and reaffirmed Washington's support for the Baltic nations and accused Russia of seeking to "redraw international borders" and "undermine democracies."

## **Jewish Community**

Jewish settlement in Estonia began only in the late 19<sup>th</sup> century, as Tsarist laws forbade Jews entry to Estonia prior to 1865. The local Jewish population grew rapidly to an estimated 5,000 Estonian Jews by 1913, with the biggest communities in Tallinn and the university city of Tartu. The Jewish community continued to grow and flourish in independent Estonia after 1918 and even enjoyed government-granted cultural autonomy and its own Board of Jewish Culture.

Soviet occupation in 1940 and the German invasion in 1941 marked the beginning of a steep decline: an estimated half of Estonia's 6,000 plus Jews migrated to other areas of the Soviet Union, some 500 were forcibly resettled or deported, and about 1,500 were killed during the German occupation. Thousands of Jews deported from elsewhere in Europe to Estonia were also murdered there by the Nazis and their collaborators. After the war, many Soviet Jews migrated to Estonia due to its general lack of anti-Semitism and relative liberalism vis-à-vis the rest of the USSR; they revitalized the local community, but were not allowed to recreate its pre-war cultural life.

Estonia has traditionally been a religiously tolerant nation. In 1993, the Estonian Parliament passed a Cultural Autonomy Act, based on a previous 1925 statute guaranteeing minorities a legal right to preserve their national identities. Under this protective legislation, the small but well-organized Jewish Community of Estonia has flourished. Numbering today approximately 2,000 people, it is centered in Tallinn, with smaller communities in the regional centers of Tartu, Narva, Kohtla-Järve, and Pärnu. A high percentage of the local Jewish community is intermarried, and the majority is Russian-speaking.

In Tallinn, Jewish life is concentrated around the Jewish Community Center (JCC) and a synagogue built in 2007. The JCC, known as Dor V'dor ("Every Generation"), offers a range of programs, services, and clubs. Social services of the American Jewish Joint Distribution Committee (JDC/"Joint") are organized under the auspices of the JCC, providing food packages, medical care, and home care to the elderly. The JCC houses a state-sponsored Jewish day school with over 250 students, a museum, and a kosher restaurant. The Jewish Federation of Greater Los Angeles has a special relationship with the Baltic Jewish communities, including Estonia, supporting community development and welfare efforts.

The Jewish community publishes a newspaper, Hashakhar ("Dawn"), and broadcasts a monthly radio show, "Shalom Aleichem." With the help of JDC, Estonia established a large Jewish library in 2000. In 2004, the first Jewish Culture festival "Ariel" was held. Coinciding with the celebration of Tu B'Shvat, a new branch of the Adin Steinsaltz Institute for Judaism Research opened in Tallinn in 2006. Survivor organizations are active in Estonia, namely the Former Ghetto Prisoners' Association and the Union of Veterans of World War II.

The Progressive Movement under ARZA/World Union for Progressive Judaism supports small congregations in Haapsalu, Narva, Pärnu, and Tallinn. Sunday schools operate in Estonia's smaller communities. The Jewish Community of Estonia is active in several regional and international Jewish organizations. It is an active member of the Baltic States Committee of the Federation of Jewish Communities of the CIS. On a regional level, the community participates in the Baltic Jewish Forum, an advocacy and aid network active in the states bordering the Baltic Sea. The Jewish Community of Estonia is also a member of the World Jewish Congress, the European Jewish Congress, and the European Council of Jewish Communities.

International organizations play an active role in Estonian Jewish life. The community receives support from JDC, the Ronald S. Lauder Foundation, the Conference on Jewish Material Claims Against Germany, the Baltic Jewish Forum, and other foundations. Representatives of the Jewish Agency for Israel (JAFI/"Sochnut") and the Israeli Embassy (in Helsinki) are in regular contact with the community, and the Israeli government provides Hebrew teachers for the Jewish day school.

In 2007, construction of Tallinn's first new synagogue since the 19<sup>th</sup> century officially was completed. Funded by local and foreign donors, including a prominent Estonian-Russian Jewish entrepreneur and an American Jewish foundation, the 200-seat synagogue is next to the JCC.

In 2013, the Jewish Community of Estonia opened the “Aviv” kindergarten, in which 30 children, up to age 7, are currently enrolled. The kindergarten operates in Russian and Estonian. In addition to basic preschool education, the children learn about Jewish traditions, Israeli dance, art, Jewish songs, and holiday celebrations.

## **Anti-Semitism**

There is no official or institutionalized anti-Semitism in Estonia, and the Estonian government has committed to swiftly responding to reported incidents. Holocaust denial is not a crime in Estonia, although incitement to ethnic hatred is. No major anti-Semitic incidents have occurred in recent years.

Most issues relating to anti-Semitism in Estonia reflect the country’s contentious World War II legacy and a historical perspective that differs significantly from the Western European, North American, or Russian outlook. Many Estonians continue to view their country’s successive wartime occupations by the Soviet Union and Nazi Germany as equally reprehensible, and do not see the 1944 return of the Red Army as liberation; Estonians suffered relatively more under Soviet rule than under German occupation; some Estonians fought with German troops against the Red Army in an Estonian SS unit. As a result, many Estonians still see veterans who collaborated with the Germans against the Soviets as patriots and freedom fighters, rather than as possible war criminals. Russia’s government and public are highly sensitive to attempts to rehabilitate allies of their war-time Nazi German enemy.

In 2002, veterans erected a monument in the city of Pärnu depicting an Estonian soldier in a Waffen SS uniform. Following criticism, the SS insignia was removed from the statue, and later the monument was removed altogether. In 2006, Estonian veterans dedicated two new monuments to Dutch and Belgian members of the SS who had fought on Estonian territory against the Soviets.

In 1998, then-President Lennart Meri established Estonia’s International Commission for the Investigation of Crimes against Humanity. At the time, Meri stressed that the aim of the commission was not to build cases against suspected Nazi war criminals and collaborators, but simply to clarify the historical record. Jewish organizations have raised concerns about implicit parallels between the Holocaust and the Soviet occupation of Estonia.

In 1999, Alfons Rebane, the commander of Estonia’s World War II-era SS division, was buried with honors in the national cemetery, sparking controversy among Jewish and ethnic Russian groups within Estonia. In 2000, a public dispute arose with the Russian government after President Meri included nineteen veterans of the wartime Estonian SS division among 168 anti-Soviet fighters to receive special decorations.

Several anti-Semitic incidents were reported in 2006 in Estonia: a Holocaust-denial book was published by the mayor of a small town, who had published similar materials in the past; a Russian-born Israeli citizen was reportedly attacked by neo-Nazis in Tallinn, and subsequently complained of alleged police indifference to his report; and a Holocaust memorial near Tallinn was vandalized on Holocaust Memorial Day.

In May 2007, veterans of the Estonian 20<sup>th</sup> SS Division demanded the removal of the synagogue in central Tallinn to the outskirts of the city. In September 2010, swastikas were spray-painted at the entrance to the Holocaust memorial in Klooga.

In July 2012, Estonian Defense Minister Urmas Reinsalu in a public speech called the Waffen SS veterans and other Estonians who fought on the Nazi side in WWII “freedom fighters.” In August 2012, a local gas company used a



photograph of the Auschwitz concentration camp to advertise its services. After vocal public condemnation, it withdrew the ad.

Marches commemorating the Estonian Waffen SS division take place annually. The Estonian government has been criticized in the past for attending the ceremonies, however, most recently government officials have stopped publicly attending the marches.

In 2016, a highly controversial art exhibition caused outrage by ridiculing the Holocaust. Its exhibits included a picture showing the iconic Hollywood sign replaced by the word "Holocaust," and a gas chamber with 20 naked actors pretending to be Jews playing a game of tag. The exhibits were eventually withdrawn. In the same year, unidentified individuals vandalized Holocaust monument in Russia and Estonia. The Jewish community reported swastikas were drawn on the Holocaust monument in the city of Kalevi-Liiva, ten miles east of Tallinn.

In 2017, Estonian nationalist politician Georg Kirsberg vowed in his election campaign to decriminalize Holocaust denial and instead penalize those who would downplay the Soviet domination of the country.

In June 2018, the Jewish community protested the unveiling of a plaque in Mustla dedicated to Alfons Rebane, an Estonian who fought with Nazi Germany against the Soviet Union. Although there is no evidence to suggest that Rebane collaborated in the Holocaust, the Jewish Community of Estonia described the soldier as "hardly worthy of commemoration," as part of "an organization recognized as criminal by the Nuremberg International Tribunal."

In June 2019, A Jewish cemetery in the Estonian capital of Tallinn was vandalized. Five gravestones were overturned in Tallinn's 110-year-old Rahumae cemetery, home to a large Jewish section. "This ugly act of vandalism where our ancestors rest in peace, and where everyone thinks of their spirituality, their connection to past generations, and human values, is insulting, frightening, and unacceptable in our society," said the Jewish Community of Estonia organization in a statement. Several major Jewish organizations have warned in recent years that as the memory of the Holocaust fades into the distance, and anti-Semitism risks slowly becoming socially acceptable once again.

In March 2019, Estonia's chief rabbi Shmuel Kot and two of his children were accosted on the street on their way to the synagogue by a man who shouted anti-Semitic insults ("Heil Hitler") at them. The rabbi added that such incidents are "very rare" in Estonia. The 27 years old man was arrested.

## **Holocaust Remembrance**

Estonia participated in the Washington Conference on Holocaust-Era Assets in 1998, as well as the Vilnius Forum on Holocaust-Era Looted Cultural Assets in 2000. In April 2004, an Estonian delegation participated in the OSCE Anti-Semitism Conference held in Berlin, and in June 2005, in the follow-up conference on Anti-Semitism and Intolerance in Cordoba, Spain.

The government's 2002 decision to officially recognize January 27 (the anniversary of the Soviet liberation of Auschwitz) as Holocaust Memorial Day initially sparked controversy and criticism among some ethnic Estonians. The day's first observance in January 2003 was implemented primarily through the Estonian school curriculum, incorporating the Holocaust into the study of World War II. In 2005, the Estonian Ministry of Education announced that additional elements of Jewish history and practice would be included in the public school curriculum.

In January 2012, the Jewish community inaugurated a Memory Gallery bearing the names of 974 Estonian Jews killed by the Nazis. In 2016, the Estonian Ambassador to Israel, Malle Talvet-Mustonen, and members of the Estonian parliament participated in a conference in Israel marking the 90<sup>th</sup> anniversary of Jewish cultural autonomy in Estonia.

In 2017, the Jewish community of Estonia celebrated its revival seventy-five years after the Nazis had declared it extinct. Estonian President Kersti Kaljulaid received guests, including Israeli Chief Rabbi David Lau and representatives of the Estonian Jewish community to mark the occasion.

In September 2019, the Estonian Institute of Historical Memory held a conference in order to increase awareness about a not-widely known episode, the Estonian “case” of the Holocaust, and ensure that its history is referred to in a truthful manner. Partly funded by the IHRA under its new grant strategy, the conference "The beginning of the End: Massacre at Klooga 75" took place on 18th September 2019. The conference was opened by the Estonian Minister of Foreign Affairs, Mr. Urmas Reinsalu. The keynote speech was delivered by Dr. Cecilia Felicie Stockholm Banke, head of the Danish delegation to the IHRA; other speakers came from Israel, Lithuania, France, Finland and Estonia.