

Fact Sheet August 2008

# Estonia Today

## CITIZENSHIP

The Republic of Estonia, established in 1918, lost its independence when it was occupied by the Soviet Union in June 1940. After the independence of the Republic of Estonia was restored in 1991, on the basis of legal continuity of statehood, Estonia was able to reinstate the right of its legitimate citizens. In February 1992, the Citizenship Law of 1938, based on the principle of *ius sanguinis* (blood relationship), was reapplied.

In the course of the Soviet occupation, the demographic situation in Estonia had been dramatically altered as a result of the Soviet Union's sovietisation policies. During the tumultuous years of 1940–1949, about 60 000 Estonians, out of the population of about 1.1 million, were either killed, deported to Siberia and other hinterlands of the Soviet Union, or imprisoned in Stalin's concentration camps, while at least an equal number fled to the West. At the same time, a large number of Soviet citizens including military staff, from various parts of the Soviet Union, were sent to Estonia as a result of Soviet forced migration policies. In 1934, there were 992 500 ethnic Estonians living in Estonia, making up 88.1% of the country's population. By 1989, this number had dwindled to 963 281 or 61.5%, less than the pre-war level. At the same time, the number of non-ethnic Estonians living in Estonia, of which the majority were ethnic Russians, grew almost fivefold from 134 000 in 1934 to 602 000 by 1989. From 1990 to 1998, 113 000 people left Estonia, the majority of whom were born abroad.

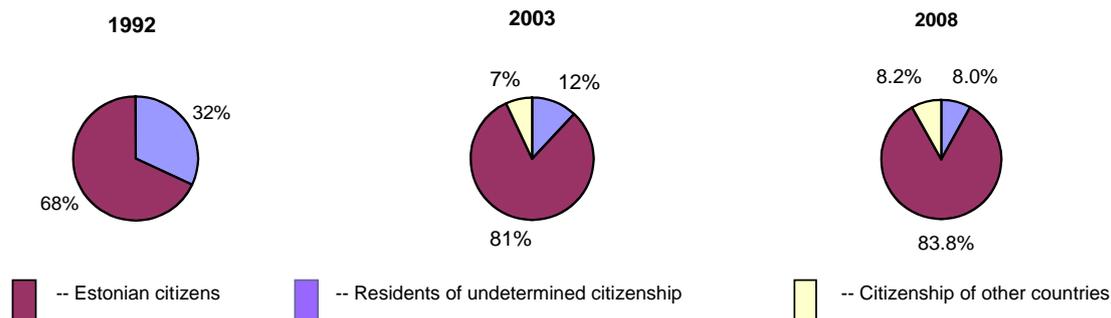
According to [population censuses](#), Estonian citizens constituted 97.7% of the population in 1922 and 98.8% in 1934. After the restoration of Estonia's independence, persons who held Estonian citizenship before 16 June 1940 and their descendants were automatically considered to be Estonian citizens. Thus, roughly two-thirds of the 1.5 million Estonian inhabitants restored Estonian citizenship in 1992. All other Estonian residents could obtain Estonian citizenship through the naturalisation process. At the same time, all Estonian residents, who had been Soviet citizens, had the right to register themselves as citizens of Russia, the USSR's successor state, or to choose any other citizenship. As of 2 August 2008, 83.8% of Estonia's population held Estonian citizenship, 8.2% were citizens of other countries and 8.0% were of undetermined citizenship.

The [Estonian Government](#) actively promotes the acquiring of Estonian citizenship through naturalisation, thus reducing the number of persons with undetermined citizenship. The Government is constantly dealing with this matter and has made the acquisition of Estonian citizenship easier in many ways, especially for children. Consequently, since autumn 2005 the number of naturalized citizens exceeds the number of residents of undetermined citizenship.

### Distribution of the Estonian population by citizenship:

As of 2 August 2008 (Source: [Ministry of the Interior](#), Population Register)

- total number of registered population of Estonia: 1 363 790
- the number of Estonian citizens: 1 143 776
- in addition, 49 529 Estonian citizens live abroad
- the number of residents of undetermined citizenship: 109 212
- the number of residents with the citizenship of another state: 110 803 (of them 92 512 citizens of the Russian Federation, 4 854 Ukrainian citizens, 2 505 Finnish citizens, 1 793 Latvian citizens, 1 383 Byelorussian citizens, 1 494 Lithuanian citizens)



### Issuing of Estonian passports and IDs

The citizenship of the Republic of Estonia never ceased to exist. During the years of occupation, the Estonian diplomatic service in exile issued Estonian passports, which were recognised as travel documents by many countries of the world, eventually even by the Russian Federation. In Estonia, the issuing of identity documents to the Estonian population began again immediately after Estonia regained its independence in 1991. The first Estonian passports, after the

regaining of independence, were issued in July 1992 and within a three-year period almost all Estonian citizens were provided with passports. In 1996, the Estonian Government began to issue identity documents (the so-called "alien's passport") to persons of undetermined citizenship, who had previously held Soviet passports, thus granting those persons time for choosing their citizenship. This document serves as the official identification within Estonia and allows its holders to travel abroad. In 2002, Estonia started issuing ID cards to Estonian citizens over 15 years of age and to



Estonian permanent residents with other citizenship or of undetermined citizenship, as a primary domestic identification document, which also can be used to sign documents digitally. As of 1 September 2008, approximately 1 024 300 Estonian residents have ID cards.

### Acquisition of Estonian citizenship

Estonian citizenship is acquired by birth if at least one of the parents of the child holds Estonian citizenship at the time of the birth of the child.

It is also possible to acquire Estonian citizenship through naturalisation. The requirements for acquiring citizenship are specified in the [Citizenship Act](#). A person who wishes to acquire Estonian citizenship by naturalisation must have been a permanent resident of Estonia for at least five years, have a basic knowledge of the Estonian language, and have knowledge of the [Constitution of the Republic of Estonia](#) and the [Citizenship Act](#). Citizenship applicants born prior to 1 January 1930 do not have to complete the written part of the language exam.

In 1992, almost one third of the Estonian population had not determined their citizenship. Estonia's position is that citizenship cannot be forced on anyone and that everyone has the right to choose his or her citizenship. The Estonian Government encouraged persons of undetermined citizenship to either apply for Estonian citizenship or choose another citizenship (Russian, Ukrainian, etc.).

During the course of this campaign, carried out from 1993 to 1998, a number of these residents received Estonian citizenship, while others acquired the citizenship of some other country. As a result, the share of persons of undetermined citizenship in Estonia has decreased from 32% in 1992 to 8.0% in August 2008.

Within the period 1992 to 2008, a total of 148 175 persons have acquired Estonian citizenship through the various facets of the naturalisation process. The majority of these people did so in the course of the 1990s (more than 110 000 people between the years 1992 and 2000).

With the accession of Estonia to the European Union in May 2004, Estonian citizens automatically became citizens of the EU. This greatly increased the appeal of Estonian citizenship, especially for younger people. This seems to be the main reason why in 2004, the number of people who acquired Estonian citizenship through naturalisation was almost double that of previous year.

#### The number of persons who have acquired Estonian citizenship through naturalisation

1992 – 5 421	2001 – 3 090
1993 – 20 370	2002 – 4 091
1994 – 22 474	2003 – 3 706
1995 – 16 674	2004 – 6 523
1996 – 22 773	2005 – 7 072
1997 – 8 124	2006 – 4 753
1998 – 9 969	2007 – 4 228
1999 – 4 534	2008 – 948*
2000 – 3 425	

\* As of 2 July 2008

#### Facilitation of the naturalisation procedures

One of Estonia's priorities is to reduce the number of persons with undetermined citizenship and to promote the acquisition of Estonian citizenship. Accordingly, the Estonian Government has facilitated the naturalisation procedure for all legal residents who wish to acquire Estonian citizenship. The most essential

amendment to the Citizenship Act was passed by the [Riigikogu](#) (Estonian Parliament) in December 1998 – children, born in Estonia after 26 February 1992, whose parents of undetermined citizenship have lived in Estonia for at least five years, are eligible, at their parents' request, to gain Estonian citizenship through naturalisation without the precondition of passing the citizenship examinations. As of 2 July 2008, 9 842 children have acquired citizenship on the basis of this amendment.

The *Riigikogu* has also passed several other amendments to the Citizenship Act. For example:

- the naturalisation process has been significantly simplified for disabled persons and persons with a restricted active legal capacity;
- since 2001, citizenship applicants who have previously passed the basic level Estonian language proficiency examination or the basic school final examination for Estonian as a second language no longer have to take the citizenship language exam;
- the time required for obtaining Estonian citizenship has been considerably shortened (i.e. certain procedures must now be completed in six or three months instead of the twelve or six months as previously prescribed);
- the costs of the language courses are reimbursed to those who pass the citizenship language exam and the exam on the Constitution and the Citizenship Act. There is no charge for taking either examination.

The Estonian Government's action plan of the integration programme for the years 2004–2007 contained the aim of naturalising at least 5 000 people a year. Within this framework, an extensive promotion campaign was carried out to thoroughly inform those concerned of the opportunities for acquiring citizenship.

#### Voting rights of non-citizens

Estonia is one of the few countries in the world where all legal residents, regardless of their citizenship, have the right to vote in local government elections.

According to the [Local Government Council Election Act](#) of May 1996, citizens of other states and residents who have not yet chosen their citizenship have the right to vote in local administration elections. They must be over 18 years of age and have been permanent residents for at least five years in the territory of the respective local government as of 1 January of the local government election year.

#### The majority of residents with undetermined citizenship would prefer to have Estonian citizenship

A survey conducted in November 2005 by the polling company [Saar Poll](#) and requested by the [Non-Estonians' Integration Foundation](#) in the framework of the project "Promoting the Integration of residents with undetermined citizenship in Estonia" revealed that 61% of the residents with undetermined citizenship in Estonia wished to become Estonian citizens, 13% wanted to have Russian citizenship and 6% the citizenship of some other country, while 17% were not interested in getting any citizenship and were satisfied with their present status. The survey revealed that a person's place of birth plays an important role in his or her preferences regarding citizenship. Of people born in Estonia, 73% wished to become Estonian citizens, but Estonian citizenship was the preferred choice for less than half of those who were born elsewhere. The older the person is, the more likely it is that he or she doesn't want to acquire any citizenship at all. The survey was supported by the European Union's "Transition Facility" programme.

## Persons who acquired Estonian citizenship by naturalisation (as of 3.07.2008)

Basis	Period	Number	In 2007	In 2008
Ethnic Estonians*	1992–1999	25 293		
Aliens who supported the independence of Estonia**	1992–2001	24 102		
On general conditions	1992–...	64 113	2 408	559
Minors under 15 years of age***	1992–...	32 940	1 733	374
For special services****	1992–...	734	4	0
Persons without active legal capacity and disabled persons	1996–...	747	83	15
<b>Total</b>		<b>147 929</b>	<b>4 228</b>	<b>948</b>

\* Ethnic Estonians – mostly those individuals whose ancestors migrated from Estonia prior to 1918 before the Republic of Estonia was founded and Estonian citizenry was formed. Those people should apply for Estonian citizenship through naturalisation.

\*\* During the period, which followed the restoration of independence those aliens who had supported the efforts of Estonia in regaining independence and who had registered themselves as applicants for Estonian citizenship before 1 March 1990. Those aliens were granted Estonian citizenship without the precondition of passing the citizenship examinations. Registration of Estonian Citizens was initiated and organised both in Estonia and in Estonian communities in exile, by the grassroots movement of Estonian Citizens Committees. As a result, the Congress of Estonia, a representative body of citizens of the Republic of Estonia, was elected in February 1990 by nearly 600 000 Estonian citizens. The first session of the Congress of Estonia took place in Tallinn from 11 to 12 March 1990. The activities of the Congress of Estonia from 1990–1992 created conditions for the restoration of Estonian independence in 1991 on the basis of the legal continuity of Estonian statehood. The Congress was dissolved when the legal Estonian Parliament, the Riigikogu, convened in 1992.

\*\*\* On the basis of Chapter 3 of the [Citizenship Act](#). This section also includes those minors who have acquired Estonian citizenship through simplified naturalization according to the amendment made by the [Riigikogu](#) in December 1998.

### § 13. Acquisition of Estonian citizenship by naturalisation by minor

...

(4) A minor under 15 years of age who was born in Estonia after 26 February 1992 shall acquire Estonian citizenship by naturalisation if:

- 1) his or her parents apply for Estonian citizenship for him or her and if the parents have legally resided in Estonia for at least five years at the time of submission of the application and are not deemed by any other state to be citizens of that state on the basis of any Act in force;
- 2) single or adoptive parent applies for Estonian citizenship for the minor and if the single or adoptive parent has legally resided in Estonia for at least five years at the time of submission of the application and is not deemed by any other state to be a citizen of that state on the basis of any Act in force.

(08.12.98 entered into force 12.07.99 - RT I 1998, 111, 1827)

\*\*\*\* Services that are deemed to be achievements, which contribute to the international reputation of Estonia in the areas of culture or sports or in other areas.

### Further Information

The Citizenship and Migration Board

[www.mig.ee](http://www.mig.ee)

Minister of Population Affairs

[www.rahvastikuminister.ee](http://www.rahvastikuminister.ee)

The Integration Foundation

[www.meis.ee](http://www.meis.ee)

Language Immersion Centre

[www.kke.ee](http://www.kke.ee)

Estonian Legal Language Centre (Estonian legislation)

[www.legaltext.ee](http://www.legaltext.ee)