Reception - Estonia

Reception system

Overview

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Relevant EU legislation

Estonia is bound by the recast Reception Conditions Directive (recast RCD) and has transposed its provisions through the Act on Granting International Protection to Aliens (AGIPA).

National legislation

14/12/2005: Estonia transposed the recast Reception Conditions Directive by the Act on Granting International Protection to Aliens (AGIPA) | Välismaalasele rahvusvahelise kaitse andmise seadus

Competent authority and stakeholders

Classification: Public

Authority responsible for reception	The Social Insurance Board is in charge of reception at the national level. The Accommodation Centre for Applicants for International Protection (Vao Centre) is responsible for organising accommodation, support and maintenance services for applicants for international protection during the procedure, as well as for the settlement of beneficiaries of international protection in local governments.

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Other actors involved	Cooperation partners of the Accommodation Centre for Applicants for International Protection include: • Police and Border Guard Board (PBGB) • Ministry of the Interior, Ministry of Social Affairs, Ministry of Education and Research • IOM (assistance to voluntary returnees) • UNHCR • NGOs dealing with refugees, such as the Estonian Refugee Council, the Estonian Human Rights Centre, and others.

Organisational aspects

Reception is managed centrally by the Estonian National Social Insurance Board (SIB). As set out in Section 2.1 of AGIPA, SIB is responsible for organising the reception system and may delegate the operation of accommodation centres to service providers through administrative contracts, in accordance with the Administrative Cooperation Act.

SIB has exercised its option to delegate the operation of accommodation centres by contracting AS Hoolekandeteenused, a publicly-owned entity, to manage accommodation centres for applicants for international protection (this reflects the outcome of the competitive process rather than a policy choice). The reception service is procured through open-market procedures and is accessible to any qualified operator capable of delivering the service. Future procurements will continue to follow this approach.

The centres provide accommodation and support services, including translation, Estonian language instruction, mental health support and transportation for procedures/appointments. Healthcare is delivered by external providers. Entry to the reception system is exclusively through referral by the PBGB.

Local municipalities are involved in the phase when individuals transition into the territory of the municipality and provide the needed support in accordance with the Social Welfare Act. The Estonian Human Rights Centre provides legal counselling in asylum matters, and under the mandate of UNHCR, biannual accommodation centre monitoring is conducted.

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Allocation of applicants to geographical areas within the territory

The management of reception is centralised. The Social Insurance Board may delegate the functions of an accommodation centre for applicants for international protection to a sole proprietor or a legal entity (the service provider) through an administrative contract, in accordance with the Administrative Co-operation Act.

The service provider of the accommodation centre for applicants for international protection must ensure the security of the accommodation and implement appropriate measures both within the accommodation centre and in accommodations organised by the PBGB to prevent violence and abuse (Section 33(9) AGIPA).

Staff and training

The core staff profiles in centres are social workers, a coordinator for work and leisure activities, and security personnel.

Social workers are responsible for case management, day-to-day support and referrals to mainstream services, such as healthcare and education, as well as providing basic psychosocial support. Medical and psychological services are not embedded in the centres but are accessed through the public health system.

The work and leisure coordinator organises activities, including workshops, excursions and group events, with the aim of strengthening psychosocial wellbeing and ensuring that the waiting period during the asylum procedure is filled with meaningful activities. Staff recruitment follows a formal process with a 4-month probation period, during which a mentor is assigned. Job tasks are defined in the employment contract.

In light of Estonia’s small caseload, staff with prior specialisation in reception are limited, and full-scale specialised training for individual staff members is not envisaged.

Security personnel are present during off-work hours, including nights and weekends, to ensure safety and compliance with internal rules. Applicants are required to remain in the centre during nighttime (22:00–6:00), with their presence registered each evening in accordance with the accommodation centre rules established by ministerial decree.

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Reception phases

Reception is organised as a single phase in accommodation centres for applicants for international protection; there are no separate border, transit or integration facilities. The right to reception begins from the moment an application for international protection is lodged with the PBGB, at which point, applicants are entitled to reception services. The PBGB makes the referral to the accommodation centre, where reception is provided. Reception ends when the procedure is concluded with a final decision. If the application is rejected and the decision becomes final, reception support ceases.

If the person lodges an appeal, the continuation of reception depends on if the person maintains the status of an applicant for international protection during court proceedings. The prerequisite for reception is the possession of applicant status, and it is for the court to decide whether this status continues throughout the appeal process. If applicant status is upheld, reception rights remain; if not, the entitlement to reception ends.

Contingency planning

Specific provisions for the accommodation and detention of applicants for international protection in emergencies caused by a mass influx of migrants are outlined in Section 366 of AGIPA. To ensure preparedness in accommodation, a contingency plan to expand reception capacity in the event of increased migratory flows was elaborated. The requirement for contingency planning is set out in law.

Facilities

Overview of different types of reception facilities according to national classification

The offices of the PBGB may provide temporary accommodation to third-country nationals in need of shelter during the preliminary proceedings, pending the completion of identification procedures. This accommodation operates under a closed regime and has an overall capacity of 80. However, these are not reception facilities as such, and this use of the offices is not currently applied.

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The accommodation centre for applicants for international protection is a collective accommodation centre where applicants are accommodated during the procedure.

Premises at the border

Name of the reception facility	n/a
Access description	n/a
Management	n/a
Type of applicants accommodated	n/a
Number of centres	n/a
Capacity	n/a
Location of the centres within the country	n/a

Initial reception centres

Name of the reception facility	n/a
Regime	n/a
Management	n/a
Type of applicants accommodated	n/a
Number of centres	n/a
Capacity	n/a
Location of the centres within the country	n/a

Collective accommodation centres

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Name of the reception facility	Accommodation Centre for Applicants for International Protection
Regime	Open. According to Section 34(5) and (6) of AGIPA, applicants are required to stay at the accommodation centre for applicants for international protection during the nighttime (22:00-06:00). The accommodation centre may grant permission for an applicant to stay away from the centre during nighttime in the following cases: • to receive medical care; • to stay with a family member who requires emergency medical care; • based on a reasoned application from a person staying legally in Estonia; • based on a reasoned application from the applicant, which includes their contact information and address of stay.
Management	According to Section 32(2-5) of AGIPA, the Estonian National Social Insurance Board is responsible for ensuring the performance of the functions of the accommodation centre for applicants for international protection, although these functions may be transferred to other entities in accordance with legal provisions.
Type of applicants accommodated	Applicants for international protection and beneficiaries of international protection.
Number of centres	1 accommodation centre consisting of 2 units
Capacity	Vao branch: 70 Vägeva branch: 30
Location of the centres within the country	Vao and Vägeva

Individual accommodation centres (such as private houses, flats, hotels)

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Name of the reception facility	n/a
Regime	n/a
Management	n/a
Type of applicants accommodated	n/a
Number of centres	n/a
Capacity	n/a
Location of the centres within the country	n/a

Temporary solutions when housing capacities is temporarily exhausted

Name of the reception facility	n/a
Regime	n/a
Management	n/a
Type of applicants accommodated	n/a
Number of centres	n/a
Capacity	n/a
Location of the centres within the country	n/a

Reception facilities for applicants with special needs

National legislation does not provide for dedicated reception facilities for persons with special needs; accessibility requirements are defined in other legislation. Where a special need requires a setting different from a reception centre, referrals are made either to a specialised facility or to mainstream services.

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There are no specific reception and care facilities for vulnerable applicants for international protection with special needs, except for unaccompanied minors and victims of trafficking in human beings, who are accommodated in specialised facilities if needed.

Material reception conditions provided in kind and cash

Definition of material reception conditions

Under Section 31 of AGIPA, the accommodation centre for applicants for international protection is responsible for providing a range of services to support applicants during their international protection or temporary protection proceedings. These services include:

- accommodation;
- provision of food, essential clothing, toiletries and other necessities to applicants residing both in the accommodation centre and outside (as specified under Sections 34 and 62 AGIPA);
- access to medical examinations and necessary health services;
- essential translation services and Estonian language instruction;
- information about applicants' rights and duties;
- transportation required for procedures under AGIPA;
- other essential services.

Material reception conditions provided in kind

Type and purpose	Transportation from the accommodation centre is provided to Tallinn for interviews and other procedures, as well as to medical appointments across the country.
Duration and recurrence	Throughout the entire asylum procedure, as needed.

Financial allowances and vouchers

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Type and purpose	A financial allowance is provided based on minimum consumption expenditure. This benefit covers costs related to food, clothing and mobile phone expenses.
Duration and recurrence	The allowance is provided on a monthly basis for the entire duration of the procedure.
Calculation and amount	The amount equal to an established subsistence limit based on minimum consumption expenditure as follows: • EUR 200 per month for a person living alone or the first member of a household. • EUR 160 per month for the second member of the family and each subsequent member thereafter. • EUR 240 per month for each minor member of the household.
Applicants granted allowance	Applicants for international protection, except those residing outside accommodation centres due to sufficient means or being employed in Estonia.
Modalities of provision	The allowance is provided in cash.

Material reception conditions for vulnerable persons

Applicants for international protection with specific medical or psychological needs are granted access to healthcare services, including mental health services (psychological counselling, psychiatric aid, etc.). If necessary, they are transferred to specialised care facilities.

For victims of human trafficking, support services are provided by the Social Insurance Board, depending on the locality. Specialised legal and psychological services are also available to victims of violence against women in 16 shelters across Estonia.

Other applicants for international protection are accommodated in the accommodation centre, where they are provided with all necessary services based on their special needs. Men and women are accommodated separately,

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and families are usually housed in a different building within the accommodation centre. Access to a general practitioner and, if necessary, a specialist doctor or psychologist is guaranteed. Translation services are also provided during medical consultations.

Rights and obligations during reception

Provision of information and counselling

Modalities of information provision on benefits and obligations related to reception conditions	Information is provided by protection counsellors and covers both the procedure and reception conditions. Interpretation is ensured in accordance with the general rules.
Provision of legal assistance on the reception conditions available	Legal aid and representation is provided to all applicants in the early stages. If necessary, applicants can arrange follow-up meetings with their counsellor. Additionally, legal aid is available through NGOs or private companies.

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House rules	The internal rules of the accommodation centre for applicants for international protection are established by a regulation issued by the Minister for Social Affairs. According to Section 32(9) of AGIPA, the internal rules must cover, at a minimum, the following: • Procedures for accommodation of applicants. • Procedures for staying in the centre's territory and buildings. • Procedures for staying away from the centre at night. • Procedures for visiting the centre. • Procedures for using the centre's property and premises. • A list of prohibited items that may endanger safety or security. • Procedures for submitting complaints. Procedures for payment of financial support under the AGIPA. • Procedures for reporting changes in residence if staying outside the centre. To ensure safety, it is prohibited to bring items into the accommodation centre that may endanger the life or health of individuals or compromise the security of the centre. Applicants are required stay in the accommodation centre at night, i.e. from 22:00-06:00, unless granted written permission by the PBGB to stay elsewhere under specific conditions. In exceptional cases, applicants may stay away from the centre at night for reasons such as medical care or assisting family members. A permit is granted for up to 3 days, with possible extensions in justified cases.

Freedom of movement within the territory

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Assignment of a particular area of residence to applicants	Applicants may move freely during the day; their presence is required only at night (22:00–06:00), unless permission for an absence has been granted under specified exceptions.
Reporting obligations	According to Section 34(5) and (6) of AGIPA, applicants are required to stay at the accommodation centre for applicants for international protection during nighttime, defined as 22:00-06:00. The accommodation centre may grant permission for an applicant to stay away from the centre during nighttime in the following cases: • To receive medical care. • To stay with a family member in need of emergency medical care. • Based on a reasoned application from a person legally staying in Estonia. • Based on a reasoned application from the applicant, including their contact information and address of stay. The applicant must submit a written request to the head of the accommodation centre, who may grant permission to stay away at night on the basis of that request. The request must be submitted 72 hours in advance, except in cases of emergency.

Employment and vocational training

Time limit to access the labour market	According to Section 10 of AGIPA, an applicant for international protection may work in Estonia if, within 6 months of submitting the application, a decision on their application has not entered into force due to reasons beyond their control. An applicant may continue to work in Estonia until the processing of their application for international protection is complete.

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Criteria to access the labour market	Applicants receive a special certificate with a note indicating the right to work and the date when employment can begin. This certificate is issued by the PBGB, and there are no costs for the applicant. The employer is not obligated to verify the applicant's right to work.
Employment support for applicants	Applicants for international protection may access mainstream labour market measures once they are entitled to work. Under Section 3(1)(4) of the Labour Market Measures Act, applicants for international protection fall within the scope of the act, subject to the conditions provided in AGIPA. Accordingly, once the 6-month condition is met, applicants may access the same state-financed employment services and support as nationals.
Adults' access to vocational training	Applicants for international protection may access vocational training.
Access to tertiary education	Applicants for international protection may access tertiary and higher education, provided they have Estonian language proficiency at level B2.

Healthcare

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Medical screening	Applicants are required to undergo a medical screening upon first arrival at an accommodation facility. The screening is carried out by the service provider, who ensures delivery through a contract with the local health centre. The medical screening aims to assess the overall health status of applicants, identify immediate medical needs and provide prescriptions if necessary. It includes the detection of infectious diseases, chronic conditions and other health issues that may require follow-up. In addition, the screening serves to flag any circumstances indicating vulnerabilities or the need for special reception arrangements. The screening is a mandatory part of the reception process, but it is conducted with the applicant's consent.
Level of healthcare	Emergency care is fully provided. Health checks are carried out during the intake procedure, and needs-based healthcare services are provided to applicants.
Access to healthcare	The state finances healthcare for asylum applicants, unless the applicant has sufficient funds to cover the costs themselves. Healthcare services and medication are provided by the contracted healthcare provider of the accommodation or detention centre. If the applicant resides outside the accommodation centre, the centre remains responsible for facilitating access to healthcare services. The healthcare provider determines which services will be provided to the applicant.

Education for minors

Under Section 102 of AGIPA, minor applicants for international protection who are required to attend school are guaranteed access to education, in accordance with the Basic Schools and Upper Secondary Schools Act, within 3 months of submitting their application for international protection. To ensure this access, minor applicants are also entitled to preparatory training, including language courses. Furthermore, access to upper secondary education is not restricted

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solely because the minor applicant reaches the age of majority during the application process.

Pre-school and basic education are compulsory for all children living in Estonia (including children of beneficiaries of protection) from the age of 7 until they complete basic education or reach 19 years. Education in general education schools operated by the state or local municipalities is free. Therefore, Estonia ensures access to education for children of those granted protection, both at the school and kindergarten levels.

Socio-cultural orientation and language learning

Access to socio-cultural orientation	Social orientation is provided to applicants during the reception phase. The work and leisure coordinator is responsible for organising these activities. Orientation is in group sessions with hands-on activities, as well as excursions and visits to museums and other attractions. The purpose is to familiarise applicants with everyday life in Estonia, the rules of the accommodation centre, access to services and broader aspects of society and culture. These activities are funded through the Asylum, Migration and Integration Fund (AMIF). There is no specific criteria or restrictions; participation is open to all applicants in reception.
Language classes	Estonian language classes are provided at the accommodation centre. They are state-funded by the Social Insurance Board as part of the administrative contract with the accommodation centre provider. The classes are delivered by a third party, organised through procurement by the service provider. They are held in group sessions with practical and interactive activities and are open to all applicants residing in the reception facility, with no prerequisites or access conditions.

Sufficient means

Arrangement of private accommodation

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An applicant may reside outside of the accommodation centre with the written permission from the PBGB if they have sufficient financial resources to cover their accommodation and subsistence.

An applicant who resides outside of the accommodation centre for applicants for international protection during the international protection procedure is required to inform the PBGB of their place of residence and any changes to it.

Contribution to reception and healthcare costs

There are no rules or modalities requiring applicants for international protection to contribute to healthcare costs. No income thresholds or cost-sharing mechanisms have been established, and such arrangements have not been implemented to date.

Applicants hosted in the centre who have sufficient means, for example through employment, are not entitled to financial allowances.

Applicants with sufficient means may reside outside of the centre, subject to permission from the PBGB.

Sufficient means test

A means test is not applied to receive material reception conditions or healthcare. The provision of these services is not conditional on the applicant’s resources. No criteria have been established to determine the level of sufficient means.

Sanction regimes, reduction or withdrawal of material reception conditions

Circumstances for reducing or withdrawing material reception conditions

There are currently no provisions in AGIPA that provide for the reduction or withdrawal of material reception conditions. Generally, there is no reason to reduce the services provided by the open accommodation centre to individuals

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who have the right and obligation to stay there.

Under Section 62(6)1 of AGIPA, an applicant for a residence permit based on temporary protection may be detained and required to stay at a detention centre, with the permission of an administrative court judge, if the applicant has repeatedly or seriously violated the internal rules of the accommodation centre for applicants for international protection.

Possible sanctions and procedure

n/a

Review of the sanction decision

n/a

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