Forms of protection - Estonia

Overview

Content updated and validated on: 22/08/2025

Relevant EU legislation

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

National legislation

Refugee status	Section 4(1)(2) of Act on Granting International Protection to Aliens (AGIPA).
Subsidiary protection	Section 4(3)(4) of AGIPA.
Temporary protection	Section 5 of AGIPA.
National forms of protection	n/a

Competent authority and stakeholders

Refugee status	Police and Border Guard Board (PBGB)
Subsidiary protection	Police and Border Guard Board (PBGB)
Temporary protection	Police and Border Guard Board (PBGB)
National forms of protection	n/a

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Renewal and withdrawal of international protection and national forms of protection

Refugee status

Length of the first and subsequent residence permits: The initial residence permit is valid for 3 years and may be renewed for additional 3-year periods.

Review of the status: The PBGB is competent for the review of the status. The review takes place at the same time as renewal, in accordance with Section 39 of AGIPA.

Renewal of the status: The PBGB is competent for extending residence permits, if the conditions for issuance remain unchanged and there are no grounds for revocation. Applications for an extension must be submitted at least 4 months before the permit expires. If the applicant is a minor or ward, the legal representative (e.g. parent or guardian) must submit the application on their behalf. The application requires an identity document, a photo (40x50mm), and, if applicable, proof of representation. The decision on the extension or refusal is made within 3 months of submission, but no later than 10 days before the permit expires. If granted, a residence card and travel document will be issued.

If a decision is not made before the permit expires, the individual retains their international protection status, but will not have a valid residence permit. If renewal is not applied for, the status and permit will expire. The Police and Border Guard Board will inform the individual of the expiration and renewal requirements. Individuals can remain in the country for up to 4 months after expiration while awaiting renewal.

Withdrawal of the status: The Intelligence Management and Investigation Department of the Aliens Unit within the Migration Bureau of the Police and Border Guard Board notifies the beneficiary of international protection when proceedings are initiated to revoke their refugee or subsidiary protection status. The notification includes the reasons for initiating the revocation process and provides the individual with an opportunity to submit objections. Once a decision is made, the person is informed of their right to appeal if the decision results in the withdrawal of their status.

Grounds for withdrawal of the status:

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The PBGB may revoke a residence permit if:

- Circumstances arise that justify the revocation of international protection status;
- New information comes to light that would have led to the refusal of the residence permit or its extension;
- The individual committed crimes in their country of origin that would have resulted in imprisonment and left their country solely to avoid penalties;
- The person poses a threat to national security, public safety or public order, specifically through serious offenses against others.

Refugee status is terminated if:

- The individual voluntarily re-avails themselves of the protection of their country of nationality;
- An individual who has lost their nationality voluntarily applies for its restoration;
- The individual applies for citizenship in a country other than Estonia and receives protection from that country;
- The individual voluntarily returns to their country of origin;
- The circumstances that justified their recognition as a refugee have ceased to exist;
- The individual refuses, without valid reason, to return to their country of origin where they no longer face persecution.

If a residence permit issued on the basis of refugee status is revoked because the grounds for granting it no longer exist, the individual may apply for a residence permit based on subsidiary protection, provided there are no grounds for refusal.

If the residence permit is revoked, a precept to leave the country is issued in accordance with the Obligation to Leave and Prohibition on Entry Act (OLPEA).

Consequences of the withdrawal of the status: Upon reviewing an asylum application, the PBGB issues a reasoned written decision either granting or refusing a residence permit to the applicant. If the residence permit is refused, the same decision will include a precept to leave, issued in accordance with OLPEA. This decision may be appealed to an administrative court within 10 days from the date of notification. However, the decision to issue a precept to leave, along with the refusal of the residence permit, is not subject to the standard challenge procedure and is enforceable according to OLPEA. The individual must leave the territory unless other legal provisions (e.g. ECtHR decisions) apply.

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Subsidiary protection status

Length of the first and subsequent residence permits: The initial residence permit is valid for 1 year and may be renewed for additional 2-year periods.

Review of the status: The PBGB is competent for the review of the status. The review takes place at the same time as renewal, in accordance with Section 39 of AGIPA.

Renewal of the status: The PBGB is competent for extending residence permits, if the conditions for issuance remain unchanged and there are no grounds for revocation. Applications for an extension must be submitted at least 4 months before the permit expires. If the applicant is a minor or ward, the legal representative (e.g. parent or guardian) must submit the application on their behalf. The application requires an identity document, a photo (40x50mm), and, if applicable, proof of representation. The decision on the extension or a refusal is made within 3 months of submission, but no later than 10 days before the permit expires. If granted, a residence card and travel document will be issued. If a decision is not made before the permit expires, the individual retains their international protection status, but will not have a valid residence permit. If renewal is not applied for, the status and permit will expire. The Police and Border Guard Board will inform the individual of the expiration and renewal requirements. Individuals can remain in the country for up to 4 months after expiration while awaiting renewal.

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Grounds for the withdrawal of the status: Subsidiary protection status is terminated if:

- The circumstances that initially justified the grant of subsidiary protection no longer exist;

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- The conditions in the country of origin have changed to such an extent that protection is no longer necessary.

In such cases, the PBGB assesses whether the change in the country of origin's situation is permanent and ensures that the individual is no longer facing actual persecution or a serious threat.

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National forms of protection

Length of the first and subsequent residence permits:

n/a

Review of the status:

n/a

Renewal of the status:

n/a

Withdrawal of the status:

n/a

Grounds for the withdrawal of the status:

n/a

Consequences of the withdrawal of the status:

n/a

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Content of protection

Overview

The legal provisions detailing the content of protection for refugee status holders and beneficiaries of subsidiary protection are found in Sections 10, 10^1, 10^2, 11, 46, 47^1 and 75 of AGIPA.

Provision of information on the content of protection

Beneficiaries of international protection receive information about their rights and obligations together with the decision. They are also invited to enrol in a compulsory integration programme.

Residence permits

Refugees

The authority responsible for delivering the residence permit is the PBGB. The initial residence permit is valid for 3 years and may be renewed for additional 3-year periods. The PBGB is responsible for extending residence permits if the conditions for issuance remain unchanged and there are no grounds for revocation. Applications for an extension must be submitted at least 4 months before the permit expires. If the applicant is a minor or ward, the legal representative (e.g. parent or guardian) must submit the application on their behalf. The application requires an identity document, a photo (40x50mm) and, if applicable, proof of representation. The decision on the extension or refusal is made within 3 months of submission, but no later than 10 days before the permit expires. If granted, a residence card and travel document will be issued.

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Beneficiaries of subsidiary protection

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Travel documents

Refugees

The authority responsible for delivering the travel document is the PBGB. The validity of the travel document corresponds to the validity of the residence permit granted to the refugee beneficiary, in accordance with Section 31 of the Identity Documents Act. A refugee's travel document can be applied for at designated service offices. Applicants aged 12 or older are required to provide fingerprints as part of the application. A digital colour photograph is required for the application, taken no more than 6 months prior. Certain foreign documents, such as those relating to marriage, divorce or name changes abroad, must be translated and, if applicable, legalised. After submission, the refugee travel document will be processed within a maximum of 30 days under the standard procedure. An expedited procedure is available, with a processing time of up to 2 days from the working day after submission. For the expedited procedure, the document may only be collected at the Tallinn service office.

The state fee for the refugee's travel document is EUR 25. The expedited procedure costs EUR 250.

Beneficiaries of subsidiary protection

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Authority responsible for delivering the travel document: n/a

Validity period of the travel document: n/a

Procedure for delivering the travel document (including the necessity to pay any fees): n/a

Freedom of movement

The freedom of movement for beneficiaries of international protection is ensured under Article 6 of the Schengen Borders Code, which serves as the applicable framework.

Access to employment and employment-related education

Refugees and beneficiaries of subsidiary protection:

During their stay in Estonia, a beneficiary of international protection has the right to take employment, in accordance with the conditions and procedures established by law (Section 75(6) AGIPA). There are no restrictions in access to the labour market.

Access to employment-related educational opportunities for adults and to vocational training, including training courses for upgrading professional skills, is available to beneficiaries on the same terms as for Estonian nationals, provided they have sufficient language skills and meet the requirements set by the educational establishment.

Access to education

A beneficiary of international protection has the right to education (Section 75(6) AGIPA). A minor beneficiary of international protection is guaranteed access to education under the same conditions as Estonian citizens.

An adult beneficiary of international protection is guaranteed access to general education, in-service training and retraining on the same basis as third-country nationals residing in Estonia on the basis of a residence permit or right of residence. Beneficiaries of international protection who are 18 years or younger, or under retirement age, are required to participate in Estonian language studies.

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However, beneficiaries who have completed basic, secondary or higher education in Estonian are exempt from this requirement.

The costs of language training may be reclaimed in the following situations:

- A beneficiary of subsidiary protection who has not achieved the A1 language proficiency level, as stipulated in the Language Act, within 1 year of receiving international protection.
- A refugee status holder who has not achieved the A2 language proficiency level, as required by the Language Act, within 2 years of receiving international protection.
- A beneficiary of subsidiary protection who has not reached the A2 language proficiency level within 2 years of the extension of their residence permit (Section 39(2) Language Act).
- A beneficiary of international protection who has not reached the B1 language proficiency level within 5 years of receiving international protection.

Language classes are provided under the Settle in Estonia programme, as well as by the Unemployment Insurance Fund.

Access to procedures for recognition of qualifications and validation of skills

The Estonian Academic Recognition Information Centre (ENIC/NARIC) of the Education and Youth Board is competent for the procedure for the recognition of qualifications and validation of skills. The procedure may already be initiated while the person is still an applicant for international protection.

Social security and social assistance

Refugees:

A beneficiary of international protection has the right to receive a state pension, family benefits, labour market services and labour market support, social benefits and other assistance on the same basis as a permanent resident of Estonia (Section 75(6) AGIPA).

The local government may pay a subsistence allowance to a beneficiary of international protection whose financial situation does not allow to organise

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residence at their own expense.

Beneficiaries of subsidiary protection:

Same as for refugees.

Healthcare

Refugees and beneficiaries of subsidiary protection:

A beneficiary of international protection has the right to receive healthcare services on the same basis as a permanent resident of Estonia (Section 75(6) AGIPA).

Health examinations are financed by the state budget.

Access to accommodation

Refugees:

A beneficiary of international protection may reside in an accommodation centre for applicants for international protection or in a place designated by the Social Insurance Board until they are settled in a local government unit (Section 73 AGIPA).

In coordination with the local government, the Social Insurance Board arranges the transfer of the beneficiary to a local government unit, taking into account factors such as health status, the location of relatives, employment and living opportunities, and ensuring a proportional distribution of beneficiaries. The beneficiary may also participate in identifying a suitable local government unit.

The Social Insurance Board will organise the settlement of a beneficiary in a local government unit within 4 months from the issuance of the residence permit. If no agreement is reached with the local government within this period, the Social Insurance Board will provide the necessary services to the beneficiary.

A beneficiary of international protection may refuse placement in a local government unit by submitting a written declaration. If a beneficiary of international protection refuses to settle in a local government unit that is prepared to receive them, they will be responsible for finding an alternative place of residence and covering the associated costs. The beneficiary will be provided

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accommodation in an accommodation centre for applicants for international protection for up to 2 months following the refusal.

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If a beneficiary of international protection refuses to settle in a local government unit that is prepared to receive them, they will be responsible for finding an alternative place of residence and covering the associated costs. The beneficiary will be provided accommodation in an accommodation centre for applicants for international protection for up to 2 months following the refusal.

Access to integration measures

Refugees:

The Social Insurance Board will enter into an administrative agreement with a legal entity for the reception and provision of services to the beneficiary of international protection, including:

- Assistance in finding housing;
- Access to social and healthcare services;
- Organisation of translation services and Estonian language courses;
- Assistance with other relevant issues.

The state budget will cover the following expenses incurred by the legal entity:

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- Expenses related to a one-time lease agreement for housing provided to the beneficiary;
- The cost of Estonian language studies for the beneficiary for up to 2 years;
- The cost of translation services provided to the beneficiary for up to 2 years.

The period for covering these expenses may be extended upon a justified request from the local government or legal entity.

In September 2020, a 2-year adaptation programme named "Settle in Estonia" was introduced for beneficiaries of international protection. The programme aims to provide essential, timely and uniform information to help them adjust and integrate quickly into society. The training sessions cover Estonian society, rights and obligations, the social welfare and healthcare systems, education, employment opportunities, and family budgeting. The adaptation programme also offers free Estonian language training courses (at A1 and A2 levels).

A beneficiary of international protection must participate in the thematic " International protection module" of the adaptation programme. The module aims to help beneficiaries successfully integrate into Estonian society. This training covers the state's operation, culture, daily life and work environment. Since 2018, the Integration Foundation has procured the module, which is conducted in English, Russian, Turkish and Arabic. The training lasts 4 days, with approximately 8 hours of instruction each day, divided into different blocks.

It is also possible to take Estonian language e-courses for free via Keeleklikk. The courses are financed by the European Social Fund and the Estonian Ministry of Education and Science.

The International House Tartu offers various activities for newly-arrived migrants and beneficiaries of international protection, including:

- Drop-in programme to practice Estonian;
- Help Desk offering support on practical matters like family doctors, contracts, taxes, etc.;
- Cultural adaptation programmes to foster understanding of Estonian society;
- Youth activities to support refugee children and their integration;
- Community interaction activities, such as cooking nights and concerts;
- Training for Estonian practitioners to understand the needs of newcomers.

Beneficiaries of subsidiary protection:

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Family reunification for beneficiaries of international protection

Refugees:

The right to family reunification for beneficiaries of international protection is enshrined in Section 46 of AGIPA. Family members of beneficiaries of international protection are (Section 7(2) AGIPA):

- Spouse or registered partner;
- Unmarried minor children (including adopted children) of the beneficiary of international protection or their spouse/registered partner;
- Unmarried and minor children under the custody of the beneficiary of international protection or their spouse/registered partner (shared custody agreements are required in some cases);
- Unmarried adult children (of the of the beneficiary of international protection or their spouse/registered partner) who cannot cope independently due to health conditions or disability;
- Parents or grandparents of the beneficiary of international protection or their spouse/registered partner, if the country of origin does not provide support for these relatives.

Family members are recognised as such if the family existed in the country of origin, even if the marriage was contracted or the partnership registered before entering Estonia.

Unaccompanied minors are eligible for family reunification, but they do not have the same responsibilities as the sponsor until they reach 18 years.

The time limit for the application of exceptions in respect of both refugees and beneficiaries of subsidiary protection is 6 months.

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According to legislation, family members eligible for reunification with an unaccompanied minor beneficiary of international protection include:

- Parent(s) of the minor;
- Guardian or another family member if the minor has no parents or if the parents cannot be traced, unless it conflicts with the minor's rights or best interests.

There are no specific family reunion visas, and there have not been any cases where children recognised as refugees or granted subsidiary protection are sponsors for family reunification.

A family member may apply for a residence permit:

- Within 6 months of the date the beneficiary of international protection receives the residence permit, with no additional requirements;
- After 6 months from the date of the beneficiary’s residence permit, in which case the PBGB may impose additional requirements on the sponsor: permanent legal income to ensure the family’s maintenance in Estonia, actual dwelling in Estonia and valid health insurance for the family. Failure to meet these conditions may result in the PBGB refusing the family member’s residence permit application. In practice, the imposition of these requirements is determined on a case-by-case basis and may not always apply.

A family reunification application can be submitted by a beneficiary of international protection. The PBGB will process the application within 30 days. The family member should submit the residence permit and international protection application within 6 months of entering Estonia. The temporary residence permit for a family member is valid for the same period as the sponsor’s (the beneficiary of international protection). If the family member applies for international protection after arrival, their application will be processed and international protection will be granted if necessary. If international protection is not granted, a residence permit will be issued.

The residence permit granted to reunified family members has the same validity as the sponsor’s residence permit, and such family members enjoy the same rights as the sponsor.

Beneficiaries of subsidiary protection:

Same as for refugees.

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