

Language Act

Passed 21 February 1995, entered into force 1 April 1995,
amended by the following Acts:

15.12.2004 entered into force 31.03.2005 - RT I 2005, 1, 1;
10.12.2003 entered into force 01.01.2004 - RT I 2003, 82, 551;
16.10.2002 entered into force 01.01.2003 - RT I 2002, 90, 521;
19.06.2002 entered into force 01.09.2002 - RT I 2002, 63, 387;
05.06.2002 entered into force 28.06.2002 - RT I 2002, 53, 337;
17.01.2002 entered into force 01.02.2002 - RT I 2002, 9, 47;
14.11.2001 entered into force 01.02.2002 - RT I 2001, 93, 565;
13.06.2001 entered into force 22.07.2001 - RT I 2001, 65, 375;
06.06.2001 entered into force 01.01.2002 - RT I 2001, 58, 354;
14.06.2000 entered into force 01.07.2000 - RT I 2000, 51, 326;
09.02.99 entered into force 01.07.99 - RT I 1999, 16, 275;
15.12.98 entered into force 17.01.99 - RT I 1999, 1, 1;
10.09.97 entered into force 04.10.97 - RT I 1997, 69, 1110;
28.05.96 entered into force 08.06.96 - RT I 1996, 40, 773;
16.05.96 entered into force 08.06.96 - RT I 1996, 37, 739.

Chapter 1

General Provisions

§ 1. Status of Estonian language

- (1) The official language of Estonia is Estonian.
- (2) For the purposes of this Act, the basis for the official use of Estonian is the Estonian Literary Standard pursuant to the procedure established by the Government of the Republic.

§ 2. Foreign language

- (1) For the purposes of this Act, any language other than Estonian is a foreign language.
- (2) A language of a national minority is a foreign language which Estonian citizens who belong to a national minority have historically used as their mother tongue in Estonia.

§ 2¹. Scope of application of Act

(1) This Act regulates the requirements for proficiency in the Estonian language and the use of Estonian and foreign languages.

(2) The use of Estonian by companies, non-profit associations and foundations, by employees thereof and by sole proprietors is regulated if it is in the public interest, which, for the purposes of this Act, means public safety, public order, general government, public health, health protection, consumer protection and occupational safety. The establishment of requirements concerning proficiency in and use of Estonian shall be justified and in proportion to the objective being sought and shall not distort the nature of the rights which are restricted.

(14.06.2000 entered into force 01.07.2000 - RT I 2000, 51, 326)

§ 3. Language of public administration

(1) The language of public administration in state agencies, local governments and agencies thereof (hereinafter local governments) and the language of service and command in the Estonian Defence Forces shall be Estonian. Exceptions are provided for in Chapters 2, 3 and 4 of this Act.

(2) The use of languages in pre-trial proceedings and judicial proceedings is provided for in the corresponding Acts.

§ 4. Right to use Estonian language

(1) Everyone has the right to access public administration and to communicate in Estonian in state agencies, local governments, bureaus of notaries, bailiffs and certified interpreters and translators, cultural autonomy bodies and institutions, companies, non-profit associations and foundations.

(14.11.2001 entered into force 01.02.2002 - RT I 2001, 93, 565)

(2) All employees of agencies, enterprises and organisations shall be provided with work-related information in Estonian.

(09.02.99 entered into force 01.07.99 - RT I 1999, 16, 275)

§ 5. Requirements for proficiency in and use of Estonian language

(09.02.99 entered into force 01.07.99 - RT I 1999, 16, 275)

(1) (Repealed - 15.12.98 entered into force 17.01.99 - RT I 1999, 1, 1)

(2) Public servants and employees of state agencies administered by government agencies and of local government agencies, and employees of legal persons in public law and agencies thereof, notaries, bailiffs and certified interpreters and translators and the employees of their bureaus must

be able to understand and shall use Estonian at the level which is necessary to perform their service or employment duties.

(14.11.2001 entered into force 01.02.2002 - RT I 2001, 93, 565)

(3) The requirement for employees of companies, non-profit associations and foundations and for sole proprietors to be proficient in Estonian to the level which is necessary to perform their employment duties shall be applied if it is justified in the public interest as specified in subsection 2¹ (2) of this Act.

(14.06.2000 entered into force 01.07.2000 - RT I 2000, 51, 326)

(4) The mandatory levels of language proficiency for public servants, employees and sole proprietors specified in subsections (2) and (3) of this section shall be established by the Government of the Republic.

(09.02.99 entered into force 01.07.99 - RT I 1999, 16, 275)

(5) Proficiency in Estonian shall be required at one of the three levels of language proficiency:

1) basic level – limited oral and elementary written proficiency in Estonian. The person can manage in familiar language situations, understands clear speech on everyday topics, understands the general meaning of uncomplicated texts and can complete simple standard documents and write short texts for general use;

2) intermediate level – oral and limited written proficiency in Estonian. The person can manage in various language situations, understands speech at normal speed, understands the contents of texts on everyday topics without difficulty and can write texts relating to his or her area of activity;

3) advanced level – oral and written proficiency in Estonian. The person can express himself or herself freely irrespective of the language situation, understands speech at high speed, understands the contents of more complicated texts without difficulty and can write texts which are different in style and function.

(09.02.99 entered into force 01.07.99 - RT I 1999, 16, 275)

(6) The requirements for proficiency in the Estonian language do not apply to persons who work in Estonia temporarily as foreign experts or foreign specialists.

(14.06.2000 entered into force 01.07.2000 - RT I 2000, 51, 326)

§ 5¹. Estonian language proficiency examination

(1) Proficiency in the Estonian language shall be evaluated by state examination committees using Estonian language proficiency examinations. The membership of the state examination

committees shall be approved and the procedure for conducting Estonian language proficiency examinations shall be established by a regulation of the Minister of Education and Research.

(16.10.2002 entered into force 01.01.2003 - RT I 2002, 90, 521)

(2) The conditions for combining final examinations in the Estonian language at foreign language basic or upper secondary schools and Estonian language proficiency examinations shall be established by the Minister of Education and Research. The conditions for combining Estonian language examinations for applicants for citizenship and Estonian language proficiency examinations shall be established by the Government of the Republic.

(16.10.2002 entered into force 01.01.2003 - RT I 2002, 90, 521)

(2¹) The conditions for combining state examinations in the Estonian language and Estonian language proficiency examinations for graduates of groups studying in other languages who acquire secondary vocational education on the basis of basic education shall be established by the Minister of Education and Research.

(13.06.2001 entered into force 22.07.2001 - RT I 2001, 65, 375; 16.10.2002 entered into force 01.01.2003 - RT I 2002, 90, 521)

(3) Persons who have acquired basic, secondary, vocational secondary or higher education in Estonian are not required to take an Estonian language proficiency examination.

(4) Persons who wish to take an Estonian language proficiency examination have the right to receive consultations without charge prior to taking the examination, to the extent and pursuant to the procedure established by the Government of the Republic; the costs of such consultations shall be covered from the state budget.

(5) Persons who have passed an Estonian language proficiency examination shall be issued a certificate of proficiency in the Estonian language, the format of which shall be approved by the Government of the Republic.

(09.02.99 entered into force 01.07.99 - RT I 1999, 16, 275)

§ 6. Acquiring education in Estonian and in foreign languages

State agencies and local governments shall ensure that opportunities exist to acquire education in Estonian in all educational institutions belonging thereto and to acquire education in foreign languages, pursuant to the procedure prescribed by law.

Chapter 2

Use of Foreign Languages in State Agencies and Local Governments

§ 7. Requirements for proficiency in and use of Estonian language for public servants and employees

In local governments where besides Estonian the language of a national minority is the internal working language, public servants and employees shall be proficient in Estonian to the extent of the requirements for proficiency in and use of the Estonian language which are established by the Government of the Republic.

(09.02.99 entered into force 01.07.99 - RT I 1999, 16, 275)

§ 8. Access to public administration in foreign languages

(1) If an application, request or other document submitted to a state agency or local government is in a foreign language, the agency has the right to require the person who submits the document to submit the translation of the document into Estonian, except in the case provided for in § 10 of this Act.

(2) If a state agency or local government does not require promptly to submit the translation of an application, request or other document into Estonian, the document in a foreign language is deemed to be accepted by the agency.

(3) In the cases provided by law, a state agency or local government has the right to require notarisation of the translation. If the required translation is not submitted, the state agency or local government may return the document or have it translated with the consent and at the expense of the person who submitted the document.

(4) In oral communication with servants or employees of state agencies and local governments, and in a notary's office, bailiff's office or certified interpreter or translator's office, by agreement of the parties, a foreign language which the servants or employees understand may be used. If no agreement is reached, communication shall take place through an interpreter and the costs shall be borne by the person who is not proficient in Estonian, unless otherwise provided by law.

(17.01.2002 entered into force 01.02.2002 - RT I 2002, 9, 47)

§ 9. Language of international communication

In international communication, state agencies and local governments and the public servants and employees thereof have the right to use a language which is suitable for both parties.

(09.02.99 entered into force 01.07.99 - RT I 1999, 16, 275)

§ 10. Right to use language of national minority

(1) In local governments where at least half of the permanent residents belong to a national minority, everyone has the right to receive answers from state agencies operating in the territory of the corresponding local government and from the corresponding local government and officials thereof in the language of the national minority as well as in Estonian.

(2) A permanent resident of a local government is a person who is legally in Estonia, who resides in the territory of the local government for at least 183 days annually and whose absence therefrom does not exceed 90 consecutive days.

§ 11. Use of language of national minority as language of public administration

In local governments where the majority of permanent residents are non-Estonian speakers, the language of the national minority constituting the majority of the permanent residents of the local government may be used alongside Estonian as the internal working language of the local government on the proposal of the corresponding local government council and by a decision of the Government of the Republic.

§ 12. Language of correspondence

In local governments where the language of a national minority is used as the internal working language alongside Estonian, all correspondence with state agencies and other local governments shall be in Estonian.

§ 13. Language of seals, rubber stamps, letter-heads, announcements, invitations and notices

(1) In local governments where the language of a national minority is used as the internal working language alongside Estonian, seals, rubber stamps and letter-heads shall be in Estonian.

(2) In local governments specified in subsection (1) of this section, invitations, announcements and notices shall be in Estonian and the local government may append a translation into the corresponding language of the national minority.

Chapter 3

Use of Language of National Minority in Cultural Autonomy Bodies of National Minorities

§ 14. Language of cultural autonomy bodies of national minorities

(1) The cultural autonomy body of a national minority may use the language of the national minority as an internal working language.

(2) All communication of cultural autonomy bodies with state agencies and with local governments where the language of the national minority is not used as an internal working language shall take place in Estonian.

§ 15. Language of seals, letter-heads, announcements, notices and rubber stamps of cultural autonomy bodies of national minorities

(1) The seals of cultural autonomy bodies of national minorities shall be in Estonian.

(2) Official letter-heads, announcements, notices and rubber stamps shall be in Estonian and the cultural autonomy body may append a translation into the corresponding language of the national minority.

Chapter 4

Use of Languages in Other Areas

§ 16. Right of consumers to information in Estonian

Consumers of goods and services have the right to receive information and servicing in Estonian in compliance with the Consumer Protection Act (RT I 1994, 2, 13; RT I 1999, 35, 450; 102, 907; 2000, 40, 252; 59, 379; 2001, 50, 283 and 289; 56, 332; 2002, 13, 81; 18, 97; 35, 214; 53, 336; 61, 375; 63, 387).

§ 17. Language of reporting

Agencies, companies, non-profit associations and foundations which are registered in Estonia shall report in Estonian pursuant to the procedure prescribed by Acts.

(09.02.99 entered into force 01.07.99 - RT I 1999, 16, 275)

§ 18. Use of foreign languages in other areas

Foreign languages shall be used for forwarding information to consumers of goods and services and in work-related communication pursuant to the procedure established by the Government of the Republic.

Chapter 5

Names and Information

§ 19. Language of place names

- (1) Estonian place names shall be in Estonian. Exceptions may be permitted in place names if they are justified for historical or cultural reasons.
- (2) Each place in Estonia shall have only one official name. The original form of Estonian place names shall be written using Estonian-Latin letters. Estonian place names transcribed into the language of a national minority which uses another alphabet shall be written in compliance with the transcription rules established in the Literary Standards.

§ 20. Spelling of personal names

Personal names shall be spelled in accordance with the provisions of the Names Act.

(15.12.2004 entered into force 31.03.2005 - RT I 2005, 1, 1)

§ 21. Seals, stamps and letter-heads of agencies, companies, non-profit associations, foundations and sole proprietors

(14.06.2000 entered into force 01.07.2000 - RT I 2000, 51, 326)

- (1) (Repealed - 28.05.96 entered into force 08.06.96 - RT I 1996, 40, 773)
- (2) The seals, stamps and letter-heads of agencies, companies, non-profit associations, foundations and sole proprietors which are registered in Estonia shall be in Estonian. An agency, company, non-profit association, foundation or sole proprietor may append a translation into a foreign language to an Estonian text.

(14.06.2000 entered into force 01.07.2000 - RT I 2000, 51, 326)

§ 22. International form of names

- (1) The international form of Estonian place names, names of citizens, things, companies, agencies, non-profit associations and foundations in the Latin alphabet shall be identical to the form used in Estonia.

(09.02.99 entered into force 01.07.99 - RT I 1999, 16, 275)

- (2) If the names provided in subsection (1) of this section are written in a language which uses another alphabet, the transcription rules established in the Literary Standards shall be applied.

§ 23. Language of information

- (1) Public signs, signposts, announcements, notices and advertisements shall be in Estonian, except in the cases provided for in §§ 13, 15 and 18 of this Act and upon organisation of international events.

- (2) The provisions of this section do not apply to foreign representations.

§ 24. Language of state registration plates

The letter combinations used on state registration plates shall contain only Latin letters.

§ 25. Translation of foreign language text of audiovisual works, television and radio programmes and advertisements

(1) Upon broadcasting (including transmission by television stations or cable networks) of audiovisual works (including programmes and advertisements), foreign language text shall be accompanied by an adequate translation into Estonian.

(2) A translation into Estonian is not required for programmes which are immediately retransmitted or language learning programmes or in the case of the newsreader's text of originally produced foreign language news programmes and of originally produced live foreign language programmes.

(3) A translation into Estonian is not required in the case of radio programmes which are aimed at a foreign language audience.

(4) The volume of foreign language news programmes and live foreign language programmes without translations into Estonian specified in subsection (2) of this section shall not exceed 10 per cent of the volume of weekly original production.

(10.09.97 entered into force 04.10.97 - RT I 1997, 69, 1110)

§ 26. Use of "Riigikogu"² as name of Estonian legislative body

(1) The word "Riigikogu" as the name of the Estonian legislative body is not subject to translation.

(2) The word "Riigikogu" transcribed into foreign languages which use the Latin alphabet identically to Estonian and into languages which use other alphabets shall be written in compliance with the transcription rules established in the Literary Standards.

(3) Instead of or as an attribute to the word "Riigikogu" as the name of the Estonian legislative body, the word "*parlament*" [parliament] in Estonian and foreign language equivalents thereof may be used as an unofficial name.

Chapter 5¹

Liability

(19.06.2002 entered into force 01.09.2002 - RT I 2002, 63, 387)

§ 26¹. Violation of requirements for use of Estonian language

(1) Violation of the requirements for use of the Estonian language in public administration, correspondence, reporting, communication, or forwarding of work-related information to employees in state agencies, legal persons in public law and agencies thereof, local governments or agencies administered thereby, companies, non-profit associations or foundations, and violation of the requirements for use of the Estonian language on seals, rubber stamps or letter-heads is punishable by a fine of up to 200 fine units.

(2) The same act, if committed at least twice, is punishable by a fine of up to 300 fine units.

(3) The same act, if committed by a legal person, is punishable by a fine of up to 40 000 kroons.

(19.06.2002 entered into force 01.09.2002 - RT I 2002, 63, 387)

§ 26². Violation of language requirements in media

(1) The absence of an Estonian translation upon the transmission of foreign language audiovisual works, foreign language programmes of radio or television stations or international events directed at the public is punishable by a fine of up to 300 fine units.

(2) The same act, if committed by a legal person, is punishable by a fine of up to 50 000 kroons.

(19.06.2002 entered into force 01.09.2002 - RT I 2002, 63, 387)

§ 26³. Violation of language requirements in Estonian Defence Forces

Violation of the language requirements in the Estonian Defence Forces is punishable by a fine of up to 100 fine units.

(19.06.2002 entered into force 01.09.2002 - RT I 2002, 63, 387)

§ 26⁴. Violation of requirements for language proficiency

Failure by an employer to apply the requirements for language proficiency in respect of an employee and violation of the requirements for language proficiency by a public servant or employee is punishable by a fine of up to 200 fine units.

(19.06.2002 entered into force 01.09.2002 - RT I 2002, 63, 387)

§ 26⁵. Violation requirements for use of Estonian language and Estonian Literary Standard

(1) Violation of the requirements for use of the Estonian language on public signs and signposts and in announcements, notices and advertisements and violation of the Estonian Literary Standard in official language use or the transcription of names is punishable by a fine of up to 200 fine units.

(2) The same act, if committed by a legal person, is punishable by a fine of up to 20 000 kroons.

(19.06.2002 entered into force 01.09.2002 - RT I 2002, 63, 387)

§ 26⁶. Violation of requirements for use of Estonian language upon servicing of consumers

(1) Violation of the requirements for use of the Estonian language upon servicing a consumer and the absence of labelling or instructions for use in Estonian on goods is punishable by a fine of up to 200 fine units.

(2) The same act, if committed by a legal person, is punishable by a fine of up to 40 000 kroons.

(19.06.2002 entered into force 01.09.2002 - RT I 2002, 63, 387)

§ 26⁷. Proceedings

(1) The provisions of the General Part of the Penal Code (RT I 2001, 61, 364; 2002, 86, 504; 105, 612; 2003, 4, 22; 83, 557) and of the Code of Misdemeanour Procedure (RT I 2002, 50, 313; 110, 654; 2003, 26, 156; 83, 557; 88, 590; 593) apply to the misdemeanours provided for in §§ 26¹–26⁶ of this Act.

(2) The Language Inspectorate is the extra-judicial body which conducts proceedings in matters of misdemeanours provided for in §§ 26¹–26⁶ of this Act.

(19.06.2002 entered into force 01.09.2002 - RT I 2002, 63, 387)

Chapter 6

Final Provisions

§ 27. Liability for violation of law

Persons who violate this Act or other legislation related thereto shall bear administrative liability pursuant to the procedure prescribed by law.

§ 28. Supervision over compliance with Act

Supervision over compliance with this Act shall be exercised pursuant to the procedure established by the Government of the Republic.

§ 28¹. (Repealed - 10.12.2003 entered into force 01.01.2004 - RT I 2003, 82, 551)

§ 28². Categories of work-related proficiency in Estonian

(1) Categories of work-related proficiency in Estonian are deemed to correspond to mandatory levels of language proficiency established on the basis of subsection 5 (4) of his Act as follows:

- 1) categories A, B and C correspond to the basic level of proficiency in the Estonian language;
 - 2) category D corresponds to the intermediate level of proficiency in the Estonian language;
 - 3) categories E and F correspond to the advanced level of proficiency in the Estonian language;
- (2) The categories of work-related proficiency in Estonian shall not be applied to certify the proficiency in the Estonian language of an applicants for citizenship.
- (10.12.2003 entered into force 01.01.2004 - RT I 2003, 82, 551)

§ 29. Amendment of legislation

- (1) The Estonian SSR Language Act (ENSV Teataja³ 1989, 4, 60; RT I 1993, 20, 352; 1994, 49, 804) is repealed.
- (2) The Local Government Organisation Act (RT I 1993, 37, 558; RT I 1999, 82, 755; 2000, 51, 322; 2001, 24, 133; 82, 489; 100, 642; 2002, 29, 174; 36, 220; 50, 313; 53, 336; 58, 362; 61, 375; 63, 387; 64, 390; 393; 82, 480; 96, 565; 99, 579; 2003, 1, 1; 4, 22; 23, 141; 88, 588) is amended as follows:
 - 1) subsection 23 (8) is amended and worded as follows:

"(8) Council regulations and resolutions and minutes of council sessions shall be prepared and published in Estonian. In local governments where the majority of permanent residents are non-Estonian speakers, minutes of council sessions may be prepared in the language of the national minority constituting the majority of the permanent residents of the local government; however, a translation into Estonian shall be appended thereto.";
 - 2) subsection 41 (2) is amended and worded as follows:

"(2) The use of foreign languages including languages of national minorities shall be provided for in the Language Act."

§ 30. Entry into force of Act

This Act enters into force on 1 April 1995.