

Governance of COVID-19

ESTONIA

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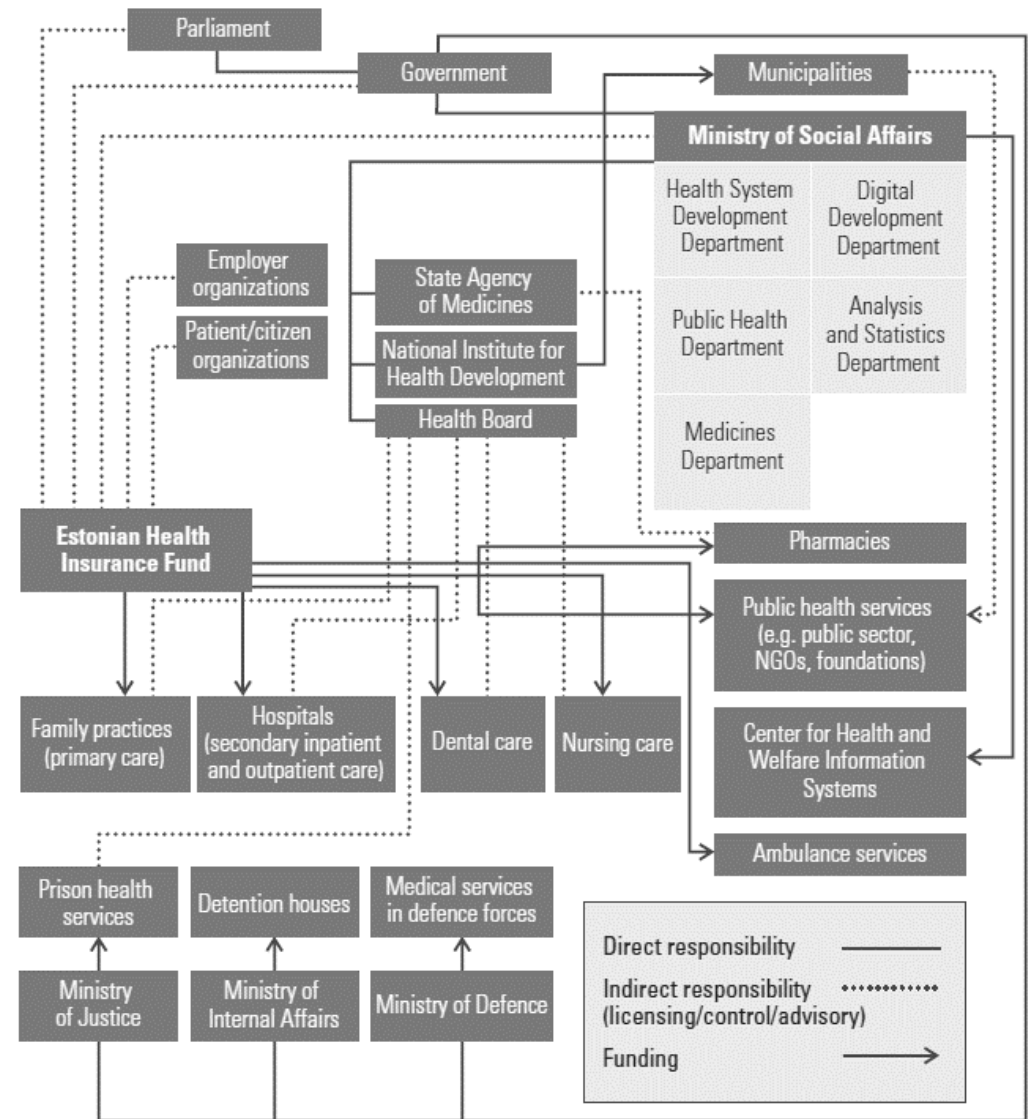
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Characteristics of the governance system

- Estonia is a parliamentary democracy.
- The Estonian Parliament *Riigikogu* is the legislative and representative body of Estonia with 101 members elected every fourth year.
- *Vabariigi Valitsus* has the executive power. The Government of Estonia represents a coalition government and typically consists of 15 ministers.
 - One ministry can have two ministers (e.g. The Ministry of Finance is led by the Minister of Finance and the Minister of Public Administration).
- The President of Estonia is the head of state who mainly fulfils representational and symbolic duties. The President is elected every five years by the Estonian Parliament.

Governance of the health care system

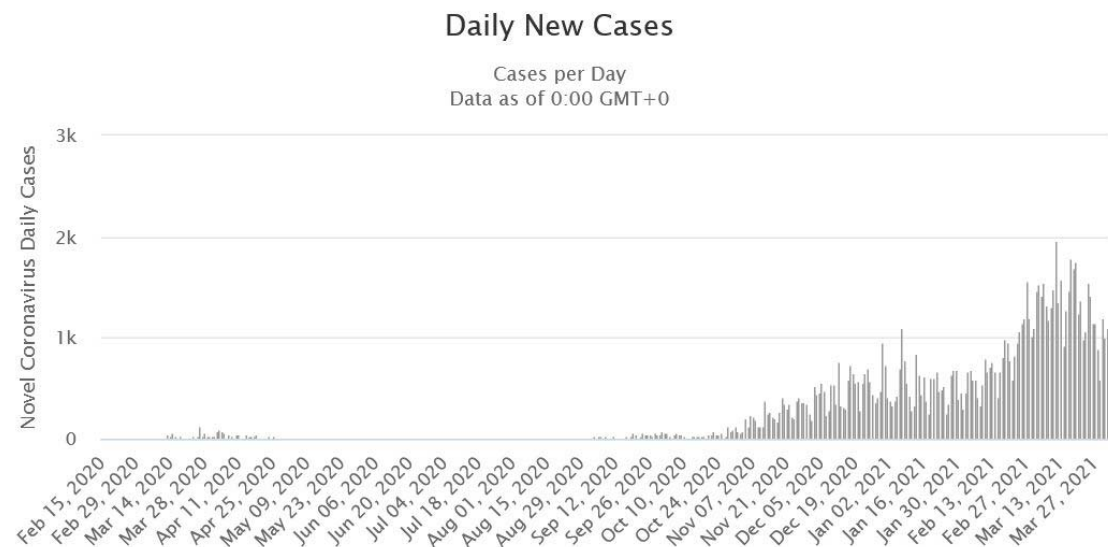
- The Ministry of Social Affairs is responsible for governing the health care system and developing health policy.
- Other main actors include the Estonian Health Insurance Fund, the Health Board and independent medical service providers who operate under private law (i.e. family doctors, hospitals).
- National public health insurance scheme covers around 95% of the population.
 - Availability of insurance is related to one's employment status or status equalled to the employment.
- Local governments assist in assuring the availability of health care services and in some cases are responsible for managing local hospitals.



COVID-19 pandemic

- The first case of the coronavirus infection was registered on February 26th 2020.
 - The peak number of hospitalizations during the first phase was 151 (April 2020).
 - The highest 14-day notification per 100,000 people was **54,2 in April 2020**.
- The „second wave“ of the pandemic began in November 2020.
 - Increase of infection cases since February 2021 due to the spread of the „UK variant“.
 - The peak number of hospitalizations during the second phase was 725 (28.03.2021)
 - The highest 14-day notification per 100,000 people was **1523 on March 18 2021**.
- As of April 2, 922 people have died after contracting the COVID-19 virus.
- During the 1st phase, Estonia mainly tested the elderly and at risk people due to low testing capacity. During the 2nd phase, testing has increased and is widely available.

Daily New Cases in Estonia



Source: <https://www.worldometers.info/coronavirus/>

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- The Health Board (HB) is officially the responsible government agency leading the efforts aimed at curbing the spread of COVID-19.
- With the COVID-19 situation becoming more salient in Spring 2020, the role of the Government increased.
- Friction between the HB and the government during the first phase of the pandemic.
 - Several of the HB top officials left the organisation after the 1st wave of the pandemic.
- Nevertheless, the governance of COVID-19 has largely been an expertise led process.
 - An advisory committee of top scientists was established to the Government in March. Experts were also involved in developing the economic relief packages.
- During the fall 2020, political considerations in decision-making have increasingly become dominant.
 - Government members labelled as „political virologists“ in the media.
- International cooperation on the European Union level mainly related to the border management and procurement of vaccines.

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- Conflicting sentiments in societal debates between health arguments and economical considerations; between individual freedoms and collective security.
- Swift decrease in societal threat perception after Spring 2020.
- Wide public debate on the obligation to wear masks.
 - The Chancellor of Justice speaking out against strict restrictions and mask obligation.
- Higher infection rates in areas populated with the Russian speaking community created a public debate on the efficiency of government communication.
- According to a survey in early December 2020, 40% of those who had been in close contact with someone with a confirmed infection said they would not change anything in their behaviour.
- When the number of daily cases suddenly reached records towards the end of December 2020, the threat perception shortly increased but did not remain high. In January 2021, only 57% of people thought the corona virus related situation was critical. As the number of infection cases swiftly increased in February and March, in March 73% of people found the situation to be critical.
- A survey from March 2021, showed that while 80% of the respondents were satisfied with strict restriction measures, 55% saw the need for even more restrictions. 77% of respondents claimed to follow all restrictions and 16% most of the restrictions.

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Demonstration against compulsory wearing of masks in November 2020.

Pictures taken by Priit Simson.



COVID-19 measures

- Measures towards limiting the spread of the pandemic have mostly been reactive, especially in the second wave.
- In Spring 2020, restrictions were wide and all-encompassing as the crisis posed a novel challenge. The importance of protecting public health and the functioning of the medical system was the key aim.
 - A **nationwide state of emergency was enforced from March 12 until May 7** during which all public gatherings were banned; only essential services were allowed to operate and health controls were introduced on the borders.
- During the 2nd wave of the pandemic, decisions to enforce restrictions have been more cautious, nuanced and the balance has shifted more towards arguments on social and economic consequences.
 - During the 2nd phase of the pandemic, regional differences were shortly enforced in order to curb the spread of the virus in areas with an especially high infection rate (i.e. in Ida-Virumaa and Harjumaa where population density is higher). Restrictions have been harmonized across Estonia since February 2021.
- In the beginning of March 2021, strict measures similar to the measures introduced during the first wave were enforced until April 25.
 - Since early March, all Government meetings have been held virtually.
 - There has been no full lockdown in Estonia during the pandemic.

COVID-19 and education

- In March 2020, all schools and universities were closed for two months and had to substitute regular studies with distant learning.
- Several schools and universities were able to quickly implement distant or e-learning without severe difficulties thanks to the availability of digital education platforms (e.g. eKool, Moodle).
- During the 2nd phase, the goal was to keep the schools open as long as possible, especially on the primary and kindergarten levels.
- There is no comprehensive nation-wide set of rules or criteria for determining the introduction of distant learning (e.g. In case of positive cases in the school). Decisions have been made by school leaders.
- On December 14, the Government decided to close all educational institutions (with the exception of kindergartens and nurseries) until 10 January 2021.
- Schools were allowed to continue with regular studies on January 25.
 - Decision to include teachers among the first group to be vaccinated.
- Quick increase of the infection rate led to partial closing of schools on February 26 (except the primary and kindergarten level) and the closure of all schools (except schools for students with special needs and kindergartens) from March 11 until April 25.

COVID-19 and borders

- In March 2020, Estonia temporarily restricted crossing the state border similarly to the other EU countries.
 - Additional human resources from the Police and Border Guard Board and the Defence League were sent to the borders.
- In addition, direct flights to countries with high infection rates were not allowed from May until October.
- In May, Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania reopened borders to each others citizens (self-isolation period required at first), creating the first travel bubble in the EU – „ **the Baltic bubble**“.
- Bilateral agreements with Finland to allow workers to commute and travel for urgent family reasons started from early May. Further easing of restrictions during the summer. However, Finland closed its borders fully from January 2021.
- In the summer and fall, the conditions of entry to Estonia depended on the infection rate of the country of departure and arriving travellers have an isolation obligation. No additional restrictions have been implemented during the second wave of the pandemic.
- A political decision in summer to restrict immigration of foreign labour using coronavirus as an argument – the case of Ukrainian seasonal workers.

COVID-19 and economies

- Differences in policies during the 1st and 2nd wave of the pandemic.
- In Spring 2020, policies towards relieving the economic impact of COVID-19 were extensive and rapidly implemented.
 - A €2 billion package of economic measures was introduced. Measures included loans for entrepreneurs, employee income compensations to prevent layoffs etc.
 - Investment programmes directed towards road construction (€30 million) and the construction industry (€100 million).
 - The government debt burden increased from 8,4% of the GDP in 2019 to 18,5% of the GDP in 2020 and is projected to increase to 23,6% of the GDP in 2021.
- The economic relief policy during the 2nd wave of the pandemic has been more cautious and criteria for receiving support have been more nuanced.
 - Introduction of additional restrictions for the economy have been directly related to the considerations on the capacity to offer economic support from the government.
 - Certain level of realization from the government that the economic impact of COVID-19 is most likely long-term and therefore the extensive and rapid relief policies introduced in Spring 2020 are not sustainable.
- In spring 2021, the new government in office (since January 26) has largely maintained similar economic relief measures that were introduced during the first wave. Additional possibilities for tourism businesses to receive support.

COVID-19 vaccines

- Estonia participated in the **EU joint procurement for purchasing the coronavirus vaccines** and has not made any additional agreements with other countries or pharmaceutical companies.
- In December 2020, the government approved the COVID-19 vaccination plan. The first doses of the Pfizer/BioNTech vaccine arrived on December 26.
 - First round of the vaccination programme includes health care professionals, residents of care institutions and at risk people over the age of 70.
 - Public vaccination is predicted to start from the beginning of the third quarter of 2021.
- The first phase of the implementation of the Estonian vaccination strategy has been criticised as slow and not clear for the wider public.
- According to surveys, 75% of the Estonian population is willing to get vaccinated.

Conclusion: Lessons and prospects

- The COVID-10 pandemic highlighted the shortcomings of Estonia in crisis preparations and management.
 - Shortage of PPE in Spring 2020 showed that Estonia was not prepared for a health crisis of this magnitude.
- At the same time, the Estonian health system has proven to be durable and has been able to quickly increase its capacity to deal with the specifics of the COVID-19 pandemic.
- Trust in government has remained high during the pandemic with 53% of Estonians saying they trusted the government in December 2020.
 - A survey in January 2021 showed that the Minister of Social Affairs was the most trusted politician in Estonia.
- Several issues have emerged in relation to the economic relief measures provided by the state in Spring 2020. The criteria for receiving support have been widely contested among entrepreneurs.
- The long-term impact of COVID-19 pandemic is most visible in Estonian financial policy. Increase of the government debt burden marks a clear shift compared to the previous years.
- The crisis has also increased the digitalization of the Estonian economy as businesses have been forced to find new solutions to continue their activities.