



25 ESTONIAN
REFUGEE
COUNCIL



Foreword

On 6 December 2000, ten people founded an organisation with a mission that was simple yet immense: to stand beside those forced from their homes and in need of a safe place to rebuild their lives. No one could have foreseen the crises and challenges the world would face over the next quarter century, nor how large and international the Estonian Refugee Council would grow in responding to them.

Today, 25 years later, we are an organisation that has supported nearly half a million people and worked in ten countries. We have grown from a small grassroots initiative into the largest humanitarian organisation in the Baltics, employing more than a hundred people – people who have chosen work that is as demanding as it is meaningful.

Our journey has been anything but linear. It has been one of constant adaptation, learning, and increasing responsibility. We have provided support amidst wars, natural disasters, and protracted crises, and helped refugees in Estonia and beyond find their way back to stability and dignity. Our work has been guided by four humanitarian principles – humanity, neutrality, independence, and impartiality – values that are not merely statements on paper but daily touchstones in moments of difficult decision-making.

These 25 years tell a story of achievements and growth pains, of the evolution of Estonian society, of changes in the global humanitarian system, and of how a small organisation learned to change with the world while staying true to its core values.

Today, the need for the Estonian Refugee Council is greater than ever. More than 300 million people require humanitarian assistance this year, and over 120 million have been forcibly displaced. This reality does not intimidate us; it motivates us to act with deeper purpose, professionalism, and responsibility.

Estonian Refugee Council is now able to respond to acute crises as well as support communities in long-term recovery. We have expanded our work into new countries, developed digital solutions, and strengthened our credibility among international partners, earning the European Commission's highest-level humanitarian partnership certification.

None of this would have been possible without the many people who have shaped our path – our founders, staff, volunteers, donors, partners, and the communities we serve.

The next 25 years will not be easier, but they may well be even more impactful. We have a strong organisation, international experience, and a profound conviction that rights-based, dignity-centered humanitarian action is essential in today's world – and that Estonia can contribute far more than we once imagined.

Thank you all for being part of the journey of the Estonian Refugee Council. Thank you for believing that every person matters.



Eero Janson,
Director of the Estonian Refugee Council

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Eero Janson', with a long horizontal stroke extending to the right.

25 years in numbers

470,000+ people reached

We provide needs-based support to those most affected by crises, primarily refugees, internally displaced people, and those trapped in dangerous and hard-to-reach areas. We provide immediate assistance in emergencies and continue to support people after crises to help them rebuild their lives. Over the years, the Estonian Refugee Council has supported more than 470,000 people.

10 areas of operation

We operate in countries hit by acute and protracted crises with humanitarian and early recovery programmes. We are ready to expand our work to countries where the needs correspond with our capacity and expertise and in cases where our involvement has a clear added value to the existing response.

In 2025, the Estonian Refugee Council works in Estonia, Ukraine, Armenia, Georgia, Jordan, Syria, and the occupied Palestinian territories. Previously, Estonian Refugee Council has also worked in Lebanon, Türkiye, and Kenya.

4 core principles

We are a rights-based organisation guided by the principles of humanity, neutrality, independence, and impartiality. These principles ensure that our assistance is based on real needs, remains unbiased, and respects the rights and dignity of every person. Estonian Refugee Council is certified by the European Commission as an organisation following the humanitarian principles and project management standards.

100+ employees

Today, Estonian Refugee Council is the largest humanitarian organisation in the Baltic region, employing over 100 people who are dedicated every day to protecting the rights, wellbeing, and dignity of crisis-affected people.

How did we get here?

i Estonia adopted its Refugee Act in 1997 and acceded to the 1951 UN Refugee Convention. During the first few years, fewer than 50 people sought protection in Estonia, and by 2000, the country had its first three recipients of international protection. At that time, there were no non-governmental organisations in Estonia providing support to people with a refugee background.

i In the year 2000, there were over 38 million forcibly displaced people worldwide.



2000

On 6 December, ten founding members established the Estonian Refugee Council. The organisation was founded by Anu Potisepp, Riina Kuusik, Raivo Kiis, Lehte Roots, Katherina Laan, Anne Adamson, Villu Kärsti, Mart Nutt, Katrin Saks, and Frank Emmert.

2001–2010

The Estonian Refugee Council was established with the aim of supporting and advising refugees and asylum seekers living in Estonia.

In its early years, the organisation primarily focused on providing legal advice to asylum seekers.

The first board members were Riina Kuusik (until 2002 and again from 2003 to 2005), Lehte Roots (until 2003 and later from 2005 to 2011), and Anne-Mai Adamson (until 2003).

Tatjana Evas joined the board in 2002 and stayed on until 2005, while Grete Kaju became a member in 2003 and remained until 2005.

- ① *In 2011, Estonia was home to 46 people with a refugee background, and according to Eurostat, it received the fewest asylum applications among European Union countries the previous year.*
- ① *The Syrian civil war began in 2011, forcing millions of people to flee their homes, whether through internal displacement or by seeking protection in other countries.*



- ① *“We have made it our mission to improve the situation of refugees here and to support their integration into Estonian society,” explained Kristina Kallas, outlining the new goals of ERC.*
- ① *Since 2011, tens of thousands of refugees have attempted to reach Europe via dangerous sea routes. The number of deaths in the Mediterranean surged dramatically, becoming a major humanitarian crisis that consistently dominated European media coverage. Within the European Union, the question arose whether the reception of refugees should be a collective responsibility. These debates sparked widespread uncertainty and caution towards refugees, with immigration becoming one of the top three concerns among EU citizens.*

2011

In May, the Estonian Refugee Council actively began working in new areas. A new board was elected, which included Kristina Kallas until 2015 and Ingi Mihkelsoo (Sutrop) until 2019.

In the following years, the organisation had two main focuses: supporting the integration of refugees living in Estonia and raising public awareness in Estonia about issues related to forced migration.

2012–2013

The Estonian Refugee Council convened the first Roundtable of Estonian Refugee Organisations, bringing together representatives of civil society organisations working with refugees. This forum continues to operate to this day.

- ① *Against a backdrop of growing fear of immigrants, Europe is indeed becoming a fortress. Its gates – whether at ports, borders, or airports – open only to a select few. /.../ The result of building walls and closing gates is that those seeking to reach Europe – including refugees searching for safe asylum – are forced to take increasingly dangerous routes. Seeking asylum is thus becoming more and more like a game of Russian roulette, even though on paper it remains an inalienable human right,” Eero Janson wrote in Eesti Päevaleht in 2013.*

- ① *The war that broke out in Ukraine in April 2014 caused deep uncertainty both in the conflict zones and across the country, forcing people to live with disrupted services, reduced security, and unstable conditions for years before the full-scale invasion began.*



- ① *For the first time since World War II, the number of forcibly displaced people worldwide exceeded 50 million.*
- ① *There was an emotional and lively debate in Estonian society about accepting refugees, with the word “refugees” becoming one of the most popular search terms on Google. In 2015, Estonia pledged to offer protection to 550 people, but only 175 actually arrived. By 2017, nearly half of them had already left the country.*
- ① *The Ukraine-focused activities received widespread support from the Estonian state as well as from local people and businesses.*

2014

In 2014, the Estonian Refugee Council was actively involved in advocacy to defend the rights of asylum seekers and people with a refugee background. ERC supported people who had been granted protection in Estonia and continued to raise public awareness on issues related to forced migration.

In October, the Estonian Refugee Council, Mondo, and the Ukrainian Cultural Centre launched a joint campaign, “For Ukraine!”, to raise funds in support of internally displaced people and those affected by the conflict in Ukraine.

- 📍 In November 2014, the Estonian Refugee Council began distributing humanitarian aid outside Estonia for the first time. Emergency assistance was provided to internally displaced persons in the Zaporizhzhia region, one of the largest destinations for IDPs.

2015

The Estonian Refugee Council began offering a support person service to assist the beneficiaries of international protection in Estonia with adaptation and integration. It also started supporting local communities in welcoming refugees by providing help to schools and organising community events across the country.

ERC continued distributing humanitarian aid in Ukraine, focusing primarily on food security and medical assistance.

Eero Janson joined the board and continues to lead the work of the Estonian Refugee Council to this day.

① *By 2015, Türkiye had become one of the main destinations for people fleeing the Syrian civil war, seeking safety and a chance to rebuild their lives. Many of them required immediate humanitarian assistance to cope with their new and often uncertain living conditions.*

① *Asylum applications and the number of refugees in the European Union declined in the following years. Estonia continued its so-called conservative asylum policy, keeping international protection applications at a low level. At the same time, the topic of refugees remained a heated issue in public debates and the media.*



① *By 2020, there were over 82 million people worldwide who had been forced to flee their homes – nearly double the number from a decade earlier – reflecting a concerning upward trend in the frequency and duration of humanitarian crises around the globe.*

① *The COVID-19 crisis began, shutting down much of the world for several years.*

① *The explosions in Beirut in August 2020 shook the entire city, deepening an already severe social and economic crisis.*

We began activities in Türkiye to support the mental health and education of children who fled the Syrian civil war.

2016–2017

We launched economic recovery programmes in Ukraine to help internally displaced persons and residents of frontline communities establish sustainable sources of income.

We expanded our existing support for people arriving in Estonia by adding a focus on language learning support and community activities alongside our previous efforts.

2018

We launched operations in Lebanon and Jordan to support the livelihoods of Syrian refugees through entrepreneurship and additional training.

2019


We began distributing winterisation assistance in Ukraine to help people in a vulnerable situation cover heating costs and purchase heating materials.


Anu Viltrop became a board member in 2019 and remained until 2022.


2020

We responded to the August Beirut explosion by assisting people with emergency repairs to their homes.

📍 We opened ERC's first official field office in Jordan and launched operations in Georgia.

 *The European Commission certificate is awarded to non-profit organisations that meet strict criteria, consistently adhere to international humanitarian principles, and have proven experience in the humanitarian sector.*

 *On 24 February 2022, Russia launched a full-scale invasion of Ukraine, triggering the largest displacement in Europe since World War II. Millions of Ukrainians were forced to flee their homes, both internally and by seeking refuge in other countries, creating an urgent need for humanitarian aid, shelter, and essential services. The support from the people and businesses of Estonia was exceptionally strong at the outset of the war – thanks to this, and our long-standing experience in Ukraine, we were able to respond quickly and begin providing aid immediately.*

 *In February 2023, an earthquake struck Türkiye and Syria, causing widespread casualties, destruction, and severe humanitarian needs in both countries.*

In September of the same year, the conflict in the Nagorno-Karabakh region escalated, resulting in a large-scale humanitarian crisis and forcing over one hundred thousand people to flee.

In October 2023, a major conflict began in the Gaza Strip, deepening an already severe humanitarian crisis in the region, causing severe human losses, mass displacement, and critical shortages of basic necessities.

2021

We successfully passed the European Commission certification audit and received the framework contract certificate as a niche organisation.

We launched activities in Kenya to support local people through entrepreneurship and life skills trainings.

2022


We responded swiftly to the humanitarian crisis caused by the full-scale war in Ukraine and provided support to people arriving in Estonia. We became one of the largest international organisations delivering cash-based assistance in Ukraine.

We evacuated over 8,000 people from the Ukraine-Poland border to Estonia.

For the first time, we organised an international humanitarian conference in Tallinn, which now annually brings together humanitarian experts from around the world.

2023–2024

We continued our work in Ukraine and Jordan, responded to the earthquake in Türkiye, and assisted people displaced from Nagorno-Karabakh to Armenia, as well as refugees who arrived in Georgia and Estonia.

 In 2023, we opened ERC's office in Yerevan, followed by the opening of an office in Tbilisi in 2024.

In October 2024, we responded to the humanitarian crisis in Lebanon following the large-scale attacks in Israel by assisting people in finding emergency shelter.

2025

① *As of the end of 2025, Estonia is home to over 41,000 recipients of international protection. The vast majority of them arrived after February 2022, having left their homes to flee the war in Ukraine. Many Ukrainians in similar situations have come to Estonia but haven't officially registered for temporary protection.*

① *As of 2025, over 300 million people worldwide are in need of humanitarian aid, and more than 123 million have been forced to flee their homes.*

The Estonian Refugee Council was awarded the European Commission's highest-level humanitarian partnership certificate. ERC is the only organisation in the Baltic States and Poland to hold this certification.

📍 We opened an Estonian Refugee Council office in Syria.

In September, we became the first Estonian organisation to provide humanitarian assistance in the Gaza Strip, distributing food assistance in local hospitals.

The Estonian Refugee Council continues delivering humanitarian assistance in crisis areas and supports the long-term recovery of crisis-affected people through its economic recovery and protection and empowerment programmes. In 2025, the Estonian Refugee Council operates in Estonia, Ukraine, Armenia, Georgia, Jordan, and the occupied Palestinian territories.

