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Epp Lauk & Andres Jõesaar

### **Are the two different information spaces in Estonia getting closer to each other?**

Sociological surveys of the early 1990s described Estonia as a country of “two societies in one State”. An aggressive Soviet migration and colonization policy ensured by 1989 that a large proportion (35.2%) of the population were Russian speaking migrants. Today, Russian is the native language for 27.9% of Estonia’s population, of whom about a third cannot communicate in Estonian.

Due to political and historical circumstances, the two language communities have very little in common, including their media consumption patterns. Furthermore, during the past three decades, two different information spaces emerged in Estonia – one in Estonian, the other in Russian.

In the Soviet Union the state subsidized all the media providing unlimited access to the press and broadcasting in Russian throughout the Soviet empire. The collapse of the USSR radically changed the situation for the Russophone population in Estonia. Increasing prices stopped subscription for newspapers and magazines from Russia in the early 1990s. However, like the Estonian press, domestic Russian language press flourished during the 1990s – early 2000s. In 2003, 84 newspapers and magazines in Russian appeared. However, Estonia’s competitive *laissez-faire* market was not favourable for the domestic Russian language press, which collapsed during the economic crisis of 2008–2010. Only three national and some local newspapers, appearing 1-3 times a week, and two free papers appear in Russian today. News portals (e.g. rus.delfi) and online versions of newspapers are filling the gap left by the press. Over 80% of the Russian speaking population uses the internet today.

The re-transmission of TV and radio channels from Russia was terminated in 1993-1994. Cable operators then started re-transmission of Russian channels available on satellite. Today, Russian TV channels dominate as the main information sources for over 70% of Russian speakers in Estonia. Media content from Russia creates certain specific frames for understanding and interpreting Estonia’s reality.

A ground-breaking study on Estonian society, *Estonian Society in an Accelerating Time*, 2017, reveals four disparate Russian speaking groups concerning levels of integration and media consumption.

Well integrated Russian speakers (circa 20%) have Estonian citizenship, all are fluent in Estonian, and have a high standard of living. Interested in Estonian media and domestic Russian media, they are regular news consumers. Indeed, they are the only group sufficiently familiar with the Estonians' information space.

Median integrated 33% have Estonian citizenship, about 40% of them can communicate in Estonian, have sufficient income and education and are active in elections. They have some interest towards Estonian media and are sporadic news consumers.

Poorly integrated 26% are oriented towards collective and religious values and Russian information channels. 70% have Russian citizenship or the grey (foreigner's) passport, which allows them to participate in local elections but 90% neither speak Estonian nor follow Estonian media.

Poorly adapted 21% do not speak Estonian, have low living standard, and are mostly unemployed, either Russian nationals or grey passport holders. They are not interested in Estonian issues, do not follow Estonian media and have little interest in domestic Russian media.

The Estonian nation state and related values are distant to all these groups. Their attitude towards Estonian issues and developments is mostly negative. They live primarily under the influence of Russian (and to an extent also global) information flows, though the interest towards domestic Russian channels is slowly growing.

The studies show the limited extent (below 10%) of the two information spaces' overlap. The findings of a 2014 survey indicated that they also carry completely different values: Estonian-language space promotes European values, whereas the Russian-language promotes "Putin's values".

The decision of Estonia's government in 2014 to establish a Russian language TV channel as a part of the Estonian National Broadcasting was an attempt to build a bridge between the two information spaces. In September 2015, ETV+ went on air and its weekly reach is steadily increasing, reaching 40% of Russian speaking

population in May 2017. Approximately 10% of Estonians also watch ETV+ weekly. The channel focuses on Estonian news, producing about 20h original programming per week, and broadcasts films and documentaries produced both in Estonia and abroad.

The case of ETV+ confirms that the state-supported public service broadcasting alone is able to maintain Russian language channels and provide Russian-speaking minority with adequate information about life in Estonia. Today, the overlap of the two information spaces is still limited, and a common *Estonian media space* for the two main groups of Estonia's population does not yet exist.

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