

## Estonia's "Virtual Russian World": The Influence of Russian Media on Estonia's Russian Speakers

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## Introduction

Russia's annexation of Crimea and the use of new, creative forms of warfare in the eastern part of Ukraine raise difficult questions for Estonia, a small Baltic nation bordering Russia. Since the conflict started, Estonian and Western security experts have been pointing out the vulnerabilities of the Baltic states. Speculation such as "will Narva be next?" is more common than one would like to admit. How vulnerable is Estonia to such kinds of unconventional attack? Could the Ukraine scenario be repeated in Estonia?

The main question is whether Estonia's Russian-speaking minority would provide a sufficient incentive for Russia to intervene militarily, or at least to create instability. Would the Russian speakers really be receptive to Russian propaganda and raise weapons against Estonia if the moment came?

Fear is being fuelled by both sides, Russia and the West. While Russia traditionally plays the card of ethnic discrimination and NATO's increasing presence in the Baltic states which, in their view, forces them to use countermeasures, the West is reaffirming the possibility that Russia will, in fact, use these measures.

A war narrative hangs in the air, creating suspicion and even panic, among Estonians whatever language they speak.

Recent sociological surveys have shown that, despite a slight improvement in inter-ethnic relationships, the number of stateless persons is declining slowly, while the perception of socioeconomic and political inequality between ethnic groups has increased, reflecting negative attitudes among Russian speakers towards Russian-language school reform.<sup>1</sup>

What's more, trust in state institutions is considerably lower among Estonian Russians than among ethnic Estonians. The north-eastern region, Ida-Virumaa, including the cities of Narva, Kohtla-Järve, Sillamäe and Kiviõli, comprises a rather isolated enclave exhibiting considerably weaker integration indicators than other regions of Estonia. In addition, Estonian and Russian speakers still live in different information spaces, the main sources of information for the latter being the Russian TV channels and PBK's news about Estonia.<sup>2</sup> Opinions about NATO membership and Estonian national defence in general are significantly impacted by the current state of relations between Russia and the US/NATO/the West and how the Russian mass media cover these relations.<sup>3</sup>

All this gives potentially good reason to expect the worst. However, behind every number and every percentage there is a person with his/her personal view, perception and understanding. The purpose of this heavily qualitative study is to add the personal dimension to the general sociological picture and see whether the threat perception remains the same.

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<sup>1</sup> Estonian Society Monitoring 2015: <http://www.kul.ee/et/eesti-uhiskonna-loimumismonitooring-2015>

<sup>2</sup> Ibid.

<sup>3</sup> Kivirähk, J. 2014; "Integrating Estonia's Russian Speaking Population: Findings of National Defence Opinion Surveys": <http://www.icds.ee/publications/article/integrating-estonias-russian-speaking-population-findings-of-national-defense-opinion-surveys/>

We conducted 44 personal interviews with integration experts, politicians, historians, journalists and, most importantly, Russian speakers with very different backgrounds, in Tallinn, Narva, Valga, Sillamäe and Kohtla-Järve.

The questions we asked can be divided into four categories:

1. Who are they?
2. Where do they get their information?
3. How critical are they of their sources of information?
4. How does the information influence their behaviour towards the society in which they live?

## Separate Information spaces

It's 6 a.m. in Narva, a city in Estonia's north-east, on the border with Russia. Seventy-year-old retired union leader Vladimir Alekseyev turns on the TV. He begins with the news, in Russian, from Europe and the United States. "The way I think of it is 'You have to know the face of the enemy'. They have an obvious anti-Putin slant ... It's just vicious, vicious! Excuse me, but a real cesspool."

Then he switches to what he likes to watch: Russian channels, broadcast from Moscow. One of his favourite programmes is Vladimir Solovyev's high-decibel political discussion show. "Russian channels aren't afraid of open, even polemical discussion, sharp, different viewpoints," he says. "They interrupt each other, shout at each other, with several people talking at once. It's a lively discussion. There's nothing like that here."

Nearly a quarter of a century after the dissolution of the USSR, almost three-quarters of Estonia's 300,000 Russian speakers still watch Russian television—the same news and entertainment shows seen in Moscow and other Russian cities.

Forty-five per cent of Russian speakers also follow Estonian-language media, according to the report "Society Monitoring 2015"<sup>4</sup>, but most prefer media in their native tongue.

On television, Estonia's Russian speakers have their choice of the leading Russian news and entertainment outlets: Rossiya/RTR, a state-owned channel that broadcasts around the world to more than 30,000,000 viewers; First Channel; NTV; REN TV; and the most popular Russian-language channel in Estonia, First Baltic Channel (PBK), which re-broadcasts Russia's top programmes.

Estonian Russian speakers have been watching Russian TV for decades but now, with the conflict in Ukraine—in which informational warfare is playing a major role—some government officials, along with foreign-policy observers in Europe and the United States, are warning of the danger of Russia's media penetration. The Kremlin, they charge, could exploit its influence to manipulate the country's Russian speakers, exacerbating societal tensions, or even foment a Ukraine-style provocation, complete with Moscow's "little green men".

"The level of sophistication of their use of media, both in TV and social media, the Internet, whatever, is on the highest level," says Marko Mihkelson, chairman of the Estonian Parliament's National Defence Committee.

From his office in the Parliament building in Tallinn's Old Town, Mihkelson looks out of the window at Alexander Nevsky Cathedral, the stunning 19th-century Russian Orthodox church, built when Estonia was part of the czarist Russian empire. "There is the potential to generate some sort of anti-government action (in Estonia), if it is needed," he says.

"The perceptions are there, the fears and anxieties are there, the lack of trust is there," says defence expert Tomas Jermalavičius. "So a lot of preconditions are there. But the

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<sup>4</sup> Sepper, K. 2015, "Media and information space", Chapter 7 in Estonian Society Monitoring 2015: <http://www.kul.ee/et/eesti-uhiskonna-loimumismonitooring-2015>

question is: what is the spark?"

The most likely source of ignition, say most observers, is the lack of full integration of Russian speakers into Estonian society. According to a report prepared for the Estonian government, "... Estonia remains home to two quite separate societies living side by side but with only superficial connections between them".<sup>5</sup>

The report concludes, "They reside in separate information spaces, and hold divergent perceptions and perspectives not just about each other, but also about the Estonian state and its history, its threat environment, and its national security policies. Since these two Estonias do not fully trust one another, when security developments put pressure on the country they tend to drift to opposing poles—especially if the factor of Russia is involved."

In Narva, a three-hour drive from the capital, Tallinn, many residents of the predominately Russian-speaking city sense that estrangement. Nina Semina, a high-school teacher, says they "live in isolation," and this has transformed her sense of identity: "In the USSR I felt Estonian," she says, "but in Estonia I feel Russian".

### **Putin's "problem"**

The presence of more than 300,000 Russian speakers—almost a third of the country's population—is a legacy of the collapse of the Soviet Union, an event that Russian president Vladimir Putin has called "the greatest geo-political tragedy of the 20th century". In September, in an interview with the American journalist Charlie Rose, Putin described how millions of Russian speakers were set adrift in 1991, as the fifteen republics of the USSR became independent countries:

In an instant, 25 million Russian people found themselves beyond the borders of the Russian state. They [had been] living in a single country and, all of a sudden, they turned out to be outside the borders of the country. You see this is a huge problem. First of all, there were everyday problems—the separation of families, social problems, economic problems ... Do you think it's normal that 25 million Russian people were abroad all of a sudden? Russia was the biggest divided nation in the world. It's not a problem? Well, maybe not for you. But it's a problem for me.

For Putin, reuniting those Russian speakers in what he calls the "Russian World" is a top priority. The concept is defined broadly, but loosely, with the Russian president claiming the right, indeed the duty, to protect Russian speakers—his "compatriots"—no matter where they live. Language, culture and the media are key tools in this endeavour.

Estonia's Russian speakers, however, are a diverse community. Some academic researchers even question whether Russian speakers can be considered a national or ethnic minority. The label "Russian" is not precise; some Russian speakers are

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<sup>5</sup> Kivirähk, J. 2014; "Integrating Estonia's Russian Speaking Population: Findings of National Defence Opinion Surveys": <http://www.icds.ee/publications/article/integrating-estonias-russian-speaking-population-findings-of-national-defense-opinion-surveys/>

ethnically Russian, others are a complex mix of nationalities—Ukrainians, Armenians, Belorussians and others that comprised the peoples of the Soviet Union.

The concept of what defines "Russian" varies from person to person. In Narva, a city of 60,000, where 96% of the population is Russian-speaking, Vladimir Alekseyev says he feels at home in Estonia; in fact, he calls it his "home". But his "motherland" is Russia.

"I was born there, grew up there, studied there," he says. "This is our land and we love it as much as Estonians do ... I have two sons, a daughter, a wife, nine grandchildren, friends ... We live here, our children live here, our grandchildren and great-grandchildren will live here—if there isn't a war."

Olga Bolshakova teaches Russian language and Estonian literature at the high school in the north-eastern Estonian town of Sillamäe, a port on the Gulf of Finland. Like many Russian speakers in Estonia, she is the product of a dizzying array of ethnic groups that comprised the former Soviet Union. Olga's family came to Estonia from Russia in 1970. Her mother is Latvian, with some Estonian blood, and her father is Greek with some Russian roots. They lived in Latvia, and then were sent to Siberia, where Olga was born. She was five when they moved to Estonia. Culturally, she considers herself "Baltic".

"In our village in Siberia there was a whole group of Latvians," she says, "and there were Russians, Greeks, Tatars. Our family traditions are Baltic. When I come home I feel this is my land." Yet, in spite of having Estonian citizenship, Bolshakova doesn't fully feel a part of Estonian society.

"We aren't ourselves here in Estonia and we aren't in Russia either," she explains. "I went to Crimea to visit my sister and everyone there says I speak Russian with an accent, that I drag out my words, and in Siberia they say the same thing."

In the 1950s Sillamäe was one of the most important top-secret locations in USSR, the only domestic source of uranium—the fuel for atom bombs—and to produce it, Moscow ordered the construction of military factories.

Construction workers, according to historian David Vsevirov, were mostly prisoners of war: Germans, Hungarians and Romanians, living in a huge number of camps along with Soviet political prisoners from Kazakhstan, Uzbekistan and other parts of the empire. "They didn't know what they were building," he explains. "They didn't even know the name of Sillamäe. It was called Object Number 22."

When the factories opened, workers from across the Soviet Union were sent to Estonia as part of Stalin's forced migration policy. More Soviet citizens followed, from free-thinking intellectuals to KGB "colonisers".

At the same time, in a series of brutal deportations in 1941 and 1949, 30,000 ethnic Estonians were banished to Siberia. Thousands died. The country's ethnic composition was turned upside down. Before World War II, 90% of the country's population was ethnic Estonian. By 1991, when Estonia regained its independence, more than one-third of its population were ethnic Russians or other ethnic Slavs. Estonia's policy of promoting and fostering the Estonian language and culture springs from the belief that the Estonian nation, with only 1,300,000 people, continues to face an existential threat

to its very existence, a belief that Russian speakers have difficulty sharing. Particularly galling for many Russian speakers is the label "occupiers".

As for their own identity as Russian speakers, many define the term "Russian" culturally, not politically. Some Estonian Russian speakers say they feel part of Russia because their relatives still live there or their ancestors are buried there. Seventeen-year-old Elizaveta Silina, who lives in Kohtla-Järve, a mining town in north-east Estonia, considers herself "Russian," using the Russian word "*Russkaya*," ("*русская*") which implies ethnic Russian, not "*Rossiiskaya*," ("*Российская*") which refers to the Russian Federation as a state. "In spite of the fact that I was born in Estonia," she says, "I consider myself Russian because all my relatives are in Russia, my native language is Russian, so I definitely consider myself Russian".

Other Russian speakers defy linguistic or ethnic categorisation. Marina Jerjomina, who was born in Rostov-on-Don, Russia, moved with her husband to Estonia when she was 23. She remains proud of her Russian origin and Russian education, but says when she first saw the trees and natural beauty of Estonia and the "intrinsic culture" of its people, she fell "head over heels in love".

She founded "Studio Joy" in the southern Estonian city of Valga, on the border with Latvia, 20 years ago. She teaches singing to the studio's 130 members, ages three to 60+, regardless of ethnic background or language. A number of students have parents or family members working abroad, because of economic hardship, she says, and the studio plays an important role in keeping those young people on track.

"I never divide people into nationalities," she says. "I divide them into whether they are good or bad, and who I would like to have contact with and who not. I always say, there are no good nationalities or bad nationalities, there are good and bad people."

When we ask her young students whether they are Estonian citizens, she stops the conversation in mid-stream, explaining that the question is not acceptable; she wants no divisions in her class. She also has no concern, she says, that Russia will try to exploit ethnic tensions.

"What I am more worried about is the future of our young people," she explains. "We have problems with drugs and alcohol. Kids are sitting at the computer for eight hours, playing computer games, and they don't want to do anything else. That's what's scary! I'm not worried about some external threat, I'm worried about internal threats that we have to solve."

### **What Colour is Your Passport?**

Russian speakers also are defined by their passports, the physical manifestation of citizenship, a shorthand way some refer to their ethnic identity. According to studies, about a third of Russian speakers are fully integrated with the Estonian community, speaking Estonian as well as Russian, and have Estonian citizenship, what many still refer to as "blue" passports. (The pre-1940 and post-1991 Estonian passports were blue; now citizens of Estonia, which is part of the European Union, carry an EU-approved common-format passport, with a dark red cover.) Another third, approximately 91,000, are legally citizens of Russia. Their Russian Federation passport

is a lighter shade of red. The final third of Russian speakers, more than 80,000 people, are stateless, neither Russian nor Estonian. Their passports are grey, tangible proof of their life between two worlds.

Being stateless, however, is not always a political choice; there are practical advantages. Grey passport holders can travel to Russia without a visa, but they can travel in EU countries as well. Mart Nutt, a member of Parliament, calls it the best of both worlds: "What does Estonian citizenship give?" he asks. "It gives, of course, the right to vote in the parliamentary elections, because non-citizens can vote only in local elections. But usually, those people are not sufficiently integrated, and don't even know the politicians. If you go through the streets and ask who is our president, they say Putin is! And that's a problem."

Citizenship remains a controversial, and politicised, issue in Estonia, mired in the population shifts of the post-Soviet period. After 1991, when Estonia regained its independence and the Soviet Union ceased to exist, some Russians in Estonia, including large numbers of Soviet military, returned to the motherland. Although Vladimir Putin now claims responsibility for the welfare of Russians around the world, in the confusing period just after the dissolution of the Soviet Union, some Russians living in former Soviet republics were legally "left behind" by Moscow.

Those who were on the territory of the Russian Federation in 1991 automatically became Russian citizens but Soviet citizens who lived "abroad," including Estonia, did not. The Estonian government allowed those who remained in Estonia to become Estonian citizens if they had lived in the country before 1940, when the country was annexed by the USSR. Others could acquire citizenship if they passed an Estonian language examination and an exam on the Estonian Constitution. The debate on just how onerous those requirements are continues today.

Russia, meanwhile, passed new citizenship legislation in 1992, giving its compatriots abroad the opportunity to register for Russian citizenship. In Estonia some registered, but others did not. Those who did not became stateless, but Anton Ossipovsky, a young Russian-speaking entrepreneur in Narva with a grey passport, argues that a passport doesn't define loyalty.

"I see no connection between Estonia being a country with Western values and getting citizenship," he says. "I can be part of this country with a grey passport, and people with red passports can too."

### **Life between two worlds**

Russian speakers are also diverse geographically. Ida-Viru county, which locals refer to as Virumaa, lies in the north-east corner of Estonia, along the border with Russia. Its residents, three-quarters of whom are Russian nationals or Russian speakers, rarely interact with ethnic Estonians. Developed by the Soviet government as a military-industrial region, its main city, Kohtla-Järve, was a centre for the production of oil shale and chemicals, as well as mining. The region now suffers from high unemployment.

The city of Narva, on the border with Russia, faces the Russian city of Ivangorod across the Narva River. On the Estonian side, high on a hill, sits the 13th-century Narva Castle.



On the Russian side, the 15th-century Ivangorod Fortress stares back. A bridge, with a border checkpoint, connects the two cities.

Holders of grey passports can pass freely across the bridge, on foot or by car. Some make multiple trips per day, buying cheap gasoline and cigarettes in Russia and transporting them, sometimes illegally, back to Estonia.

In southern Estonia lies the city of Valga. Once a single city including the Latvian town of Valka, the border between the two countries runs right through the centre. A quarter of the city is Russian-speaking but, in contrast to Narva, there is significantly more ethnic integration.

At the Aclima Baltic factory in Valga, 55 workers, all of them women, sew washable wool clothing for a Norwegian sportswear company. Work is carried out in three languages: Estonian, Russian and English. Outside of work they speak Russian, Estonian, Ukrainian and Latvian. Relations are cordial but language often determines friendships. Angelica, a 48-year-old Russian speaker, has Russian and Estonian friends. She says she would never leave Estonia. Her son, however, is at university in St Petersburg because he wants to study "in his own language". She was shocked recently to hear him say "I'll live in Estonia—if there's no war".

"It was frightening to hear that he thinks that's what's going on in the world," she says. "I don't think that's going to happen."

In Estonia's capital, Tallinn, Russian speakers are concentrated in the eastern part of the city in Lasnamäe, a neighbourhood filled with Soviet-era dormitory-style apartment buildings. The original residents, who moved to Estonia from the USSR in the 1970s and 1980s, included doctors and engineers, along with a large number of labourers. The area remains overwhelmingly Russian-speaking with few ties to ethnic Estonians. Like people in Moscow and other Russian cities, television is their primary source of information.

Consuming Russian TV broadcasts, however, does not necessarily mean supporting Vladimir Putin. Journalist Pavel Ivanov, former editor of a Russian-language programme on Estonian public television, says "We're not talking about loyalty to Putin, we're talking about how they are accepted here".

### **A Sense of Belonging**

Regardless of which passport they hold, most Russian speakers in Estonia, especially older ones, continue to watch Russian television via cable. Russian TV is often described as "propaganda" but, in reality, it is a couch potato's dream: an attractive, even mesmerising mix of frothy morning shows, high-decibel discussion shows, tear-jerker serials and song contests—peppered with news bulletins and current events shows that toe the Kremlin line.

On a Saturday afternoon, for example, Russia's NTV is featuring a programme called "I'm Losing Weight". A woman checks her bathroom scales and happily discovers she's lost two and a half kilos. During the commercial break there's an advertisement for an upcoming news show, "Blockade of Crimea". The voice-over asks menacingly why a

country (Ukraine) with "European values" is blockading truck traffic to Crimea, the Ukrainian territory annexed by Moscow in 2014, and causing such misery to its people.

Even the strongest Estonian critics of Vladimir Putin concede that Russian TV is supremely watchable. "It's entertainment," says journalist Pavel Ivanov. "Even politics turns into a show."

Russian speakers we interviewed uniformly mentioned the entertainment value of Russian TV. In contrast to Estonian-language broadcasts—which, in addition to the language factor, have an ethnic-Estonian flavour with which Russians find it hard to identify—Russian TV is bright, brash and, in some cases, brilliantly presented.

Few observers believe that Moscow is directly targeting Estonians with its media or propaganda. "We don't think that Russia has any particular interest in Estonia," says government adviser Ilmar Raag: as a member of the EU and NATO, he believes Estonia "is just a pawn in this game with the West".

Part of that "game" is denigrating Estonia and its neighbouring Baltic states, Latvia and Lithuania, discrediting their reputation as democratic countries. One motive: sowing doubts about their credibility among other NATO members.

Russian television invites Estonia's Russian speakers to join a virtual "Russian World," the same mental universe in which many Russian citizens live, a world united by language, culture, religion, history and blood. At its political core is the concept that Russia, after years of post-Soviet insults and being demeaned by the West, is back on its feet, a country to be respected and even feared. President Putin is viewed as muscularly defending Russia's interests, the strongest leader on the world stage today.

Putin's "macho" image plays well among some Estonian Russian speakers. Russia's massive size and its political influence are also attractive to those who contrast it with Estonia's tiny size and self-effacing image. In Narva, Vladimir Alekseyev proudly says he sees "no other president in the world like Putin".

"Under his leadership," he says, "Russia has risen from its knees. That makes me happy, it's fantastic! Russia has begun to understand what it is, who it is, where it needs to go."

Pride in Russia is an integral part of a political world view that, in the eyes of some, like Estonian parliamentarian Marko Mihkelson, is rapidly coalescing into a fully-fledged ideology: "It is dangerous," he says, "because I think that people are more zombified today than ever before. Even more than in the Soviet Union because, in the Soviet Union, what idea was it? Communism. But nobody believed in that, everybody joked about that. Today, it's Big Russia."

But pride, too, has complex connotations for some Russian speakers. Kristina Kallas, acting director of Narva College, is researching Russia's "compatriot" policy. The more frustrated Estonia's Russian speakers are, she says, the more they look up to Russia and president Putin.

"Russia is some kind of imaginary hope," she explains. "But this is the hope of the person in despair. 'There is Putin, he will come and change my situation because I am not capable myself of doing this.' And, clearly, they are not capable."

Central to the concept of "Big Russia" is a desire to belong. That's the opinion of Narva entrepreneur Anton Ossipovsky. Educated as an engineer in St Petersburg, Russia and in Estonia, he runs his own marketing and advertising company. Analysing the Russian media's strategy, Ossipovsky describes it as "values marketing".

"In Russia and in some countries of the former Soviet Union," he says, "they cultivate and support the cult of belonging. This is the value that means it is important to you to belong: be part of the Party, be part of a circle, be part of a club, of something. If this is something you value, you are an easy target for Putin and the marketing is effective. Western values are completely different. Contemporary Western values are summed up in self-expression. Yes, a person may share some values, but only if it gives him a way of expressing himself. So, with people like that, the marketing is not effective."

Reconciling a virtual life in the Russian World with real life in Estonia can be a challenge, says Marianna Makarova, a PhD student who studies identity and integration issues. The result, for some, is "cognitive dissonance".

"On the one hand, they would like to feel that their Motherland (Russia) is a great country ... (but) that's one of the dilemmas that a lot of Russian-speaking people have here. They would like to love their new homeland, Estonia, but without the condition of having to hate the country where their forefathers come from."

Russian speakers also feel they are "on the borderline of the information war," Makarova says, especially as a result of heightened propaganda connected with the Ukraine conflict. Subjected to a confusing onslaught of reliable reporting, disinformation and outright lies, some dismiss any media, from any source, as propaganda. The 2015 Integration in Estonian Society survey confirms that behaviour. It asked both Estonian speakers and Russian speakers what media they watched, and which they trusted. The results showed that Estonians had a high level of trust in Estonian-language media. Among Russian speakers, the dominating media sources are Russian-speaking channels, Makarova notes, "but the level of trust, both towards Russian-speaking channels and Estonian-speaking channels, is significantly lower".

Even some of Russia's strongest proponents are sceptical about the media, whether Western or Russian. When we asked Mihhail Stalnuhhin, a member of Parliament who represents the Narva region, whether he could get the "truth" from Russian media, he scoffed: "Truth is in some thick tome written by philosophers. Does anyone read them? It's not 'the truth,' it's entertainment, and we know that, today, people want to get entertainment from information. They show you a flood, an airplane crash, and we are entertained. For them it's misfortune; for us it's entertainment. And there are showmen who present these programmes, who are really talented, who are smart and can ask the right questions, and make it really interesting."

The impact of Russian television broadcasting is being challenged by another factor: age. Young Russian speakers in Estonia are watching little or no TV. Their sources of information are the Internet and social media, and a recent survey<sup>6</sup> showed that social

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<sup>6</sup> Sepper, K. 2015, "Media and information space", Chapter 7 in Estonian Society Monitoring 2015: <http://www.kul.ee/et/eesti-uhiskonna-loimumismonitooring-2015>

media are a more important source of information for young Russian speakers than for young Estonian speakers.

In Kohtla-Järve, Russian speakers have access to a variety of western and Russian TV channels, as well as Internet sites. Andrey Tambovtsev, a 17-year-old student, gets most of his information from the Internet, as well as Facebook, Twitter and the Russian-language VKontakte.

"All the content on that—news, jokes, entertainment—is from Russia," he explains, "so if you read a joke, it refers to Moscow, and it turns out that, even though you live in Estonia, the informational environment is more Russia".

When we ask him whether that is strange, he says "I grew up in it so I don't think of it as strange. It's just normal. To live in Estonia but use information from another country. It's entirely normal."

Andrey agrees that there is a difference between Western and Russian news but, when asked which he believes, he says: "I don't believe in anything, practically, unless I can confirm it myself". He says he tries to remain neutral, compare sources of information, and "separate out extraneous information". Then, he thinks, "it's pretty simple to figure out what's true or likely false".

Andrey's mother, school director Tatyana Tambovtseva, agrees there are cases where she is sure neither side is telling the truth. "You hear something is happening but you know from people who live there it isn't. And, of course, there's an information war going on and each side uses any means they have to carry their truth to people. It's hard to hear—both sides are lying."

### **Estonia Strikes Back**

On 28 September 2015, at 6.55 a.m., Estonia's first government-funded Russian-language channel, ETV+, debuted on cable and the Internet. Although its €4,000,000 budget comes from the Estonian government, the channel was created as a public broadcasting channel, which by law, its directors insist, means no government interference in its editorial content.

The morning show "Coffee+" has two young anchors—Dmitry Pastukhov, sporting long hair and a friendly grin, and Elena Solomina, an attractive blonde who, on this morning, spent several minutes discussing the merits of French-press coffee. Next up, a chef who uses home-grown ingredients, followed by a yoga instructor.

The appeal to the young, the channel says, is deliberate; the approach is heavy on "infotainment". Short interviews with Russian speakers recorded on the street in Tallinn and broadcast the same morning drive home that point.

"Let's not have a political channel," one woman says, "but make it positive, open, accessible. There's not enough positive stuff out there."

"I'd like to see more entertainment, and education shows," a man says. "For me as an Estonian," says another, "it's really important to show Estonians."

The new channel's editor-in-chief, Darja Saar, insists its purpose is not to counter Russian propaganda. For her, it's a sensitive subject; a few months before the channel's launch, she ran into the buzzsaw of Russian media while giving an interview to a Russian reporter who quizzed her about the war in Ukraine and about who owned Crimea, a region annexed by Russia. Saar replied, as shown in a taped segment on Russian television, that ETV+ would follow the Estonian government's position on such issues, which undermined the image of an independent media source.

Saar insists it was "useless" to answer the Russian journalist because he edited it to distort her views. "My answer wasn't reflected there," she says. "My full answer was the same as I am saying right now: ETV+ is a platform on which various points of view are expressed. It's not a black-and-white picture. We have people who believe that Crimea belongs to Russia and those who think it belongs to Ukraine. Well, sorry, but that's the way it is. We have a lot of issues on which there is no single point of view."

Saar is 35 years old, was born in Estonia and spent some of her youth in the former Soviet Republic of Kazakhstan. She is a Russian speaker and says she understands their mentality. "I think people here [in Estonia] have low self-esteem, they are used to thinking they are constantly being deceived, they're promised something they don't get, or they have to deal with unequal conditions. They're used to people treating them unequally. It's an inferiority complex."

Saar says the new channel's purpose is to "raise the self-esteem" of Russian speakers, "let them know that they can do something in this life ... that they are valuable ... that they can accomplish something".

Estonia has had several abortive attempts at fashioning a national channel that could talk to the country's Russian speakers in their own language. Pavel Ivanov was head of a Russian-language programme on Estonian public television. He points to a series of wake-up calls, beginning with the 2007 so-called Bronze Soldier riots, in which Russian speakers took to the streets when the authorities moved a monument to Red Army soldiers from its site in central Tallinn to the official military cemetery.

"[The government] called and said 'Let's do a channel on TV' and I said 'OK, let's do it!' Then the worst was over and things calmed down. There was a second call in August 2008, after the Georgian–Russian war. 'So, let's do it!' Then that was over, and everything [went] back to normal. Third call—Ukraine. 'So let's do it, finally!' Official Estonia doesn't know us. They were actually never, in a positive sense, involved with Russian speakers."

The crisis in Ukraine galvanised the Estonian government, says Estonian broadcasting's Ainar Ruusjaar. "After Maidan [the uprising in Kiev that sparked the conflict in Ukraine] and Russian aggression ... the government took some surveys, very serious surveys, to understand what Russians in Estonia were thinking, what their emotions were. And the surveys showed that, on some issues, it was a serious problem. In reality, Russians in Estonia are living with and influenced by Russian TV channels. They do not know very much about the Estonian position. They have no platform [on which] to discuss such issues with Estonians, or among themselves. And this was the starting point for the government to find some solutions."

Those who have watched the channel's concept evolve say it was obvious that Estonia, with its tiny population and limited resources, could not compete with Russia's big-

budget broadcasts designed to entertain and influence a nation of more than 140,000,000. One thing that the Russian media could not do, however, was give Russian speakers in Estonia news about their daily lives, and strategic communications adviser Ilmar Raag believes that is crucial: "Many of those Estonian Russians, they don't really know who they are. They really don't think they are accepted by Estonian society and they don't want to be part of Russian society. If this community were able to have a more lively dialogue with themselves, that they still thought Estonia's a place where they want to live and have a future, this kind of identity can only be beneficial for Estonia."

ETV+'s success in attracting Russian speakers could take months, or even years, to assess. Estonia's media market, with both government-funded and commercial channels vying for viewers, is competitive.

Russian state media are already depicting the channel as Estonian government propaganda. Significantly, the day the channel debuted, the Russian foreign minister, Sergey Lavrov, in a meeting with his Estonian counterpart Marina Kaljurand, asked whether the purpose of the station was to counter Russian broadcasts, something she denied.

Ilmar Raag says there have been some "weak" cyber-attacks on the channel's website, "and there is concern that bigger attacks could be on the way".

### **Putin's Plan?**

Are Russia's media changing the minds of Estonia's Russian speakers? How dangerous is it to have Estonia's population living in two information spaces? Could the Kremlin, if it wanted, exploit this division to ignite societal upheaval, or even Ukraine-style destabilisation?

The Russian media appear to have succeeded in convincing many Russian speakers we spoke with of the Kremlin's narrative that the political upheaval and conflict in Ukraine were caused by "fascists" supported by the West. It is not as apparent, however, that Russian speakers in Estonia actively support Russia's action in Ukraine. In Sillamäe, Olga Bolshakova tells us "a person hears what he wants to hear. If you want to find news against Russia, you can find it. Or the reverse." She watches Russia's Rossiya/RTR channel, but also Euronews and CNN. She rejects any notion that she is being "brainwashed": "If you look at a channel and they are discussing the situation in Ukraine, or in Russia, or Russia and the US, you need to know some historical facts in order to understand it. If you don't, you go on intuition. If you're pro-Russian you will take information that way, and the reverse, so you need to be in the middle, not on one side or the other."

Many Russian speakers who we interviewed rejected any violence, expressing a visceral reaction to the possibility of war. Gennadi Filipov, for example, a retired machinist in Narva, says Estonians with Russian passports "are the most fervent proponents of improving relations between Russia and Estonia. If relations get worse," he says, "we become hostages to the situation. And, because of that, we are not interested in any provocations whatsoever. The most law-abiding citizens (in Estonia) are Russian citizens."

Natalja Kitam, head of media development at the government-sponsored Integration and Migration Foundation, argues that Russian speakers in Estonia who watch Russian broadcasts are, in fact, "brainwashed". As proof, she notes that people who have never met each other often use the same words and expressions, some of them pejorative, commonly used on Russian TV—for example, "*Pindos*" (Пиндосы,) for Americans, or "*Ukrob*" (Укроб) for Ukrainians. "They use the same sentences, like 'But what is Obama doing in Ukraine?' They never discussed this with each other. They don't know each other but they have one language."

Other experts believe that the cynicism Russian speakers express about the media could, in fact, be an indication of Russia's influence. Keir Giles, an expert on Russia's military at London's Chatham House, points to Russian speakers' frustration in the face of conflicting propaganda narratives and the conclusion by many that, ultimately, "everyone lies". He blames, at least in part, the Russian media: confusion and obfuscation, he claims, are weapons in Moscow's information warfare: "If people are already disaffected and disillusioned with their own politicians, inclined to believe that there is no such thing as a trustworthy politician or objective truth, then that lays the groundwork, it prepares the foundations for Russia to conduct successful information warfare campaigns."

In Narva, the editor-in-chief of the newspaper *Narvskaja Gazeta*, Sergey Stepanov, watches Russian broadcasts and the effect they are having on his fellow Russian speakers. "Of course it's dangerous," he says. "They don't live in the information field of their government. They don't have the information that is available in Estonia, they have the information that is available in Russia. So far it's coming in a gentle stream—light attacks on Estonia's foreign policy, on certain individuals—but if you make it more aggressive, create a minor informational provocation, for example, all you would have to say is 'near Narva they found the bodies of Russian activists, tortured'. You wouldn't even have time to say 'We cannot refute that information' before a fire was lit."

Others draw parallels with a potential Ukrainian scenario: "If we look at what happened in eastern Ukraine," says Ilmar Raag, "we see the first thing was just the situation in which the population interpreted the world according to the Kremlin's framework. And if, one day, the Kremlin decided it had a vital interest in stopping something, then it added its call to arms ... if even a tiny part of the population is radicalised, it can be very dangerous for the rest of society."

But former Estonian defence minister Sven Mikser does not believe Russian speakers are Estonia's Achilles heel. "The fact that Russian speakers here in Estonia believe what the Russian propaganda is saying about Ukraine does not translate into Russian propaganda about things here domestically in Estonia," he explains. "There are limits to how you can convince people of something that's not true, and the closer it is to your homeland the more difficult it is to actually use propaganda lies."

As for any Russian plans to invade Estonia, Mikser says: "I do not think that Putin wakes up every morning with the idea of coming to invade Estonia". Russia does have the advantage of proximity and speed, he concedes, but it is not interested in having a prolonged conventional armed conflict with NATO, adding "There's no way they could possibly win that".

There is, however, a different kind of threat to NATO, according to Heather Conley, of the Center for Strategic and International Studies (CSIS). In testimony to the US Senate's Armed Services Committee in October, she said NATO and the US "should be fully cognisant of the devastating impact of Russian influence inside NATO countries that could inhibit allies from taking collective action against Russia".

"As Russia dominates the media, financial and energy markets of some of our NATO partners," she stated, "we will find NATO collectively less able to respond. This requires as much attention by the US and NATO as does deterring the Kremlin militarily."

Others describe a sinister possible scenario: Moscow could use propaganda to ramp up destabilisation in Estonia, enough to create a fully-fledged insurgency, a violent uprising of local Russians to free themselves from what they consider an unfair regime. Tomas Jermalavičius, a researcher at the International Centre for Defence and Security, says Russia "would need to create a sense of threat to the livelihoods and property of local Russians by playing the ethnic card: convince Russian speakers that Estonian ultra-nationalists, supported by the Estonian government, are attacking them". The flame then would be lit, he says, and Russian speakers, desperate for protection, would turn to Moscow for help. Jermalavičius claims the scenario is plausible, if not probable.

### **Is It Working?**

Every day, thousands of Russian speakers in Estonia begin their day with the morning show on Russia's Rossiya channel, with its light and breezy banter between two attractive anchors, advice on nutrition, crime stories—and news bulletins. On Sunday evenings they tune in to "News of the Week" (*Вести Недели*), hosted by the polished and opinionated Dmitry Kiselyev, who saves his sharpest barbs for NATO and the West, and his highest words of praise for the Russian president.

Is Moscow winning the hearts and minds of Estonia's Russian speakers? Our research, which included interviews with 44 Russian speakers, academic experts, legislators and government officials in Narva, Valga, Sillamäe, Kohtla-Järve and Tallinn, revealed a mixed picture, closely tied to the internal ambivalence of many Russian speakers about their place in the "Russian World" and, more importantly, in Estonia. Generalisations are impossible; there are Russian-speaking Estonian "patriots", many of them living in north-east Estonia where the vast majority of the population is Russian, who identify with and support the Estonian state. There are young Russian speakers who admire Vladimir Putin, and others who have no interest in Russia and no desire to visit the land of their ancestors. There are those for whom Europe, not Estonia or Russia, is the promised land.

Our research underscores five principles that guide Russian speakers in how they consume Russian media:

1. Entertainment is primary, news is secondary
2. Scepticism about any and all news sources is rampant
3. Young people are tuning out, abandoning TV in favour of the Internet



4. Local news, not international, is of paramount interest

5. Cultural attraction to Russia does not necessarily equal political attraction.

Given these factors, we do not see the likelihood of Russia's state media succeeding in inciting widespread civil disturbances among Russian speakers in Estonia. They are too diverse, too rooted in their cities and towns, albeit in some cases marginalised and fearful of perceived threats to their national culture. Watching Russian TV, joining the virtual "Russian World," does not necessarily mean that a person identifies politically with Russia; being alienated does not necessarily mean opting for life in Russia.

Part of the Russian-speaking population, especially those who cannot speak Estonian, who have less education and fewer job prospects, do have real grievances about their lives and, under the influence of Russian media, look at the world through a Russian lens. Historian David Vseviiov argues, however, that no more than 10% of Russian speakers in Estonia are alienated from wider Estonian society, but historically, he cautions, even 10% of a population can be exploited for political purposes, with serious consequences for stability.

"They like everything (in Russia)," Vseviiov explains, "but it's not the reality of Russia. It's what they have created for themselves. They don't want to go anywhere ... The root of it is psychological dissatisfaction."

This dissatisfaction is not translating into political action. Many Russian speakers in Estonia, especially those at the lower end of the economic scale, with little or no knowledge of the Estonian language, are disengaged from the political life of their country. This "de-politicisation" is, in part, a legacy of life in the Soviet Union, where civic involvement outside of Communist Party institutions was persecuted.

The Russian media frequently depict Estonia as a "fascist" country which seeks to oppress its Russian-speaking minority. On the Internet, Russian bloggers and trolls sometimes write the name of the country with a double "S", creating an image similar to the Nazi SS. Previous attempts to exploit dissatisfaction among Russian speakers, however, have not succeeded. Support for purely Russian political parties, some of them allegedly funded by Moscow, has decreased over the years, according to a report by the Swedish Defence Research Agency.

Alexey Semjonov, head of the Legal Information Centre for Human Rights, which receives some financial assistance from Moscow, says that, in general, the minority rights of Russian speakers in Estonia are protected. His explanation for their political passivity is that, after the 2007 Bronze Soldier crisis, many Russian speakers "simply lost their confidence in the Estonian state". They were "used to being neglected" for so long, he says, that they had no motivation to exercise their political rights. But he also points to another reason that stateless Russian speakers are not more politically involved: the European Union established the status of long-term resident of the EU for stateless people and, as a result, he says, grey passport holders have almost all the rights of fully-fledged EU citizens.

The 2015 Monitoring of Integration in Estonian Society report notes that young Russian speakers are better integrated in Estonian society than older generations. There are "considerably more people with Estonian citizenship among second-generation immigrants ... compared to the first generation of immigrants," it says.

However, the Estonian government should not be complacent about the country's Russian-speaking minority. Alienated Russian speakers with no role in Estonian society may find the invitation to join the virtual "Russian World" attractive, says sociologist Marianna Makarova. "It's not a question of them being pro-Putin or pro-Russia. But if people don't have a welcoming context in this country, they might start looking for something else."

Some Russian speakers with whom we spoke have a strong perception of discrimination in Estonia. Monitoring studies show that the Estonian labour market is, to a great extent, still segregated ethnically and linguistically. "Certain doors are still closed for you," says Narva College's Kristina Kallas, "and I think the Estonian government should really pay a lot of attention to that because this can eventually turn against you".

The crisis in Ukraine and strained relations between Russia and the West have increased people's interest in the news media, according the monitoring report, but they also have "deepened the differences between Estonians and Russian speakers in terms of the media channels that they follow". Divided into separate information spaces, they increasingly see world events in different ways.

So far, Russia's state-controlled broadcast media are focused on their domestic objective: building support among Russian citizens for Vladimir Putin and his vision of a powerful, renaissance Russia. With access to cable channels in Estonia and other countries in the former Soviet space, they are sharing that message with Russia's "compatriots" abroad. Estonia's Russian speakers are watching and listening, but it is far from clear that they are ready to join Putin's "Russian World". Even those with the strongest cultural attraction to Russia do not, at this point, extend that to unquestioning political support. As one Russian-speaking woman told Kristina Kallas: "I love Russia, I love Putin—but from a distance".

