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Article – Theme section

Media engagement during Russia's war against Ukraine

Reflections of young Russian-speaking Estonians and media professionals

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Abstract

This contribution explores the contested relationship with media among young Russian-speaking Estonians from migrant family backgrounds since Russia's invasion of Ukraine. Our analysis sheds light on how the war context, characterized by the securitization of Russian state-controlled media usage and ideological tensions within the Estonian Russian-speaking community, impacts the media-related perceptions and practices of young Russian-speaking Estonians. We also investigate media professionals' views on building relationships with their audience. Our investigation reveals an existing gap in connectivity between Estonian local Russian-language media outlets and their young audience. This gap is rooted in the production logic of these media platforms, which has previously hindered effective engagement. The context of Russia's war against Ukraine exacerbates this disconnect. Improving the currently poor professional practices of audience engagement, particularly production-oriented approaches, would enhance connectivity and the epistemic power of Estonian Russian-language media and motivate young Russian-speaking Estonians to use it as a vehicle for their social agency.

Keywords

Estonia, Russian-language media, young audience, media use, Russia's war against Ukraine

Introduction

Russia's war against Ukraine has far-reaching consequences that extend beyond geopolitical boundaries. As the war unfolds, it shapes not only physical landscapes but also the intangible fabric of society. The term "imprint" has been coined by Johnstone and McLeish (2022) to refer to the profound and enduring changes resulting from traumatic events occurring within a brief timeframe at specific locations. These changes ripple through various domains, affecting communication systems, technological infrastructures, and social practices (Vihalemm et al., in print).

Russia's ongoing war against Ukraine left its mark on society too. Particularly in Central and Eastern European countries, it has disrupted three decades of relative peace and democratic transformation since the collapse of the Communist regime, rekindling memories of a difficult shared past (Pustulka et al., 2024). Early signs of impact are already observable. Scholarly attention should focus on the effects of these shocking events on young individuals with migrant backgrounds. Pustulka et al. (2024) found that the younger generation, facing shattered imagined futures during their transition to adulthood, is particularly vulnerable. Young people with migrant backgrounds are even more susceptible compared to established native adults, who typically form the political landscape.

This study contributes to our understanding of how war reverberates through the media landscape, shaping related social practices. We focus on young Russian-speaking Estonians whose family backgrounds are rooted in migration. Their parents and grandparents belong to the first and second generations of Russian-speaking migrants from various ethnic origins, who arrived in Estonia during the Soviet/Russian colonization period. The mental differentiation of generations was observable already 15 years ago (Vihalemm & Kalmus, 2009), but Russia's war against Ukraine has drawn out certain differences more clearly.

Our analysis adopts Couldry's concept of media-related practices, encompassing a wide range of activities directly or indirectly connected to media (2012, p. 33). We focus on understanding the actions of young people within the media landscape and how media production practices either enable or hinder them. In examining media professionals' building of relationships with their audience, we base our inquiry on the notion of epistemic power by Anderson (2006) – medias' ability to address specific issues and meet audience expectations within particular contexts. Our premise is that enhancing this epistemic power poses a challenge for media professionals: to grasp audiences' media-related practices and produce collaborative content (Nelson, 2021). Drawing from prior research, we posit that the media engagement and practices of young Russian-speaking Estonians are shaped by three interconnected phenomena, which we delve into further in subsequent sections:

a) ideological tensions within the Russian-speaking population in Estonia, which cut across generational lines;

b) securitization of Russian state-controlled media use and Russian language during the escalation of geopolitical tensions;
c) and weak communicative connections with young generation rooted into the production logic of local Russian-language media outlets.

The following research questions guide our investigation:

1. How do the media use practices of the young generation differ from those of middle-aged and older generations within the Estonian Russian-speaking population, particularly in the context of Russia's war against Ukraine?
2. How do young Russian-speaking Estonians perceive and utilize the media as a means of exercising their social agency as citizens?
3. What strategies do media professionals in the Estonian Russian-language media ecosystem employ to amplify the voices of younger audience members and actively listen to their perspectives?

In what follows, we give insight to the phenomena that shape the media engagement and media-related practices of young Russian-speaking Estonians in the context of Russia's war against Ukraine and give short overview on the Russian-speaking media audience and media system in Estonia. Then, we introduce the method and materials we used in answering the research questions and results of analysis. The article ends with a discussion and conclusions.

Empirical and theoretical frame

Internal differentiation of the Estonian Russian-speaking population

The Estonian Russian-speaking population, comprising approximately 330,000 people, does not constitute a homogenous community (1). Instead, it represents a diverse assembly of individuals with varying ethnic origins, mother tongues, migration histories, citizenship statuses, and integration approaches within Estonian society (Lauristin & Vihalemm 2024; Vihalemm et al., 2020). Drawing on the latest sociological analysis from Integration Monitoring 2023, distinct integration types emerge among this population, based on their attitudes toward Estonian society, the Russia–Ukraine war, economics, political engagement, and civic agency.

Cluster A comprises 14 percent of the Estonian Russian-language population who exhibit strong involvement in Estonian society (Lauristin, 2024, p. 31)**.** They place trust in state institutions, actively participate in local life, endorse Estonia's NATO membership, and support Ukraine. Notably, this cluster includes both native-born and immigrant members who arrived in independent Estonia and lack experience with Soviet colonization (Lauristin, 2024, p. 31). Three-quarters of the cluster members belong to the higher social status group: entrepreneurs, managers, and specialists. The "Estonisation" trend is

particularly pronounced among the younger generation (Cluster A in Figure 1). Secondary analysis of Integration Monitoring 2023 data shows that within this cluster of young people, approximately half perceive that the war has shattered their previously secure world. Additionally, 70 percent report strained family relationships and communication due to the conflict. Furthermore, they express concern about negative public attitudes toward the use of the Russian language.

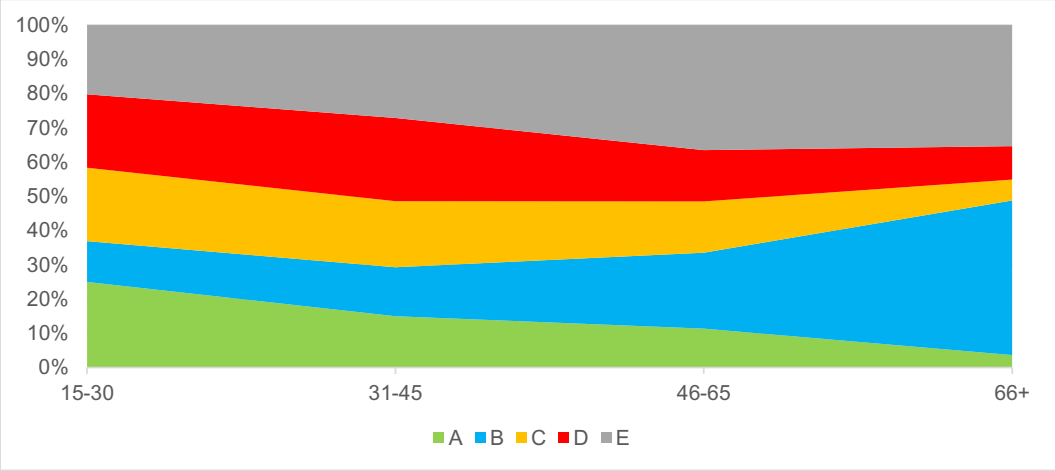

Figure 1. Five integration clusters among Russian-speaking population in Estonia across age groups. (n=473). Source: Integration Monitoring 2023. Authors' calculations.

Among the Estonian Russian-language population, 22 percent – forming *cluster B* – exhibit a strong emotional attachment to their place of residence (Lauristin, 2024, p. 31). They express trust in the Estonian state and support for Ukraine. However, their proficiency in the Estonian language, political engagement, civic participation, and cultural involvement remains modest. They tend to avoid discussing conflict-related topics during communication with ethnic Estonians or survey responses. Notably, individuals with Estonian, Russian, or undetermined citizenship belong to this cluster, suggesting that citizenship status does not significantly shape this type of identity. Approximately two-thirds of this group were born in Estonia, while the remainder migrated during the Soviet era. One-third of the cluster, which is above average, consists of people living in the industrial cities of north-east Estonia, where the population is predominantly Russian-speaking. Consequently, the share of blue-collar workers is remarkable – about half of the group. This cluster is particularly characteristic of older people – 45 percent of those aged over 66 belong to this group, and the proportion decreases with age (Cluster B in Figure 1).

16 percent of the Estonian Russian-speaking population belongs to a pragmatic and adaptive *cluster C* (Lauristin, 2024, p. 31). They express satisfaction with life in Estonia, actively participate in local cultural activities, and believe they can influence societal

affairs. Their perspectives on the Russia–Ukraine war vary, trending to justifying Russia's aggression and criticizing Estonia's support for Ukraine. Notably, 80 percent were born in Estonia, but only 41 percent hold Estonian citizenship. This cluster is prevalent among middle-aged and younger individuals, with minimal representation among the older generation (Cluster C in Figure 1). Approximately one-fifth of young people (aged 15–30) belong to this cluster. Young people within this cluster exhibit lower sensitivity toward war-related topics. For instance, they less frequently report feeling a deterioration in public attitudes toward the use of the Russian language or experiencing tensions within their families.

18 percent of the Estonian Russian-speaking population belong to a socio-politically active *Cluster D* that is highly critical of the Estonian state, its minority policies, and foreign affairs (Lauristin, 2024, p. 32). They harbour distrust toward Estonian state institutions and express dissatisfaction with ethnic minority policies. Notably, a significant proportion of this group was born in Estonia, holds Estonian citizenship, and possesses proficiency in the Estonian language. They actively engage in social media, cultural events, and political activities, including voting and participating in protests. However, they disapprove of Estonia's support for Ukraine and perceive war-related topics as divisive within the Russian-speaking community. This cluster of "disappointed citizens" is more prevalent among middle-aged and young generations – approximately one-fifth of them belong to this category (Cluster D in Figure 1). Among young people within this cluster, every second individual feels that the war has shattered the safe world they have known thus far. Additionally, 60 percent report that the conflict has strained family relationships and communication with relatives, further dividing the Russian-speaking community in Estonia.

30 percent of the Estonian Russian-speaking population in *Cluster E* exhibit weak involvement in Estonian society (Lauristin, 2024, p. 32). They distrust institutions, resist state policies quietly, and rarely participate in economic, political, or cultural life. Their attitudes are negative toward Estonia's support for Ukraine, and they tend to consume Russia-oriented media. Additionally, their (geo)political allegiances align with Russia. This cluster gradually diminishes across age groups, yet it still constitutes every fifth young person (aged 15–30) within the population (Cluster E in Figure 1). The share of blue-collar workers is above average in this group.

The internal differentiation within the Estonian Russian-speaking population is not only an analytical construct of surveys but also a consideration within the professional practices of media producers. For instance, the editor of a popular local Russian-language radio channel said that the radio lost approximately one-third of its previous listeners after Russia's annexation of Ukrainian territories in 2014–2015. The divergence arose because the channel covered events differently from the narratives propagated by Russian state-controlled media. The editor clarifies: "It was our editorial decision, not a prescription from Toompea [government], that Radio 4 objectively covers events in Ukraine, even if our listeners don't approve" (Rumm, 2024). Despite this, one-fifth of the pro-Russia

minded remained, because they seek pragmatic information related to everyday living arrangements (Rumm, 2024). This illustrates the division within the Russian-speaking population, while also shedding light on the pragmatic-adaptive integration pattern (see Cluster C above).

Securitization of transnational media practices during escalation of geopolitical tensions

The term "securitization", originally coined by the constructivist school of international relations (Buzan et al., 1998), refers in this article to the representation of certain social practices as primary issues of state security. This often occurs disproportionately compared to other potentially problematic practices, resulting in a simplified public view of the causes and solutions in the field of ethnic relations. In the Estonian public sphere, following the media of the Russian Federation during the escalation of political tensions, albeit motivated by different reasons and varied loyalty to the Russian state regime (Vihalemm & Juzefovičs, 2021, 2022), is considered potentially hostile.

Following the media of the Russian Federation is, however, part of the geo-politically plural media consumption practice (including Russian Federation media, local Russian-language media, Estonian-language media) that reflects subjects' civic self-perception as discerning media consumers, adept at synthesizing their own perspective from conflicting information sources fostering a distinct form of agency (Vihalemm & Juzefovičs, 2021, 2022; see also Caspi & Elias, 2011). During peaceful times, these media practices enhance social capital and mitigate deficiencies in the national mediascape. However, in geopolitically tense contexts, where interests clash, these practices may diminish subjects' social agency within the home country (Vihalemm & Juzefovičs, 2022).

Particularly since Russia's invasion of Crimea, the practice of following Russian media and the geopolitical orientations of Russian-speaking Baltic audiences have been framed as a threat to national security (Dougherty & Kaljurand, 2015) and analysed from a defence studies perspective (e.g., Bērziņa, 2016). This discourse is understandable given the worrisome results of public opinion surveys among the Estonian public. Following Russia's invasion of Crimea in 2014, the attitudes of the Russian-speaking Estonian population were predominantly pro-Russian (Kaprāns & Mieriņa, 2019). In June 2024, 64 percent of the Russian-speaking population fully or rather fully condemned Russia's military activities in Ukraine (Riigikantselei, 2024, p. 25). However, only 25 percent express support for sanctions against Russia (Riigikantselei, 2024, p. 28). According to Integartion Monitoring 2023, 40 percent of the Russian-speaking population of Estonia view Estonia's support for Ukraine in the war as positive (Integration Monitoring 2023). We concur with Kachuyevski (2017), who posits that the aggression in Ukraine securitized issues that were already divisive: following Russian media, and collective memory about World War II. Present blind faith in Russia's war propaganda among a segment, colloquially called "zduni" (referring to their waiting for Putins' coming and fixing local problems one nice day) (Rumm,

2024) traces back to earlier Russian media discourse. This discourse is accompanied by a narrative of geopolitical dominance, with Russia viewing itself as a great power at its core (Miskimmon & O'Loughlin, 2017) accompanied with self-victimization discourse, portraying Russia as a victim of Western aggression (Ambrosio, 2016; Miazhevich, 2018).

While security vigilance is partially justified, its broad application can undermine the social agency of Russian-speaking populations who are more integrated into Estonian society. The special agency derived from geo-politically plural media practices (Lacroix, 2014) may erode in securitization discourses, which depict transnational ties and communications as threatening and lead to the internalization of diasporic-radical identities (Botterill et al., 2019; Zontini & Pero, 2020) or the emergence of new protective identities (Redclift & Begum Rajina, 2019).

What is less investigated is the impact of securitization discourse to the audiences' actual media diet and self-image. Studies of the Russian-speaking population in Finland (Sotkasiira, 2017) have identified three different types of responses these audiences have taken during the war in Ukraine: escapism from news flow, consolidation toward Russian media production, and maintaining a transnational and ideologically diverse media menu. Sotkasiira (2017, p. 121) reported that the negative image of Russians in Finnish media "diminish[es] their trust in Finnish society and leads them to question their own position within it". During the initial years following Russia's invasion of Ukraine, the Estonian Russian-speaking population exhibited greater differentiation. Notably, there emerged in addition a clearly anti-Russian audience with a plural media diet which ranged from trusting all to distrusting all media channels (Vihalemm & Juzefovičs, 2022). Initially, Estonian Russian-language audience members adeptly circumvented the securitization of their Russia-oriented media practices by employing humour (Juzefovics & Vihalemm, 2020).

War and related public securitization have impacted the social relationships and use of the Russian language. 75 percent of 15–30-year-old Estonian Russian-speaking admit that the war in Ukraine has affected their relationships with other Russians or Estonians, and 36 percent admit that war has broken relationships or caused tension in relationships with family members and relatives (Integration Monitoring 2023).

The ongoing war significantly influences public attitudes towards the Russian language and culture (Pchelintseva, 2023; Mitaishvili-Rayyis, 2023). Among the Estonian Russian-speaking population, 65 percent agree that the Russia–Ukraine conflict has exacerbated negative perceptions of using the Russian language (Integration Monitoring 2023). Maintaining a positive linguistic-cultural self-perception is a contentious task, particularly for the younger generation. While members of the Russian cultural elite in Estonia have attempted artistic reflections on this issue (Allik, 2024), even these efforts are subject to securitization (Oidsalu, 2014). This complex context shapes the media practices of the young Estonian Russian-speaking population, discouraging them from public discourse and reinforcing public stereotypes about uniformly pro-Putin sentiments among local Russian-speakers.

Local Russian-language media: Production logic and relation-building with audiences

Media practices, ranging from following to active contribution, are significantly shaped by the existing local Russian-language media ecosystem: editorial policies, business models, competition, cooperation between media venues, and the broader social context. Numerous local Russian-language media outlets thrive in Estonia, encompassing the Russian-language public broadcast service television, radio, and news portal; two commercial nationwide news portals; a business news portal; and several commercial radio stations and local newspapers (see Appendix 1). Consequently, intense competition prevails among these local media outlets for the audience's attention and trust, underscoring the importance of building meaningful relationships with the audience.

The epistemic power (Anderson, 2006) of Russian-language media in Estonia warrants examination, particularly regarding its operational logic for gathering and effectively utilizing information to address audience members' challenges in today's contested context (2). The epistemic power of Russian-language media in Estonia lies in fostering *connectivity* among Russian-speaking individuals themselves, as well as with the Estonian public and institutions by addressing issues and presenting alternative perspectives that diverge from those found in mainstream majority media. In this study, connectivity is defined as the media's ability to enhance the likelihood of building communicative connections. These connections include recognizing common questions and shared anxieties, fears, and hopes, identifying issues and ideas for further discussion, and referring to sources for spontaneous searches or tracking. These concepts draw from Luhmann's systems theory, which has been operationalized for analyzing the media system in today's post-migration societies by Gustafsson et al. (n.d.). Their approach combines three key practices: 1) information selection, or determining resonant topics, problems, and viewpoints; 2) information production, or decisions about participation, reasons, and resources for information gathering and sharing; and 3) understanding audiences, or anticipating their engagement and reactions. This complements media logic (Altheide & Snow, 1979), which traditionally prioritizes novelty, proximity, authenticity, conflict, and personalization by stressing connectivity and generating new topics and follow-up contributions (Gustafsson et al., n.d.). We juxtapose the professional practices of Russian-language media professionals and their perspectives with the subjective feelings and experiences of young media contributors, grounded in this concept of connectivity. Our aim is to elucidate the (non)utilization of media in the exercise of social agency and to propose potential solutions.

Materials and method

The analysis draws from three datasets. Firstly, the Integration Monitoring survey, conducted in summer 2023 by Kantar Emor under the Estonian Ministry of Science and Culture's subscription, surveyed individuals aged 15 and older permanently residing in

Estonia. Of the 1,564 respondents, 477 had Russian as their mother tongue or primary language.

Secondly, we conducted eleven semi-structured interviews with editors and journalists from local Russian-language media outlets: public broadcast Russian-language news portal (2 interviews); nationwide private Russian-language news portals from Ekspress Media Group (2 interviews) and Postimees Group (2 interviews); regional or city newspapers (6 interviews); and local/city news portals (2 interviews). Further in the text, these interviewees are referred to as media professionals. The interviews were conducted in Russian, via remote communication tools, and lasted approximately one hour. The interview questions focused on the perceived role of the media channel, the imagined audience, inspiration for stories, communication with the audience, co-operation with other media venues, journalists, and projects, relations with NGOs, other ways of listening to the audience, and which sub-groups among the audience are better or worse represented in the media coverage and why.

Thirdly, we interviewed ten young Russian-speaking Estonians who work as professional media contributors or who own content producers across various venues. Among them, one contributed to a city youth media platform, another made own podcast, two held paid positions in media venues, and five worked as freelance contributors for different Estonian- and Russian-language media outlets and produced content for personal social media channels. Further in the text, this group of interviewees are referred to as young media contributors. The interviewees were aged 18 to 31. They represented not only the more mature age subgroup among the young Estonian Russian-speaking audience, but they were also more socially active in their public communication compared with the average of the young audience. Thus, their opinions reflect the most experienced and potentially motivated group of the young audience. The interviewees exhibited diverse educational backgrounds: five hold higher education degrees, four have secondary education, and one is nearing completion of high school. Six respondents were female, and four were male. All interviewees considered Russian to be their mother tongue. All of them were also able to communicate in Estonian. Regarding political engagement, five interviewees were not politically engaged, one experimented with political creative activism formats, two identified as political activists, and one was a member of a political party. According to the Integration Monitoring 2023 report definitions, we hypothesized that five interviewees would likely belong to Cluster A, while the remaining five would belong to Cluster D (see section 2.1), based on their answers to some indicative background questions.

The interviews were conducted in Estonian (with those fluent in Estonian) or Russian, via remote communication tools, and they lasted an hour to an hour and a half. The interview questions focused on media consumption habits, the production of different media channels, a comparison of Estonian- and local Russian-language media, personal opinion pieces published, experiences of contributions to traditional media venues,

inspiration for opinion pieces, experiences with audience reactions, reflections on the war in the media and how it has changed media use and perspectives on expressing opinions, generational differences, and possibilities to improve the representation of young voices in the media and attract a young audience.

Prior to the interviews, all participants carefully reviewed an informed consent form that outlined the study's objectives and methods. They were informed of their right to decline participation at any time. Additionally, the form covered details related to the use and storage of interview texts, the researchers, funders of the study, and the dissemination of research results. This approach aligns with the ethical guidelines set forth by the Estonian Sociological Association and the International Sociological Association. Participants were assured of anonymity.

The interview transcripts underwent analysis using MAXQDA software. A thematic cross-case analysis, employing a deductive and semantic approach (in line with Flick, 2009 and Miles, 2018), was applied. Interviewee responses were carefully selected and categorized based on theoretical frameworks derived from the literature review. The coding process combined inductively derived codes with predetermined categories informed by existing research literature, ensuring alignment with the interview content.

Results

Age differences in media use among the Estonian Russian-speaking population

There are age-based differences, but also several similarities in the media consumption practices of the Russian-speaking Estonian population. The group aged 31–65 has broader media menu compared to the youngest and oldest age groups, but there is also a wider gap between following and trusting the sources of information they engage with (see Figure 2). This practice of actively monitoring their surroundings and maintaining a cautious stance on interpretation, as part of their self-esteem, persists – a trend described in earlier studies (Vihalemm & Juzefovics, 2023).

The youngest group, aged 15–30, stands out for their greater inclination toward social media as a source of information, particularly YouTube (Figure 2). In contrast to the middle-aged group, both the youngest and oldest me dia consumers place more trust in the traditional local media channels they follow. However, some young people lack the habit of regular media consumption, relying instead on information shared within their social networks (Vihalemm & Juzefovics, 2022). Among social media platforms, YouTube, Facebook, Telegram, and Instagram are popular not only among young people but also among middle-aged Russian-speakers (see Appendix 2).

Media consumption practices among young Russian-speakers

The interviewed young media contributors (the third dataset explained in the Method section) demonstrated a comprehensive understanding of the local media system. Specif-

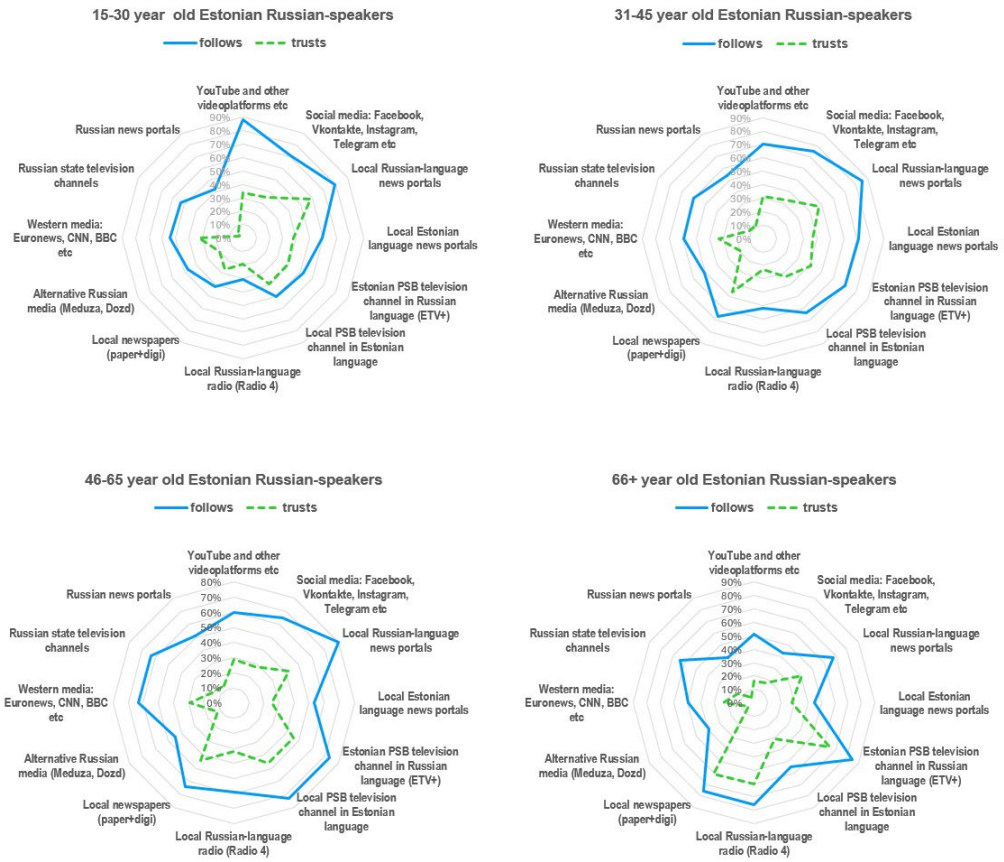

Figure 2. Media use and trust in age groups of Estonian Russian-speaking population. Integration Monitoring 2023 (n=477).

ically, politically engaged respondents, regardless of which integration cluster they belong to, strategically utilize local media channels to achieve political objectives or gain insights into local societal issues for use in creative activism projects. They consider daily news consumption as an integral part of their activism practices. Conversely, those who are not politically engaged follow local media but lack a systematic daily news-reading habit. Instead, they rely on social media to receive important news without actively searching news portals. This reliance on social media is underpinned by a conviction that they can critically assess news and avoid information bubbles. This belief may be reinforced by their parents' idealized self-perception as smart media consumers (see above). Consequently, they exclusively rely on social media for their news consumption, have pinpointed reliable content creators and established a personalized network that aligns with their preferences and values. This unwarranted trust may prevent them from differentiating between independent news websites and politically motivated social media accounts. For example:

> I use most frequently Telegram, and there I read different news, from Estonian to foreign news, most often Russian news. Well, the channels are either personal channels run by someone, or open groups. […] In Telegram, I trust all the channels that have a tick [verified] mark. And I have never had a situation where I read a news item and start doubting whether it is true or not, I know where I read it from, so I trust it. (Interview 2)

Some news consumers who rely on social media channels exhibit a habitual scepticism, refraining from immediately trusting any information they encounter. When something appears unusual or misrepresented, they actively seek alternative sources for verification, without delving into the backgrounds of these channels. Interestingly, trust was also placed in officially verified information from both Estonian and Russian government sources.

The young media contributors were critical about the content provided by local traditional media. A recurring concern pertains to the prevalence of click-based media, characterized by sensationalism and a focus on generating clicks. Another salient point raised is the perceived inadequacy in delivering quality coverage of foreign issues, revealing a gap in the representation of global perspectives. A third critique centres on the media landscape's tendency to predominantly align with mainstream governmental narratives, while voices from socially underprivileged groups – such as teachers, police officers, the disabled, the elderly, and Russian-speaking youth – are notably absent. The latter critique was characteristic of respondents likely belonging to cluster D. For example:

> I think that mass media do not offer Russian-speaking youth interesting discussions and topics. [...] The media does not cover Russian-speaking youth enough. I see it very rarely. I think it is not enough. (Interview 5)

And finally, respondents stressed significant divergence between local Estonian- and Russian-language media, both in terms of topic selection and the tone of news reporting. Notably, a substantial portion of Estonian-language news fails to reach Russian-language media, particularly cultural topics and, occasionally, even important legislative debates. Navigating this divergent selection of topical information requires additional effort for those seeking to stay well-informed. For example:

> Not enough is written in Estonian-speaking circles about what is happening in Russian-speaking circles and vice versa. […] I have to read news in Estonian, not just in Russian, because they just print different news. Too many articles are not translated, even announcements about some state-level changes are not really translated into Russian. So, unfortunately, I have to keep an extra eye on it. And they [Estonian-language press] don't print some Russian-language topics, so I have to read everything twice as much. (Interview 3)

As for the tone of reporting, respondents cited instances where the same incidents were portrayed in starkly different ways in the two languages. For example:

> What is confirmed very obviously and explicitly is that the language communities here live in parallel, including media worlds. […] There was an article in the Russian-language *Postimees*, titled "A protester was arrested in Narva", and in the Estonian-language *Postimees*, with the same photos, titled "A drug addict was arrested in Narva". That's a difference in presentation, isn't it? (Interview 1)

Moreover, interviewees who likely belong to cluster D contend that Estonian-language media lacks neutrality when reporting on local Russians. They admitted that journalists and editors often employ provocative headlines and topics that inadequately represent the situation of Russian-speakers within the local context. Consequently, this has fostered a negative attitude towards news published in Estonian-language media, which, in turn, demotivates individuals who follow such media. These individuals refrain from sharing or discussing these news items with other members of the Russian-speaking audience. For example:

> Local media covers Russian-speakers a bit like asylum patients who need to be treated urgently. That's not a very good approach. It is clear that most Russian-speakers in general think that Estonian news is propaganda. A lot of them think it's very one-sided, and it's all your propaganda. "You're just Russophobes, you don't like Russians". (Interview 1)

These interviewees, who are proficient in the Estonian language, do not enjoy their ability to engage with both Estonian- and Russian-language media due to the inadequate connectivity between these two media production spheres. The lack of reader-friendly integration and collaboration is surprising, considering that several Russian-language media outlets are affiliated with major media houses.

It should be stressed that the interviewees represent the most socially active group compared with the average young Russian-language audience, who show higher trust in local news portals compared with the middle generation (Figure 2). The more critical stance of the interviewees can be explained by their personal experience in (or consideration of) publishing opinion pieces in the media, which is not a common practice – most audience members are rather consumers, not prosumers, of the media.

Media participation practices among young Russian-speaking Estonians

The interviewed young media contributors (the third dataset explained in the Method section), regardless of which integration cluster they belong to, share their political and personal views on social media through their own online channels. Some have extended this practice to regular contributions in mainstream media, including radio, television, and opinion columns. They actively engage with journalists, participating in interviews and maintaining established contacts.

The decision to express their opinions publicly is driven by both courage – the willingness to speak out despite potential negative feedback – and a sense of obligation to use their voices. Additionally, some respondents who likely belong to Cluster D remembered

their experiences in Russia, where expressing diverse opinions can lead to severe consequences, including imprisonment and stressed the value of free speech.

Respondents, regardless of which integration cluster they belong to, emphasized that their followers trust them, creating a sense of responsibility to provide reliable information. Consequently, they propose a more blog-like approach to media, catering to the preferences of young audiences who seek engaging content rather than conventional, dry news coverage. Their commitment to continuous self-education and reading stems from a desire to meet their followers' expectations and deliver information in an appealing and informative format. For example:" I still want to give something to people, firstly to show my position, and secondly, perhaps, to help someone to understand their own position" (Interview 2).

A notable difference in motivation to speak publicly is that half of the interviewees cite an intrinsic desire to change the world and contribute, while others primarily view expressing opinions as part of their job. The latter is a strategic approach to achieve personal or organizational goals, particularly in the realm of politics, and seems to characterize cluster A, in particular.

Respondents were asked about their ability to effect societal change through public expression of their views. One respondent sought community connection and visibility through public speaking. Some adopted the role of information intermediaries, prioritizing the dissemination of reliable information over expecting major shifts. Others recognized the cumulative impact of even minor attitude changes generated by media opinion pieces. While they didn't perceive themselves as highly influential, they believed public expression was crucial. All respondents, regardless of which integration cluster they belong to, shared the conviction that making a difference required collective efforts, while valuing individual contributions, dedication, and hard work to move towards it. For example:

> I think that in Estonia, you can have an impact if you want to. And especially if there are a lot of us, if a lot of people gather about the same problem, there are probably even more chances to reach out and influence something. In Estonia, I think it is easier that way to reach the top and make them hear us out in this respect. (Interview 4)

The Russia–Ukraine war has had a strong impact on the public speaking of most respondents. Firstly, they feel a personal connection and the responsibility to express their stance. Many made a deliberate decision to speak more extensively about the war, particularly during the initial stages of Russia's full-scale invasion. One respondent, who likely belongs to Cluster A, increased her public speaking in response to the war, especially due to differing opinions within her pro-Russian family. Another respondent, likely belonging to Cluster D, emphasizes the inability to stay silent, particularly after returning to Estonia, where freedom of speech exists. For example:

> The original motivation is just to get rid of the unbearable sense of shame, and also the survivor syndrome. Because I know it's there, because these are living people. [...] And because I'm in a country where they won't put you to jail for reposting, I feel obliged before my conscience to at least try, at least to repost. The motivation is like that from the beginning, more internal. (Interview 1)

One respondent, likely belonging to Cluster A, explained that he chose to speak on the matter because, due to his political situation, making a public statement was politically inevitable. He further emphasizes that discussing the war is a politically useful strategy, indicating that his motivation is more utilitarian than personal.

Some of the young media contributors likely belonging to Cluster A are cautious in expressing themselves honestly on political matters because they do not want to spoil relations with their parents and are afraid of general negative feedback. For instance, a young media contributor to a major Estonian-language outlet recounts her negative experience publishing an opinion piece on war-related issues in a Russian media venue. She received aggressive comments from readers, whom she presumed to be from the older generation. For example:

> When I realized in the first second that the opinions differ, I no longer wanted to argue on this topic about which opinion is more correct than the other. This is their opinion. I can understand why they have that opinion – no knowledge, not very smart. I understand and just do not want to cause conflict. They are often friends, acquaintances. I still need to communicate with them in the future, so I avoid conflicts. I find it easier to talk to people who share the same opinion as me. (Interview 9)

Another young media contributor, likely belonging to Cluster A and who writes regularly to the alternative youth media platform in Russian language, does not dare to write about issues concerning the Russian-language population in Estonia. She admits to being afraid of reactions from both ethnic Estonians and from the Estonian Russian-speaking population. For example:

> [Are you afraid of Estonian' reactions?] Yes. Also, the Russians. Worse if the Russians react negatively. I have heard a lot from family members that I am more Estonian than Russian. […] I don't know, Russian culture is not as close to me as it is to others. Also, Estonian culture is not my "own culture". I therefore do not dare to write about these topics. (Interview 10)

Respondents likely belonging to Cluster D emphasized that the war has diminished mutual trust and heightened fear among the Russian-speaking population of repercussions for expressing opinions that deviate from the official state's position. For example:

> We cannot say that we have repressions or anything like that in Estonia, no. But a certain category of local Russians has a feeling of fear for persecution, for what they have said. I

> would like them to be more included somehow. In general, the problem of inclusion of these post-Soviet people in society is a serious issue. (Interview 1)

Respondents highlight that individuals who fear deportations and legal consequences for expressing their opinions are typically from the older generation and are often influenced by Russian state propaganda.

Some respondents who likely belong to Cluster A, on the contrary, mention that Russian-speakers have begun to express themselves more openly, particularly on social media semi-private groups. In these online spaces, people feel a sense of safety and security, allowing them to voice their opinions more freely.

The respondents, regardless of which integration cluster they belong to, admitted that Russia's war against Ukraine has further reduced the willingness of young people to use traditional media in expressing their views as the primary means to influence society. The disinterest works both ways: young people don't want to read and express themselves in traditional media, and, conversely, media shows no interest in the views of the younger generation. For example:

> But young people don't really read the media. Well, what they write is so cringe and they cover poorly what is going on among young people that, well, it is clear that no one will read it. Most likely the media have just given up and are writing for those who listen and watch them, and don't try to somehow optimise for the young people who don't understand. They [journalists] don't want to give the young people the floor because they think we are stupid, dumb, and not interested. (Interview 3)

Some argue that engaging young Russian-speakers with traditional journalistic content is futile, as this audience has irrevocably shifted towards social media. Respondents note that on social platforms, young people feel safe and have formed their own communities, free from patronizing attitudes. To appeal to younger generations, media must overhaul reporting formats, favouring short news digests, social media posts, and videos akin to bloggers' and Telegram channels' content. Additionally, media should empower young individuals to decide what matters and which issues to address.

None of the respondents, regardless of which integration cluster they belong to, consider publishing in professional media essential for amplifying their voices. Instead, they view professional media as an additional platform to showcase their work and occasionally express their opinions.

The media houses seem to lack the adaptation policy of (young) contributors. For instance, when a young Russian-speaking contributor joined the editorial team of a Russian-language news portal in a large media house, he was not formally introduced to the venue's aims and mission. Consequently, he had to define it for himself. In an ironic comparison, he likened the media house's lack of identity-building practices to the well-established methods of a fast-food enterprise:

> When I went to work at McDonalds […] I was told what McDonalds is and how it works, what the mission is, who the customers are. However, I was not told such a story at XXX when I joined. Therefore, it is impossible to say what the reason is for their action. From my own experience, I can say that it has a role to help Estonian Russians not to be some "annex" of Estonian society, but its' specific, full-fledged part with its own platform, original content and culture. (Interview 7)

Despite several drawbacks, this interviewee sees being a contributor to the Russian-language portal of a big media house as good self-realization and feels common belonging with the Russian-speaking audience and other authors writing in this venue:

> XXX is a very valuable platform to express yourself. Without this platform I wouldn't be sharing this interview now, because I would be a nobody. I am incredibly grateful to this platform that I am given the opportunity to be someone and talk about the issues. It connects me and the audience and me and the other authors, it creates a community. (Interview 7)

Interviewees proposed several strategies to enhance the connectivity of local professional media with young audiences and amplify the voices of young people. These include actively recruiting young Russian-speakers, engaging in direct conversations with them, and exploring new media formats that resonate with and encourage contributions from the younger demographic. Additionally, translating as many Estonian texts as possible into Russian, involving young Russians in the process, and providing opportunities for them to create content were recommended solutions. The respondents emphasized the need for editorial freedom to determine engaging topics, following the principle: "from young people to young people".

One potential hindrance for young freelance war journalists in conducting more thorough investigations is poor legislation aimed at safeguarding journalists and commentators from legal threats. Limited resources may prevent them from adequately defending themselves against potential prosecutions. Media houses can also collaborate to address this challenge.

Practices of Estonian Russian-Language media professionals

In this subsection, we explore strategies of media professionals – journalists and editors – in Estonian Russian-language media use to communicate with younger audiences. The interviews cited here belong to the second dataset explained in the Method section.

Editors at major private media houses define the mission of Russian-language news portals as providing diverse and topical information to Estonia's Russian-speaking population. However, this mission is often implicitly assumed, leaving room for interpretation.

Media–audience relationships rely on audience research, click statistics, and direct feedback via phone calls, emails, and social media comments. Although editors acknowledge that specific age and residency groups dominate the audience based on statistics,

they have not explicitly identified a target audience. In large media houses, audience feedback is primarily quantitative, leaving journalists to interpret the reasons behind the popularity (or lack thereof) of certain stories. For example:

> It happens that you don't know what will "shoot the mark" [be popular and clicked]. For example, I posted a comment by a teacher from Narva, regarding the transition to the Estonian language [3], there was a […]some kind of quote and got a lot of reading. You never know exactly. (Interview 12)

Beyond impersonal, technically mediated audience information, qualitative, personal feedback is limited to active individuals who are willing to engage – predominantly elderly people. Consequently, communication with the audience predominantly revolves around social and health issues, daily community matters, and practical information.

Journalists also acknowledged a tendency to overlook young people as potential sources of viewpoints when covering topics – even when those topics directly concern them. In the interviews, professionals admitted a certain home-blindness in their search for information sources and in envisioning solutions. Also, the expectation that the information source has to offer a solution to the problem may hinder media professionals from asking young people. The following excerpt from an interview illustrates this perspective:

> Well, now I think that this transition to Estonian-language education […] we have talked so much about it, but all the interviews and opinions are about teachers and ministers. Nobody asks young people, students, who must start learning in Estonian. Maybe the problem is that they don't have so much knowledge to answer these questions in an argumentative way. Of course, they can answer that they don't like the idea, but why not? Why is the topic important, etc.? People don't know how to solve specific problems. We can show where the problem is, but how to solve it? Maybe that's why they don't talk so much in the media. (Interview 15)

Even when media houses create special sub-venues to attract the younger generation, the content may still resonate with the older generation, who follow the media more consistently. For instance, during the COVID-19 pandemic, older Russian-speaking people, influenced by extensive Russian propaganda, wanted only the Russian Sputnik vaccine, which was not approved within the EU. On April 1st, the youth media venue published a joke about the temporary availability of the Sputnik vaccine, because publishing absurd news is common practice in Estonian-language newspapers. Unexpectedly, this jest reached an unintended audience of elderly Russian people, causing legitimate outrage.

The traditional Russian-language media outlets do not attract socially integrated Russian-background youth, belonging to Cluster A, due to ideological disagreements with their parents' and grandparents' generation. While readers' forums and social media allow audience interaction and feedback for journalists, they also deter young media users.

Many socially active Russian-background youth work in NGOs and other organizations focused on social development. Despite their media expertise, they hesitate to promote their organization's mission publicly, as public speaking doesn't yield tangible social capital among friends or family. The Russian-language media faces challenges such as staff shortages, dependence on fragmented advertisers, and intense competition. Strengthening cooperation could partially address these issues.

Discussion

The younger generation of Russian-speaking Estonians underutilises professional journalism media in exercising their social agency. This is evidenced by their less frequent engagement with news and opinion pieces in professional media compared to older generations. Despite demonstrating greater trust in local media (particularly Russian-language news portals) than their parents, they lack the motivation for regular independent use. Additionally, young, socially active Russian-speakers who engage in public communication practices, such as writing opinion pieces, primarily express themselves through social media platforms or independent podcasts. They utilise professional media channels, at best, as a supplementary option for public self-expression.

The reasons for the modest utilisation of professional media channels by Estonian Russian-speaking youth are partly attributable to universal generational developments and partly to the specific context of Estonian Russian-language media and Russia's war against Ukraine. These phenomena are discussed below, with proposed solutions based on theoretical concepts and empirical research evidence, and questions for future research posed.

Young Russian-speaking Estonians consider social media important, often viewing it as the only available tool for asserting social agency, both as a source of daily news and a venue for public debate. The migration of young audiences to social media outlets, a common challenge for professional journalism media globally, is both a cause and consequence of the poor connectivity between media institutions and young audiences. This study reveals that socially active young people perceive that journalists do not anticipate their engagement when determining issues and selecting sources, tacitly assuming that young people are uninterested and "dumb" (as quoted in interviews). This assumption is reinforced by quantitative audience statistics and direct feedback via phone calls and social media comments, which predominantly reflect the viewpoints of elderly audience members who are more willing to engage.

Interviewed media professionals acknowledged a tendency to overlook young people as potential sources of viewpoints when covering topics, searching for information, and envisioning solutions. Moreover, young contributors are not encouraged to contribute independently; instead, topics are assigned to them, and negative reactions from older audiences to young contributors' work (e.g., journalistic experiments, jokes) are overemphasised by editors in a discouraging manner. Losing connectivity with young audi-

ences weakens the epistemic power of professional media institutions, that is, their ability to gather and effectively utilise information needed by other institutions and society members to solve particular social problems (Anderson, 2006).

Professional media would benefit from explanatory (qualitative) audience research addressing young potential audiences. Investigating the experiences of socially active young people who publish in other venues provides valuable information. This study enables professional media to reconsider the editorial policy for young freelance contributors by encouraging them to propose their topics and engage their own sources, even if these seem unconventional to professionals. Additionally, adapting pieces published in other channels to make them more relevant to specific audiences should be encouraged. This cross-generational translation can be addressed in special workshops and other events organised or promoted by established media institutions. This study suggests that such opportunities would make the social benefits of publishing in professional media more tangible for socially active young people, who can then engage more passive members of their generation.

The socially and politically active young people we interviewed hold an (over)optimistic belief in their ability to critically assess news and avoid information bubbles and politically motivated social media accounts. In response, professional media must intensify cooperation and build solidarity against media outlets that do not adhere to the democratic principles and professional ethics of classical media. Additionally, both the public and private sectors can support professional journalism by allocating special grants that enable media venues to experiment with genres and methods of engaging young audiences.

This study revealed that the connectivity of Russian-language journalism media has worsened, not only due to common generational trends but also due to the imprint effect of Russia's war against Ukraine, which has strained relationships between ethnic groups and between younger and older generations of the Estonian Russian-speaking population. Traditional Russian-language media outlets do not attract socially active Russian-background youth due to ideological disagreements with their parents' and grandparents' generation. Public speaking does not yield tangible social capital among friends or family for them.

Young people holding anti-Russian views (Cluster A in the study) can be encouraged to use professional media for self-expression by initially inviting them to publish in Estonian-language media and then encouraging them to share their work in Russian-language outlets. Some young media contributors have practised tailoring their words and examples to specific sub-audiences and sharing their work across various channels, including both minority and majority media. Motivating them to engage with both Estonian- and Russian-language media could also be promoted by supporting them in establishing their own channels and then sharing their production with established media. Strengthening cooperation between Russian-language and Estonian-language professional media institu-

tions is essential for building connections with young audiences. This can be achieved through the exchange of journalists and materials, and the development of young freelancer programmes. Collaborative planning for reportages and interviews, as well as joint discussions on audience research results, would provide valuable insights into sub-groups and their expectations, including those of the young audience.

Some young media contributors who are more critical of Estonian society (Cluster D in the study) exhibit a critical attitude towards professional media channels due to ethnic and ideological reasons. Their key concerns include disparities between Russian- and Estonian-language media, the negative tone of reporting on issues concerning the Russian-speaking Estonian population, the use of ideologically provocative or ethnically biased headlines, and the under-representation of young voices and topics concerning youth. The war context has made this segment of Russian-language youth more cautious about speaking in public due to potential negative feedback from both ethnic Estonians and the older Russian-speaking population. The interviewed young Russian-speaking media contributors advocated for amplifying diverse voices, ensuring that a broader range of perspectives is represented, avoiding ethnic emphasis, and moving away from narratives that overly emphasise ethnicity. These content-production principles would obstruct the diasporic/protective identity-building impact (Redclift & Begum Rajina, 2019; Sotkasiira, 2017) of the securitization discourse surrounding the media consumption practices of the Estonian Russian-speaking population in the context of the Russia–Ukraine war.

This study was limited to reflecting the most experienced and potentially motivated group of young minority audiences. However, publishing opinion pieces in the media is not common practice; most audience members are consumers rather than prosumers of the media. Comparative research on young audience members from varying socio-political contexts would enrich our understanding of how to motivate young people to use the media as a vehicle for their social agency and democratic participation.

Notes

1. In this article, this diverse group is referred to as the Estonian Russian-language or Russian-speaking, population, as the primary use of the Russian language in daily life is their common attribute and the driver of their relationship with the media, which is the focus of this analysis. As they are also, at least potentially, the audience for locally produced Russian-language media outlets, the same group is referred to as the Russian-language media audience of Estonia in the relevant parts of the text. The term Russian-speaking Estonians, who belong to Russian and other ethnicities and have Russian as their mother tongue or primary language, is also used as a synonym.
2. Anderson (2006, p. 8) suggests that institutions have (different) epistemic powers – particular abilities to gather and make effective use of the information they need to solve a particular problem in the social life.

3. In the Estonian Republic, the schools with Russian as the language of instruction, where Estonian is taught as a foreign language, remained since 1991 as a legacy of Soviet colonization. Educational reforms, changing the language of instruction from Russian to Estonian, have been planned but postponed several times because of the lack of political will. In 2022, the plan to transition schools from Russian to Estonian as the language of instruction was approved, stating that in kindergartens, and 1st and 4th grades, the instruction language is Estonian from the autumn 2024. The gradual transition will last until 2030.

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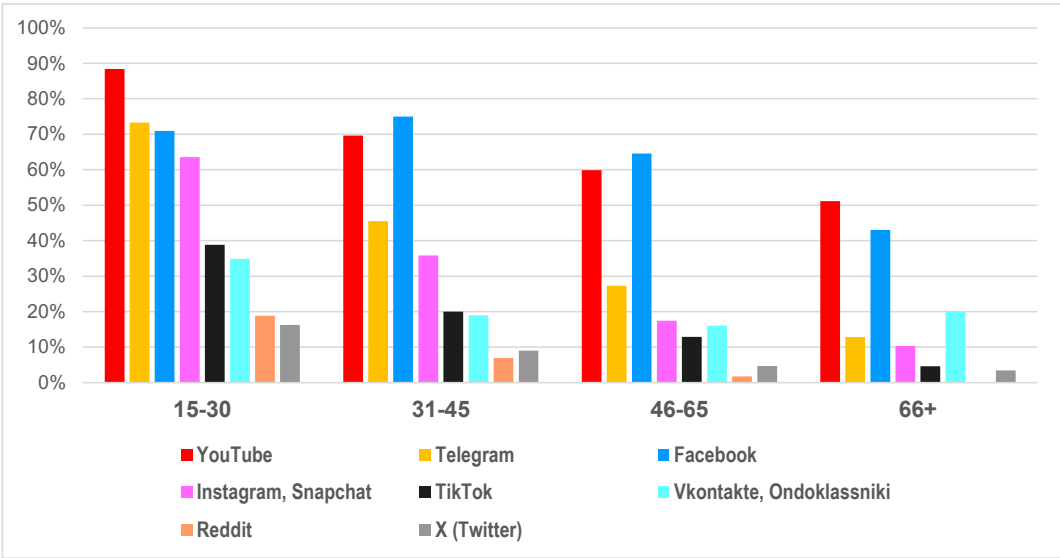
Appendix 1

	Estonian public broadcast: ETV+; Radio 4; err.ru	news portal delfi.ru	news portal postimees. ru + TV broadcast Channel 7	business news portal Delovye Vedomosti dv.ee	Super Radio From 1998-2023: Russkoje Radio	Severnoje Poberezje	Narvskaja Gazeta newspaper web portal social media	Vestnik Sillamäe	Gorod Narva town weekly	Vestnik Tartu	Tribuna	Dokole – closed from January 2024	Prosvet
Type	State media	Private enterprise	Private enterprise	Private enterprise	Private enterprise	Private initiative	Private initiative	City of Sillamäe	Private initiative	Private initiative	Private initiative	Private initiative	Private initiative
Owners	State	Ekspress Group Ltd., branches in all Baltic states	Postimees Group Ltd., branches in all Baltic states	Bonnier Group owned by Bonnier AB (Bonnier family)	Sky Media enterprise owning several music-oriented radio stations	Põhjaranniku Kirjastus Ltd.	Trust company Prospekt Media Main area in the business register is publishing of periodicals	City of Sillamäe council	Telerek-laami Ltd. Main area in the business register is media advertising	NGO Kultuuri-tahvel	NGO Tribuna	The legal entity who collects donations is NGO Human Rights Protection Center Kitežh	Prosvet Ltd. Main area in the business register is trade of different goods
Staff	Estonian Russian-language population	Mixed ethnic and language groups	Estonian Russian-language population	Mixed ethnic and language groups	Estonian Russian-language population	Mixed ethnic and language groups		Estonian Russian-language population					Mixed ethnic and language groups
Top management	Ethnic Estonians			International	Ethnic Estonians		Estonian Russian-language population						

Main Estonian Russian language media channels

Appendix 2



Use of social media channels/platforms in age groups of Estonian Russian-speaking population. Integration Monitoring 2023 (n=477).