

# Estonia's Russian-speaking Audience's Media Attitudes, Preferences and Susceptibility to the Spread of Fake News and Information Disorder in Media Outlets

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**Abstract:** A multiplicity of infospheres in a country, especially in those with a significant proportion of language minorities, creates polarization and distrust towards state institutions. This article addresses the problem by exploring the attitudes of Estonia's Russian-speaking minority towards news media content regarding fake news and information disorder. The semi-structured interviews were conducted with Russian-speakers living in Estonia (N=29), using stimulus materials to induce reactions related to elements of trust in the materials. The results showed that the interviewees have—diverse media preferences, a critical eye for the news, more trust in Estonia's Russian-language media, and are quite capable of recognizing fake news and information disorder. The study challenges the view that Estonia's Russian-speaking minority lives in the isolated infosphere of Russia. The article argues that more attention should be drawn to information quality in the news aimed at this language minority audience.

**Keywords:** fake news; information disorder; Russian-speaking minority; polarization; distrust.

## INTRODUCTION

Fake news is a message that is verifiably false, usually disseminated as a true news with the intent to mislead (Greifeneder et al., 2020), or as Tandoc et al. (2017, p. 11) explain “fake news hides under a veneer of legitimacy as it takes on some form of credibility by trying to appear like real news”. Dorofeeva (2019) argues readers are not immediately able to detect information falsification and believe the presented “facts” either unconditionally or in part. Tandoc et al. (2017) conclude—in their research of 34 academic articles published that use the term “fake news” between 2003 and 2017—with a six-part typology of false news: 1) news satire,

2) news parody, 3) fabrication, 4) manipulation, 5) advertising, 6) propaganda. Wardle (2020) compiles a similar typology but consisting of seven parts and argues the problem is complicated in that: “most of the content isn’t even fake; it’s often genuine, used out of context and weaponized by people who know that falsehoods based on a kernel of truth are more likely to be believed and shared” (Wardle, 2020). Wardle and Derakhshan (2017) recommend the terms misinformation (“false information is shared, but no harm is meant”), disinformation (“false information is knowingly shared to cause harm”) and malinformation (“genuine information is shared to cause harm, often by moving information designed to stay private into the public sphere”), collectively calling them information disorder (see also Ireton & Posetti, 2018; Wardle, 2020). This article uses both terms fake news and information disorder to cover every possible aspect of fake, false, etc. information in the news.

The studies of the media habits and preferences of Estonia’s Russian-speaking audience conducted in the first half of the 2010s (Saar Poll, 2014; Jõesaar, 2015) show the Russian native speakers—almost 33% of the country’s population (Vihalemm & Juzefovičs, 2020b, p. 2)—live in a separate infosphere. Estonians and Russian-speaking residents represent two polarized audiences in one country in this period (Jõesaar, 2015) and even as of 2019 “the infospheres of the Estonian-speaking and Russian-speaking communities are still quite different” (Jõesaar, 2020, p. 83), because the latter still actively consume the Russia’s media outlets, especially Russian TV channels (Jõesaar, 2020).

The pro-Russian information is disseminated in Estonia and other EU countries by the Russian state and state-related media and even global media including international news agencies and domestic news media and is considered by Russia as form of its soft power (Vorotnikov & Ivanova, 2019; Wagnsson & Barzanje, 2019; Watanabe, 2017). According to the “Foreign Policy Conception of the Russian Federation” soft power “primarily includes the tools offered by civil society, as well as various methods and technologies – from information and communication to humanitarian methods and other types of technologies” (The Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Russian Federation, 2016, II, 9).

Toomla (2010) argues the situation of Estonia’s Russian-speaking audience to watch more programs in their mother tongue as completely natural, but they still do not live only in the infosphere of Russian media outlets. Vihalemm et al. (2019, p. 1) argue against the “levelling, uniform view” that the Russian-speaking residents of Estonia are completely under the influence of Russian media and thereby politically associate themselves with the Kremlin.

The media repertoire, consisting of all the media outlets used regularly by the individual (Hasebrink & Popp, 2006), of the Russian-speaking audience has become more Estonian (Kantar Emor, 2020a; Kantar Emor, 2020b). Non-Estonians have started to consider Estonia’s media outlets to be more important and reliable

than those of Russia, including a significant increase in reliability of *ETV+*, a Russian-language TV channel of Eesti Rahvusringhääling (ERR, Estonian Public Broadcasting), especially in the older age groups (Seppel, 2021).

Therefore, in recent years the media repertoires of Estonia's Russian-speakers have expanded and are now broader than those of the Estonian-speaking community, but still includes Russia's media (Jõesaar, 2020) and occasionally also the West's in Russian (Kaprāns & Mieriņa, 2019). Thus, this article investigated Estonia's Russian-speakers' contemporary media preferences.

Despite widespread skepticism and distrust of media organizations, members of Russian-speaking audiences in Estonia strive for independence in their judgement, however, they still view Russia's hegemonic geopolitical narratives (Vihalemm & Juzefovičs, 2020b). The same researchers conclude that news media audiences have developed "self-reliant media-related behavior strategies (juxtaposition of sources, interpreting clues) that allow them to manage the partial dysfunctions of the media system while not to fully abandon trust because this is a useful tool for managing complexity" (Vihalemm & Juzefovičs, 2020a, p. 3).

The abovementioned findings support the theoretical approach of active audience, in which participants are not passive recipients of information (Munday & Chandler, 2011; Livingstone, 2013) and may play an active role in decoding media messages (Hall, 2006). But according to the selective exposure theory, people tend to choose aspects of information that correspond to their individual characteristics and integrate them into their way of thinking, and their choice is based on their own interests, views and beliefs (Sullivan, 2009).

Therefore, the current study aimed to define the attitudes and preferences of Estonia's Russian-speaking minority towards news media and its content and their abilities to recognize fake news and information disorder in the news related to Russia.

The hypothesis underpinning the study program was that a Russian-speaking individual's ability to recognize fake news and information disorder relates to their media preferences. To resolve the truth of this statement four research questions (RQs) were formulated:

- RQ1. How do Estonia's Russian-speaking minority evaluate the media coverage: is there enough information, is the coverage comprehensive?
- RQ2. What media do the preferences of Estonia's Russian-speaking minority include, and which media do they consider reliable or unreliable and how do they justify such a division?
- RQ3. Have Estonia's Russian-speaking minority identified fake information and information disorder in the news about the coronavirus pandemic?
- RQ4. How do Estonia's Russian-speaking minority check the accuracy and what strategies do they use to verify information?

## METHODOLOGY

The study used personal semi-structured interviews since such approach helps to ensure the necessary confidentiality and openness of the participant during the interview, while the semi-structured style allowed the interviewer the flexibility to change the order of questions and ask additional ones when an interesting or a new line of research emerges (Young et al., 2018). The interviews were conducted from November 2020 till March 2021. Due to the social restrictions established for the welfare of society during the COVID-19 pandemic—March 2020 until June 2022—the study used the following system to conduct the interviews to ensure interviewees’ safety: face-to-face with face-masks and social distancing or through Skype depending on the person’s request.

The interviews were split into two parts. The purpose of the first part was to explore the interviewees’ relationship with news media and content and their interests in the news, media use, media assessments, assessments of the accuracy of the information, etc. The aim of the second part was to explore the interviewees’ attitudes towards Russia-related topics and their information checking strategies. The interviews lasted for 23–53 minutes.

The study used the acquaintances + snowball method of recruiting participants, the team made phone calls and sent email invitations (n=41). The response rate was 70,7%. The study accepted participants on the basis of their interest in the news, i.e., the principle of credibility—sources of information can maximize the credibility and veracity of the results (Rubin & Rubin, 2005, p. 64). Responses from people who in their opinion did not consume news were excluded.

The study placed the interviewees at random into three groups of roughly equal size (Group 1, n=9; Group 2, n=10 and Group 3, n=10), in which they were coded by their group number (G#) and a given interviewee number (I#) using the format G#:I# (e.g., 1:9, 2:10, 3:5). The coding enabled the study to meet the GDPR as well as the research ethics requirements in social studies to protect the privacy of the participants.

The study’s design provided each group with various stimulus materials, which research considers as important support materials (Vincent & Stacey, 2013; Törrönen, 2002). News from media outlets provided the stimulus materials, which were presented to the interviewees after a discussion about their general background, media-related habits, and Russia-related interests.

In qualitative research, stimulus objects can be used as “clues, micromodels, or provocateurs” (Törrönen, 2002: 343). The news played the role of clues to the topics in Part I of the interviews and included various elements of credibility: title severity, media ownership (public, state, private) and political orientation (pro-government, opposition, neutral), referring to sources, the origin

of information, news content, news tone (positive, negative, neutral), compliance with the requirements of the news style genre, persons or agents covered.

The primary criterion for selecting stimulus materials was the topic or event system based on preliminary work from the previous study (Kremez & Kõuts-Klemm, 2021) and a new topic connected to coronavirus pandemic, all of them about Russia. Thus, each group received four news items as stimulus materials (see Appendix 1, Table 1). The first was a catastrophe, which always draws readers' attention as a news item and was in this instance an explosion in the Arkhangelsk region on August 8 2019. The second was an economic topic for readers with a special interest (the Eastern Economic Forum September 4–6 2019); the third was a psychologically relevant topic about the coronavirus vaccine in 2020; and the fourth was a piece of fake news. The latter news item was originally a joke on the KuzPress web site, which spread widely and became fake news about a Russian child named COVID. An investigation by the newspaper *Komsomolskaya Pravda* concluded that no child with that name was ever registered (Shelgachova, 2020).

The next criterion was the media outlet: each group would have news on a variety of platforms and with a range of credibility other than the fake news outlet that was the same for all 29 interviewees. Each group received an item of news from one of three of Estonia's Russian-language news portals: the public *Rus.ERR.ee*; the privately owned *Rus.DELFI.ee*; the privately owned *Rus.Postimees.ee*. Each group also received one news item from Germany's public Russian-language broadcaster *Deutsche Welle (DW)* plus an item from one of three of Russia's media outlets: the pro-government state owned newspaper *Rossiyskaya Gazeta*; the neutral, as of 2021 (Kõuts-Klemm & Kremez, 2021) privately owned *Kommersant*; and the independent *Novaya Gazeta*. The last-mentioned media outlet was in opposition to the government (Kremez & Kõuts-Klemm, 2021) until September 2022, when its licenses (print and online) were revoked (Russia rescinds, 2022).

The team, comprising the author and two assistants made audio recordings of the interviews and took notes. The team transcribed the interviews leaving each interviewee's words intact (Bryman, 2008), following the principle of naturalism, in which each statement is transcribed in as much detail as possible (Oliver et al., 2005), and reinterpreting what the participant said (Leech, 2002) was avoided as much as possible. However, predetermined prompt questions were available to keep the interviewees talking and to rescue questions when responses became sufficiently vague (Leech, 2002).

The next stage involved the close reading of each transcription in order to gain a deeper understanding of it (Brummett, 2018) and the reflexive thematic analysis to identify and analyze patterns across the qualitative dataset with researcher's thoughtful engagement with the analytic process (Braun & Clarke, 2019).

All translations of the Russian-language transcripts into English for this article are the responsibility of the author.

## FINDINGS

### ASSESSMENTS OF THE MEDIA COVERAGE

Most of the interviewees were rather satisfied with the way the media covered topics they were interested in. However, the pattern of their responses did not indicate any satisfaction benchmark:

Interviewee 2:3 “It should be mentioned here that they [the media, MK]<sup>1</sup> cover them in the same way throughout life. And I like don’t know anything else.”

Some interviewees were not satisfied:

Interviewee 3:7 “I don’t think so. There could be more, and the media could involve more different professionals in a certain field.”

In this instance and in others, the interviewees demonstrated the need for more expert opinions in the news.

Some interviewees were only partially satisfied by media coverage because of the lack of reporting about the pandemic:

Interviewee 3:4 “Generally, yes [satisfied, MK]. True, when it comes to health, not as much is being written about the coronavirus as you would like.”

Several sources were considered necessary to obtain sufficient information, demonstrating wide and diverse media preferences of the audience:

Interviewee 2:2 “Well, I read and look at several sources. After all, I read and watch, well, the Estonian press...*Postimees*, *Äripäev* [weekly business newspaper, MK]”.

Interviewees pointed out that each media outlet may present information in their own distinct way and therefore several news sources needed to be included in the media repertoire:

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<sup>1</sup> Clarifications inserted into translated transcriptions in square brackets are made by the author—Mihhail Kremez (MK)

Interviewee 2:6 “I noticed that it is covered differently everywhere. That’s why I watch different news.”

They felt that news can be presented in various ways in support of particular interest groups, e.g., authorities and politicians. Several interviewees talked about the suspected poisoning of Russian oppositionist Alexei Navalny:

Interviewee 3:1 “...the poisoning of Mr. Navalny was very differently reported. The information was presented in different ways, very differently. (...) ... in Russian state media, Russian media, Estonian media, British media.”

Many interviewees mentioned special attention must be paid to coverage of political news, which could be biased:

Interviewee 1:7 “Well, arguably a political issue, and now it is related to Russia. Or elections in the US – it was a nightmare, a horror”.

Interviewee 2:3 “Most of such sharp policy news and content almost automatically fall into the category of suspicious”.

The media coverage in Estonia was praised:

Interviewee 3:2 “It is covered fine in Estonia”.

Some interviewees trusted the Estonian media, but were critical of the media of other countries:

Interviewee 2:1 “Media in Estonia, a small country, I trust completely. Where the big European countries are involved, Russia, look at it...”

Some were critical of Russia’s media coverage:

Interviewee 3:1 “If we take our European territory, information will suffice. If you take the Russian media, then there, of course, is not the same”.

Satisfaction with the coverage might depend on the media outlet:

Interviewee 3:3 “Depends on the specific newspaper or portal”.

The media as such was accused of being biased and taking sides:

Interviewee 1:3 “Look, when they write, it seems clear what they write, they themselves are on one side”.

Several interviewees believed there were not any independent media. This is an extremely critical view on the media that can also influence their attitude to certain media outlets and news:

Interviewee 2:2 “I would say the words ‘independent’, ‘super-independent’ and ‘super-objective’ media (...) – I do not believe that”.

One interviewee mentioned a conspiracy theory that the media publish only what is allowed to publish:

Interviewee 2:9 “Unfortunately, in general, you have to look at alternative media, because it is obviously copying of information allowed for broadcasting”.

Therefore, some interviewees were confident that the biggest news agencies were under the control of interest groups, receiving instructions on content could be published.

## **MEDIA PREFERENCES, TRUSTED AND NON-TRUSTWORTHY MEDIA**

The flexibility of the semi-structured interviews ensured the necessary confidentiality for, and the openness of, the interviewees. The variety of stimulus materials presented to three groups allowed the study to collect more information about the media preferences and attitudes of the interviewees. The interviewees were aware of most of the media outlets presented in the stimulus materials and had developed personal attitudes about them.

The Russian-language TV channel *ETV+* and news portal *Rus.ERR.ee* were popular news sources among the interviewees, well trusted and highly valued for their high-quality media coverage. Interviewees mentioned the better resources and quality of journalistic work of these media outlets:

Interviewee 2:7 “Some – of high quality, let’s say yes, that’s ERR. Because they have significantly better quality than other Estonian ones”.

However, *ETV+* was also criticized for unprofessional work for filming the same experts and in their institutions. Interviewee 1:1 called it an “event between own people”, which implied the audience did not know many Estonian experts.



Thus, the credibility of the media outlet decreased if the audience saw that it was doing “cheap” work using comfortable sources and speakers.

Estonia's privately owned media were also praised and criticized. The interviewees most often mentioned the Russian-language news portals *Rus.DELFI.ee* and *Rus.Postimees.ee* (some interviewees consumed both Estonian-language versions from time to time). Many interviewees identified *Rus.DELFI.ee* and *Rus.Postimees.ee* as their “main” and “favorite” sources of Estonian news but some blamed them of “bias”, “lying”, “writing nonsense”, “lack of self-made news”, “non-professionalism”, and “poor translation”. The interviewees also saw variations in the coverage of the same news across language versions. They noted that the media outlets offered either a distinct form or less information to the Russian-speaking audience than to their Estonian counterparts, which could lead to societal polarization:

Interviewee 3:5 “News is translated from one language to another, and you only watch – there is something else in Russian. Different information. It seems to me that this could lead to the division of society”.

The interviewees accused the media outlets of big nations, primarily the USA and Russia, of bias:

Interviewee 2:8 “CNN – well, the kind of channel that, like, I really think it's fake news.”

Interviewee 2:7 “There is *Russia-24* [owned by The All-Russia State Television and Radio Broadcasting Company, MK] in Russia. (...) If you just need news, (...) you can watch them. There are no attempts for neutrality, it is not there and will not be in the future”.

But some Russian news media was considered reliable, such as the privately owned daily newspaper *Kommersant*:

Interviewee 1:7 “*Kommersant*, well, *Kommersant* I trust”.

The Russian state-owned news agency *TASS*, is used as a news source by Estonian journalists (Kõuts-Klemm & Kremez, 2021), and was considered reliable by many of the interviewees (1:3, 2:2–2:7, etc.):

Interviewee 2:10 “If there is a source and you say it is *TASS*, does it turn out to be trustworthy? Yes, I think so, I would trust that”.

Interviewee 2:2 “But *TASS* can transmit abbreviated information that is provided, for example, by the Ministry of Defense of the Russian Federation.”

English speakers often watched *CNN*, *Fox News* and the *BBC*, but emphasized that they produced biased news. Both *CNN* and *Fox News* were mentioned in connection with the undisguised support of Democrats and Republicans, respectively:

Interviewee 2:3 “Biden was declared the winner of the election, and *CNN* comments on it with one intonation and some summaries of it, so to speak, yes, well, but *Fox [News, MK]* comments it from basically the other side”.

The interviewees admitted to consuming the news of Russia’s other major media outlets. Chief amongst them were the online news portals *Yandex.ru* (owned by Russian-Dutch multinational corporation Yandex N.V as of 2021) and *Mail.ru* (owned by Russian internet company Mail.ru Group). They also watched *PBK* (mostly Channel One Russia’s products that were broadcast by privately owned *First Baltic Channel*, closed in 2021) and *NTV* (owned by Gazprom Media Russian free-to-air television channel). They also consumed media outlets that are politically critical of the Kremlin. There are the online radio and news portal *Echo of Moscow* (owned by Gazprom Media and Echo of Moscow Holding in 2021), considered to be in critical of the government (Kazakov, 2018), and the private *Novaya Gazeta*, considered the most Kremlin-critical paper in Russia’s media landscape (Solts, 2015). The interviewees also consumed materials of the privately owned Kremlin-critical news portal *Meduza* (Kremez & Kõuts-Klemm, 2021, p. 121), established in Latvia by Russian journalists, and the broadcaster *Dozhd* that escaped Kremlin enforced closure to exile in Latvia (Russia’s Dozhd TV, 2023). *Dozhd* lost its Latvian broadcast license and obtained a Dutch license in December 2022 (Russia’s Dozhd TV, 2023). But the interviewees said the politically critical media are one-sided, as they all consult the same experts:

Interviewee 1:1 “I think *Dozhd* conveys the same point of view, only the same people are ever invited as experts, and that’s not interesting”.

*Euronews* is both a popular EU TV channel in Russian and a master of hard news.

Interviewee 2:6 “The number one channel on television is *Euronews*”.

Interviewee 3:2 “There are the facts, the facts, the naked facts”.

The interviewees talked about other media related to their more focused interests, such as the Russian-language news portal of Finland’s national public broadcasting *Yle*, German Public Broadcaster *Deutsche Welle* in either language German or Russian and the Israeli Russian-language news portal *Vesti.co.il*.

Therefore, many interviewees consumed news based on their own needs and interests from across a variety of media outlets. Multilingual interviewees daily consumed news from five or more media outlets.

In summary, the interviewees consumed news they liked, even if they understood the outlet to be biased, and used as many sources as possible to verify certain facts and to obtain a complete picture.

## **FAKE INFORMATION AND INFORMATION DISORDER CONCERNING THE PANDEMIC IN THE NEWS**

Many interviewees started to explain their topic interests through the pandemic information. Some were interested in the coronavirus topic from a professional point of view of being a medic, a pharmacist or a physiotherapist.

During the research period, the news about the pandemic made interviewees search for additional information, using other media or looking for official information on the government agencies' websites. They used a diversity of media preferences as a tool to detect fake information:

Interviewee 1:3 "I looked for specific numbers, I really searched, I also looked directly at countries, and some sites publish aggregate statistics. The numbers were indeed confirmed."

Interviewees wanted to know more about the pandemic (those infected, restrictions and vaccines) and to be constantly informed:

Interviewee 2:5 "They seem to update it during the day. Basically, they could write a little more".

Fake information about the pandemic was noticed initially in the social media not in the news:

Interviewee 1:9 "By the way, I was in Tallinn when the news came that Tallinn would be locked [locked-down, MK]. And I believed it at first."

Suspicious information about the pandemic was noticed in the foreign news media, but interviewees as a rule could not tell of any specific items:

Interviewee 3:1 "Yes, this [suspicious news, MK] was in remote regions: the US, South Asia, maybe Japan, India..."

Some interviewees emphasized the information disorder in the Estonian news media:

Interviewee 1:6 “Yes, there has been such conflicting news about the coronavirus. In several publication. One says one thing, the other says another.”

Coronavirus statistics were important to the interviewees, but reliability, presentation and contextualization of the news were equally important, e.g., interviewees accused the media of creating fear:

Interviewee 2:9 “They write so much and so frighteningly about this coronavirus infection that it causes fear in humans.”

Interviewee 1:8 “... This [media reading, MK] caused anxiety and fear.”

Interviewee 2:8 “What I’m kind of not happy with is the fact that the media very much exaggerates.”

The perceived fear even led to the rejection of some media by the interviewees, and therefore to a reduction in their media preferences.

## VERIFICATION OF INFORMATION

The interviewees’ assessments of media coverage and attention to fake news and information disorder were related to their media literacy. Among them, some admitted they may not be right about certain statements or did not know the specifics of the events being covered, or that the topic was completely unknown to them. One interviewee, who once was a gullible victim of a media joke, now fully trusted the official news about the coronavirus:

Interviewee 2:4 “I don’t control anything. I accept that it exists. What to check here?”

But as already mentioned in the previous section on the pandemic, specifically the description of using multiple media outlets for information checking, most interviewees did prefer to check the information. Some admitted they did interact with active journalists and really knew how the press works:

Interviewee 2:8 “I do this [question any news information, MK] because I think it is presented to me through the prism of someone’s perception. (...) I just have acquaintances who have worked in information agencies.”

Interviewee 2:3 "... I have enough friends and acquaintances who are involved in the media one way or another."

The interviewees perceived variations between the quality and reliability of mediated and direct information. Thus, the more a person knows about the work organization of newsrooms, the more critical they are about the information provided. That point indicated the need to increase transparency in the work processes of media organizations, but also to reducing trust in the media (in the case of unprofessionalism).

Those interviewees who did lack knowledge in some areas, such as history or medicine, which distorted their perception of the news, were clearly vulnerable. An interviewee with insufficient knowledge might also find suspicious news that was completely reliable, or vice versa. Some interviewees concluded that the fake news in the stimulus materials was the result of people's stupidity that did not deserve to be checked.

Several interviewees went to extremes in their criticality – suspecting fake news on every topic. A closer look revealed that sharing fake information meant these interviewees believed all politicians were liars. Moreover, as there are many political issues in the content of the media aimed at the general audience, the interviewees also evaluated the content of all news media as fake information. An interviewee's personal attitude, especially towards certain politicians the media covered, could negatively impact on their trust in the concrete language of the media.

Many interviewees pointed out that they often came across unreliable information. This problem was highlighted regarding Estonia's media portals such as *Rus.DELFI.ee* or *Rus.Postimees.ee*:

Interviewee 1:4 "Often. All the time. Maybe it made me quite cynical, I don't want to believe anything anymore."

There were interviewees who distinguished between intentional lies (Russian: *zlonamerennyi feik*) and jokes (Russian: *prikol*). Interviewees might also have considered incorrect any that contradicted their personal experience:

Interviewee 3:4 "I think the news in *Rus.Postimees.ee* was that 80% of people in Ida-Virumaa County [the region near the border with Russia where Russian-speakers are in a majority, MK] wear masks. I know from others, and I saw for myself that this is not true."

Interviewee 2:5 had an inverse mask-wearing experience compared to 3:4's comment in that a significant part of Ida-Virumaa Russian-speaking residents were more attuned to Russia's news. The interviewee was worried that

a certain part of the population was segregated in terms of the infosphere, and it affected their behavior:

Interviewee 2:5 “They have, in principle, a general lack of awareness of what is happening within the country in which they live. Thirty percent wear masks, I came from there yesterday.”

It is believed that the closer — geographically — the event takes place, the easier it is to check the accuracy of the information:

Interviewee 3:6 “It is easy to evaluate Estonian things. However, if, for example, the news reports the situation in Italy and shows two hospitals in which the situation is bad, it is difficult to assess exactly how it is. There are hundreds of hospitals in Italy, and perhaps this is not the case in others.”

The study with stimulus materials revealed that the interviewees were mainly suspicious of the lack of references or sources and the clickbait headlines, which tend to be rather skeptical about the content:

Interviewee 3:1 “Lack of sources, too screaming title, screaming fully that it is... clickbait.”

Audiences question the reliability of media outlets and if they are viewed as unreliable, i.e., as yellow press or otherwise, the news becomes suspicious:

Interviewee 1:2 “Since I see that was written on *Dni.ru* [privately owned Russian e-newspaper, MK], I would not say that it is true. It is the first time I have heard of such a news portal.”

Topics also raise doubts. The concept of “flat Earth” has become an analogy of fake information:

Interviewee 3,6 “And if I see that information comes from a page that has a flat Earth on the front page, for example, of course, I don’t trust that page.”

The control of suspicious information was usually carried out when the topic was interesting. But interviewees did not start checking if there was insufficient time:

Interviewee 1:3 “If I have time, I can go somewhere on the Internet and see what others have written about the same problem or issue.”

Most often information was sought from other media and from official sources. Interviewees searched the internet or went to the website of a specific official source:

Interviewee 2:1 “The only option for me is to go to other sites, search the internet for that, maybe there are some other sources of information.”

Discussing suspicious information with other people who are important to the interviewees was another widely used method. Therefore, interpersonal communication was another strategy for the detection of fake news. Suspicious news was discussed with relatives, friends, and colleagues:

Interviewee 1:1 “Well, we always discuss with colleagues, we discuss everything.”

But discussions with those who have a different view may be avoided in order to avoid conflict:

Interviewee 2:7 “The family has a certain point of view – there is nothing to chat about.”

## DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSIONS

The study revealed that the sample population is an active audience (Munday & Chandler, 2011; Livingstone, 2013), which, if consider its decoding of the news according to Hall’s encoding/decoding model (2006), operates in negotiated rather than opposing or dominant code. Russian-speakers more often operate in negotiated code being balanced and skeptical, partially perceiving the encoder’s thoughts, but also having their own views. But they may operate in the opposing code toward the news – reject the encoder’s intended content and create their own – if it is published in a non-trustworthy media outlet or due to the extremely critical view of the media in general. They may also take the dominant-hegemonic position towards news from well trusted media outlets, decoding the messages exactly as they were encoded.

The interviewees are active consumers of Estonia’s Russian-language media outlets, especially well trusted Estonian Public Broadcasting’s channels, which corresponds to the results of previous studies (Kantar Emor, 2020a, 2020b; Seppel, 2021). Some consume Estonian-language news from time to time. Also, they actively consume the news content from Russia, the US, the UK, the

EU countries (e.g., well-trusted *Yle*, *Euronews*, *Deutsche Welle*), wherein many of the interviewees question the credibility of the media outlets in Russia and the US. English-speakers prefer to consume foreign news media in English: *Fox News*, *CNN*, *BBC*, etc. These findings confirm the expanding of media repertoires of Estonia's Russian-speakers in recent years (Jõesaar, 2020).

Hence, the interviewees have broad and diverse media preferences to obtain sufficient information from different sources. Russia's media is only one part of their repertoire, and they question the credibility of Russia's media outlets (especially government-controlled) and their news coverage. These findings challenge the understanding, that the Russian-speaking residents of Estonia are completely under the influence of Russian media, against which Vihalemm et al. also argue naming it "levelling, uniform view" (2019, p. 1).

Most of the interviewees are rather satisfied with the media coverage of topics they are interested in, but do need more balanced and expert information. They mention that special attention must be paid to coverage of political news, which may include the disinformation that could be used to exercise political influence according to Wardle (2020).

The supply of information is often assessed on the basis of interviewees' satisfaction with the information on COVID-19. The pandemic led them to assess the reliability of the news on the topic and search more often for additional information from other sources (official and alternative).

Pre-existing knowledge is considered the primary basis for assessing the reliability of media texts; news could be considered unreliable if it conflicts with such knowledge. The question of credibility does not appear if the interviewees deem the topic irrelevant or uninteresting to them personally. The latter supports the selective exposure theory's approach – people tend to select those aspects of information that correspond to their individual characteristics, and their choice is based on their own interests, views, and beliefs (Sullivan, 2009).

A second basis is if the interviewee is generally critical of the media outlet or has a long-established negative attitude towards the host countries of those outlets, their agents, or specific topics of the reported event.

The interviewees use the diverse sources, juxtaposition of them and discussion of the news with people important to them as strategies for detecting fake news. Attention is also paid to text-level elements: links to trusted news sources, citations, active links, and clickbait headlines. They strive for independence in their sense-making (Vihalemm & Juzefovičs 2020b) showing self-reliant media-related behavior (Vihalemm & Juzefovičs 2020a).

Based on the above, three conclusions supporting the hypothesis can be drawn regarding Estonia's Russian-speakers: First, their media preferences are broad and diverse and support their ability to be less receptive to fake news and information disorder in the news media, and there are insufficient grounds to claim



that Estonia's Russian-speaking population lives in the infosphere of Russia. Secondly, they trust Estonia's Russian-language media—especially the Estonian Public Broadcasting—but most do not believe the news blindly, being critical of both the media and the content. Thirdly, they are quite capable of recognizing fake news and information disorder, but they do need fact-based, balanced, and diverse information. The attention that Estonia's Russian-language speakers pay to fake news and information disorder is related to their knowledge of the media. They are aware of the methods for, and strategies of, verifying information in the news media, although they only apply them when the news is interesting to them personally and they have time to check.

### LIMITATIONS OF THE STUDY

To ensure the diversity of the sample population their socio-demographic characteristics were recorded (see Appendix 1, Table 2). That most of the interviewees who agreed to participate in the current research have higher education reflects the invitation-response rate, which suggests that people who do not advance beyond a basic level of education were less willing to participate in interview-based research programs. The predominance of Russian-speakers whose main residence was in Tallinn (55% in the study) closely mirrors the 47%<sup>2</sup> of Estonia's Russians who do reside in the nation's capital and largest city<sup>3</sup>, while most of the other 53% live in the towns of Ida-Virumaa County in the north-east and in the southern city of Tartu. The sample population included people with differing citizenship (mostly Estonian, but also Russian, Ukrainian).

The results of the study could be valuable for researchers and authorities in Estonia and in other EU countries, where significant communities of Russian-language speakers exist, and where informational segregation is possible. Further research could be focused on the study of the Russian-speaking news media audiences in other EU countries.

### ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I thank Ragne Kõuts-Klemm, Anna Tisler-Lavrentjev and Mari-Liis Someral for their assistance in conducting the interviews.

2 [https://andmed.stat.ee/en/stat/rahvastik\\_\\_rahvastikunaitajad-ja-koosseis\\_\\_rahvaarv-ja-rahvastiku-koosseis/RV0222U/table/tableViewLayout2](https://andmed.stat.ee/en/stat/rahvastik__rahvastikunaitajad-ja-koosseis__rahvaarv-ja-rahvastiku-koosseis/RV0222U/table/tableViewLayout2)

3 [https://andmed.stat.ee/en/stat/rahvastik\\_\\_rahvastikunaitajad-ja-koosseis\\_\\_rahvaarv-ja-rahvastiku-koosseis/RV0222U/table/tableViewLayout2](https://andmed.stat.ee/en/stat/rahvastik__rahvastikunaitajad-ja-koosseis__rahvaarv-ja-rahvastiku-koosseis/RV0222U/table/tableViewLayout2)

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## APPENDIX 1

**Table 1: Share of Russian-language stimulus materials by each interview group**

GROUP	Estonia’s online media outlets	Germany’s broadcasting media outlet (online)	Russia’s print media outlets (online)	Fake news
Group 1	<i>Rus.DELFII.ee (Forum)</i>	<i>Deutsche Welle (Vaccine)</i>	<i>Kommersant (Explosion)</i>	<i>KuzPress joke</i>
Group 2	<i>Rus.ERR.ee (Explosion)</i>	<i>Deutsche Welle (Forum)</i>	<i>Rossiyskaya Gazeta (Vaccine)</i>	<i>KuzPress joke</i>
Group 3	<i>Rus.Postimees.ee (Vaccine)</i>	<i>Deutsche Welle (Explosion)</i>	<i>Novaya Gazeta (Forum)</i>	<i>KuzPress joke</i>

Source: author

**Table 2. Socio-demographic characteristics of the interviewees (N=29)**

<b>Socio-Demographic Characteristics</b>	<b>n</b>	<b>N</b>
<b>Gender</b>		
F	14	<b>29</b>
M	15	
<b>Age – years</b>		
20–29	10	<b>29</b>
30–39	4	
40–49	6	
50–59	5	
60–69	2	
80–89	2	
<b>Highest level of attained education</b>		
Higher Education	22	<b>29</b>
Vocational Education	4	
Secondary Education	2	
Basic Education	1	
<b>Employment status</b>		
Employed	17	<b>29</b>
Unemployed	2	
Pensioner	3	
Student	4	
Unknown	3	
<b>Primary place of residence</b>		
North Estonia	18	<b>29</b>
North-East Estonia	1	
South Estonia	9	
Western EU	1	

Source: author