

PEACE AND SECURITY

FEELING CORNERED

An Analysis of the Russian-Speaking
Minority in Estonia

Reinhard Krumm, Tõnis Stamberg, Irina Strapatsjuk
Tallinn, September 2023



Looking towards Russia:
continuously puzzled



Looking towards Ukraine:
cautious solidarity



Looking towards the West:
still suspicious



Looking towards Estonia:
difficult relationship

Table of contents

	INTRODUCTION	4
	RESEARCH DESIGN	5
1.	LOOKING TOWARDS RUSSIA: CONTINUOUSLY PUZZLED	7
2.	LOOKING TOWARDS UKRAINE: CAUTIOUS SOLIDARITY	11
3.	LOOKING TOWARDS THE WEST: STILL SUSPICIOUS	15
4.	LOOKING TOWARDS ESTONIA: DIFFICULT RELATIONSHIP	19
	CONCLUSION	23

INTRODUCTION

I. BACKGROUND

The share of Russian speakers within the Estonian population is substantial. According to the 2021 Estonian Population Census, they account for 374,038 residents, which is 27.4% of the population as a whole, and include Russians (22.5%), Ukrainians (4.1%), and Belarusians (0.8%). Most of them settled in Estonia during the time of the Soviet Union. The following analysis will concentrate on Russian-speaking Russians, although the poll includes small numbers of the other two minorities who chose Russian as their main language.

In 1918, Estonia was freed from the Russian Tsarist state and achieved the status of an independent country. According to the 1922 census, Russians made up 8.3% of the Estonian population at that time. The influx of the Russian-speaking population accelerated after World War II, when the independent Republic of Estonia ceased to exist, and a huge process of Russification began. While in 1934, according to the census, Russians made up 8.2% of the Estonian population, in 1959 this figure was 20%, and by 1989, it had risen to 30.3%. In the decade after Estonia regained its independence, 1991–2011, approximately 140,000 Russian-speaking people, mostly of Russian nationality, left the country. By 2011, the share of Russians in the population had decreased to 25%.

According to census data, in 2011, 53.9% of Russian residents in Estonia held Estonian citizenship. By 2021, this figure had risen to 58.8%. The lowest percentage of Estonian citizens among Russians is found in the 65+ age group. Over the years, the number of residents holding Russian citizenship has slightly decreased, and the number of individuals without any citizenship has decreased as well (from 21% to 17%).

II. IMPORTANCE OF THE TOPIC

One year after the beginning of the war, the Friedrich Ebert Stiftung (FES) together with the Estonian survey institute Turu-uuringute AS conducted this representative and in-depth survey of the Estonian population with a focus on the Russian-speaking minority. The main reason was to find out whether the war had had a major impact on relations between the Estonian majority and the Russian-speaking minority. Are there major tensions between the two groups? If so, that could be a security issue for the country, an EU and

NATO member, with consequences for both the political and economic union as well as the defense alliance. The Russian Federation has defined the supposed insecurity of Russians abroad as a legitimate reason to potentially defend their rights by any means – this was one of its official justifications for going to war against Ukraine.

The Russian-speaking minority is often described and analyzed as a monolithic community. That was never the case and was proven wrong in this survey. The minority consists of groups with different status: citizens of Estonia, citizens of Russia, and non-citizens, who are protected by the Estonian constitution but have neither an Estonian nor a Russian passport.

III. DIMENSIONS OF THE SURVEY

The aim of the study is to achieve a better understanding of any different opinions between the Russian-speaking minority and Estonian majority. For this, five major themes were chosen:

1. Foreign policy orientation and threat perception
2. Solidarity with Ukraine
3. Media and narratives
4. Identity, affiliation, and feelings of Russian speakers
5. Relations between Estonians and Russian speakers

The FES hopes that the main results of this opinion poll and its analysis will be discussed in public. In general, and not only in Estonia, any issues between majorities and minorities can only be resolved through a constant conversation about how to make a country a home for everyone and how to build a stronger community and more resilient democratic society to face domestic and foreign challenges. There are clearly no easy solutions. Instead, the continuation of the long and difficult process towards a prosperous and thriving independent Estonian state, which began in 1991, requires the participation of all communities and a willingness on all sides to accept some compromises.

RESEARCH DESIGN

From May 16 to May 29, 2023, a study was conducted in Estonia on the topic “Russian-speaking Estonian residents’ views on current events, narratives, and the war in Ukraine.” The target group of the study was Estonian residents aged 18 years and older. A total of 1,000 people participated in the survey.

The sample is representative in terms of Estonia’s regions, settlement types, gender, age groups, and respondents’ ethnicity (data from the 2021 Population Census). The survey was conducted using a combined method of online and face-to-face interviews, with 473 and 527 participants respectively. The face-to-face interviews were carried out with respondents in the regions of Northern Estonia and Northeastern Estonia (in the regions with the most concentrated population of Russian-speaking residents).

The mixed-mode method was used in order to reach as many respondents as possible, including those who are not very active in responding to online surveys, have a lower socio-demographic status, and are more skeptical of internet-based surveys.

To adjust the resulting initial sample, official data from the Estonian Department of Statistics (<https://www.stat.ee/>) were used for weighting. The variables used as weighting variables were: gender, nationality, age, urban/rural, and region.

Technical characteristics of survey

Population: permanent residents of Estonia aged 18 +

Sample size: 1000 respondents

- 527 respondents reached through personal (face-to-face) interviews at their places of residence
- 473 respondents reached through the web survey

Sampling methods:

- For face-to-face survey: stratified nationally representative random sampling
- For the web survey: quota sampling (respondent quotas on gender, age, ethnicity, and place of residence (regions of Estonia); quotas were proportional to the actual composition of the population)

The web sample was created from the population of Estonia registered in the WebPanel of the public opinion and marketing research company Turu-uuringute AS (~ 23,000 participants/potential respondents)

Time of survey: May 16–29, 2023.

The survey was conducted by the public opinion and marketing research company Turu-uuringute AS (<https://www.turu-uuringute.ee/>)

Respondent groups: The analysis of the survey results revealed four groups of respondents: those who speak only Russian within their families; those who speak both Estonian and Russian within their families; those who speak Estonian within their families; and the fourth group – individuals who speak Estonian or Russian along with some other language within their families (this group was not included in the analysis). Since the number of respondents in the group where both Russian and Estonian languages were spoken at home was very small, their results, though included in the overview, were not analyzed separately.

The creation of such groups is based on the hypothesis that the language used in the household to a large extent indicates the information space from which a person receives information about what is happening both in Estonia and abroad.

In the case of Estonia, the Russian-language and Estonian-language information spaces represent two very different spheres, with diverse and often even opposite points of view on the events in the country and the world.

The composition of the language groups according to the nationality of the respondents revealed the following picture:

- Among those who speak only Estonian in the family, 99.5% are ethnic Estonians, 0.3% are Russians, Ukrainians or Belarusians, and 0.2% are of other nationalities.
- Among those who speak only Russian in the family, 85% are ethnic Russians, 4% are ethnic Ukrainians, 4% are ethnic Belarusians, 4% are ethnic Estonians, and 3% are ethnic representatives of other nationalities.
- Among those who speak both Estonian and Russian in the family (bilinguals), 20% are ethnic Estonians, 64%

are ethnic Russians, 8% are ethnic Ukrainians, and 7% are ethnic representatives of other nationalities.

There was also an outlying group of respondents who speak some other language at home plus Russian or Estonian. Since the latter two groups were rather small in number, they were not included in the analysis separately.

As can be seen, bilinguals represent a very heterogeneous group in ethnic terms, comprising not only a combination of Russians and Estonians, but also representatives of other nationalities.

If we look at the spoken language groups depending on the citizenship status of the respondents, we can see the following picture:

- Among those who speak only Estonian in the family, 100% are citizens of the Republic of Estonia. There were no non-citizens, citizens of another country, or citizens of Russia in this group.
- Among those who speak only Russian in the family, 44% are citizens of the Republic of Estonia, 24% are non-citizens, 30% are citizens of the Russian Federation, and 2% are citizens of other countries.
- Among those who speak both Estonian and Russian in the family (bilinguals), 76% are citizens of the Republic of Estonia, 6% are non-citizens, and 18% are citizens of the Russian Federation.

Estonian speakers mainly live in the Estonian-speaking information space, i.e. they mainly consume Estonian-language media, while Russian speakers live in the Russian-language information space, consuming mainly Russian-language media. It should be noted, however, that although some of such Russian-language information does originate from Russia, much is also produced locally.

1

LOOKING TOWARDS RUSSIA: CONTINUOUSLY PUZZLED

After more than 500 days of the war inflicted by the Russian Federation on Ukraine, the effects on Estonian society are very clear and visible. This is evident not only from the numerous Ukrainian flags on streets throughout the country but also in the still increasing support for the Ukrainian state and society, even as everything connected to Russia faces criticism and attack. During the last parliamentary election in March 2023, parties with connections to the Russian-speaking minority did not do well, foremost the Center party. Former supporters were confused and angry because the parties in general openly criticized the Russian war.

This confusion can be observed in the answers to the survey question on how Estonia's interests would be better served. Whereas the Estonian majority (74%) prefers working more closely with Western countries, not even one third of the Russian-speaking minority support this option. Interestingly, only 8% of the Russian speakers prefer working more closely with Russia alone. Instead, over half of this group would like to see more cooperation with both Western countries and Russia (figure 1).

Concerning Russia in general and its president Vladimir Putin in particular, 15% of the Russian-speaking minority like both Russia and its president (none among the Estonian-speaking

majority), 44% like Russia but not the president (similar to the sentiment among the Estonians), and a quarter do not like either one, almost three times less than the Estonians (figure 2). When asked to rate the performance of political leaders, over one third of the Russian-speaking minority consider Putin's performance very or rather positively and over half of them very or rather negatively. 92% of the Estonians rate Putin very negatively (figure 3).

Whereas three quarters of the Estonians support sanctions against Russia, only one quarter of the Russian-speaking minority agree, and almost half do not (figure 4). These differences in opinion might have something to do with a certain solidarity with Russia and its population. This could also have something to do with personal relationships between the Russian-speaking minority in Estonia and friends or family on the other side of the border.

But at least some of the diverging opinions are connected to the different information consumed by each group, respectively. The Russian speakers are critical towards media in general. A majority of this group rejects all Estonian media, Russian federal mass media, Russian independent or opposition media, as well as Western mass media. They find Estonian and Western mass media to be completely non-objective

Figure 1

Looking to the future, do you think Estonia's interests would be better served by...

Answers depending on the language spoken in the family. All figures in %

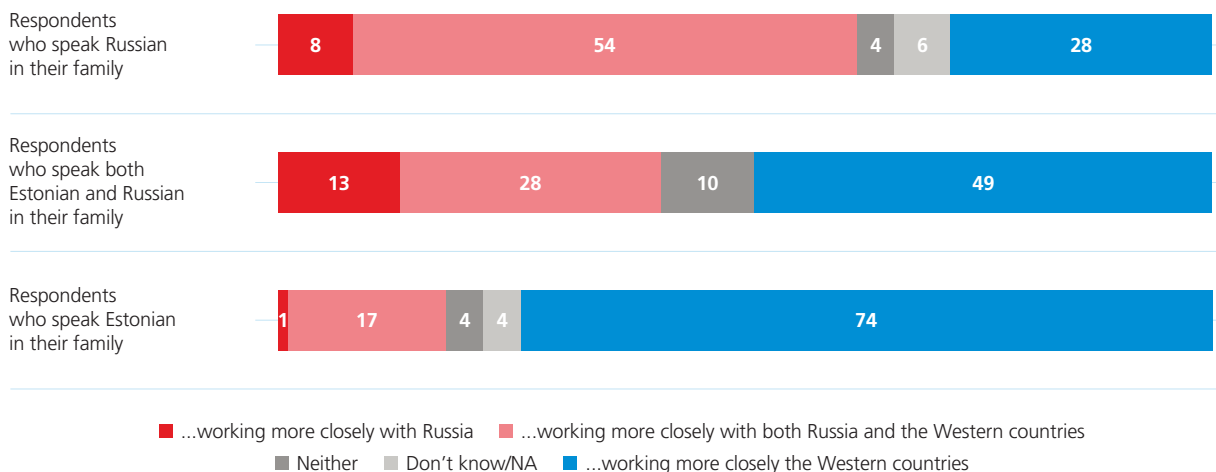
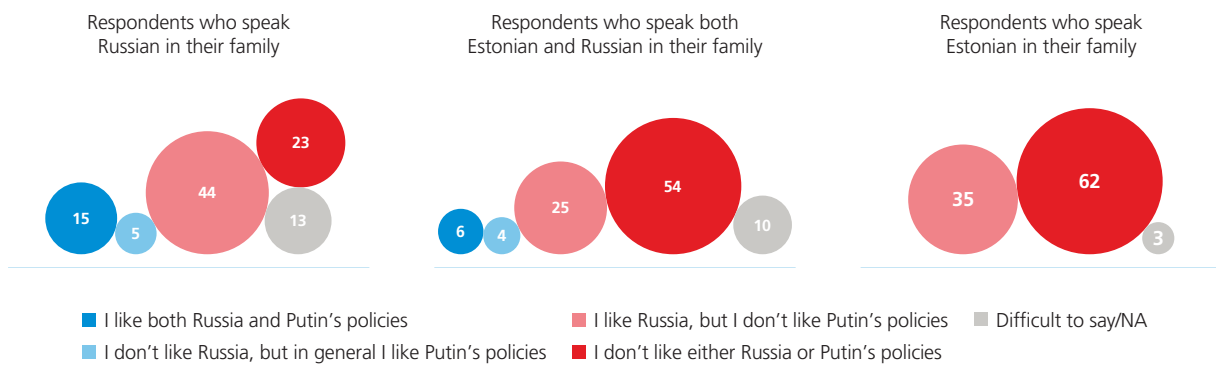


Figure 2
Please assess which of the following statements best describes your views on Russia and its current policies of its President Vladimir Putin?

Answers depending on the language spoken in the family. All figures in %



or not very objective (70% and 61%, respectively), and disapprove of Russian state media and Russian independent media at similar rates (58% and 59%, respectively) (figure 5). That leaves communication with friends and relatives, social media, and as sense of frustration with information sources in general.

Over half of the Russian-speaking minority think to different degrees that Russia was not entitled to use military force against Ukraine to prevent the country from joining NATO, whereas a quarter believes that Russia was justified in doing

so. In contrast, almost all the Estonians (94%) believe that Russia was not entitled to take such action (figure 6). Half of the Russian-speaking minority agrees with the claim that Russia is in fact fighting with NATO in Ukraine, whereas one quarter disagrees (figure 6).

Interesting is the belief of 40% of the Russian-speaking minority that Russia is a threat to peace and security in Europe, even as over half think that that is not the case. For 95% of the Estonians the question is easy to answer – Russia is a threat (figure 7).

Figure 3
Please tell me how you rate each of them: do you rate this person's performance very positively, rather positively, rather negatively, or very negatively: Russian President Vladimir Putin

Answers depending on the language spoken in the family



Figure 4
Do you personally support the various sanctions imposed by Western countries against Russia?

Answers depending on the language spoken in the family. All figures in %

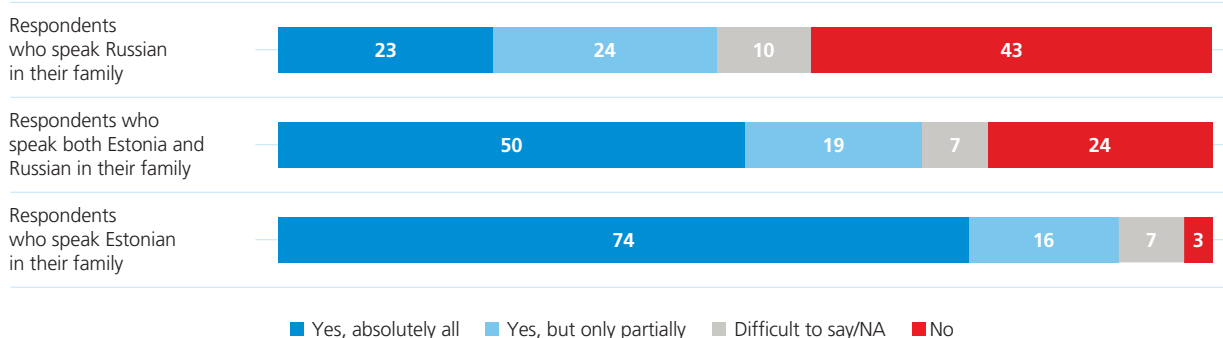
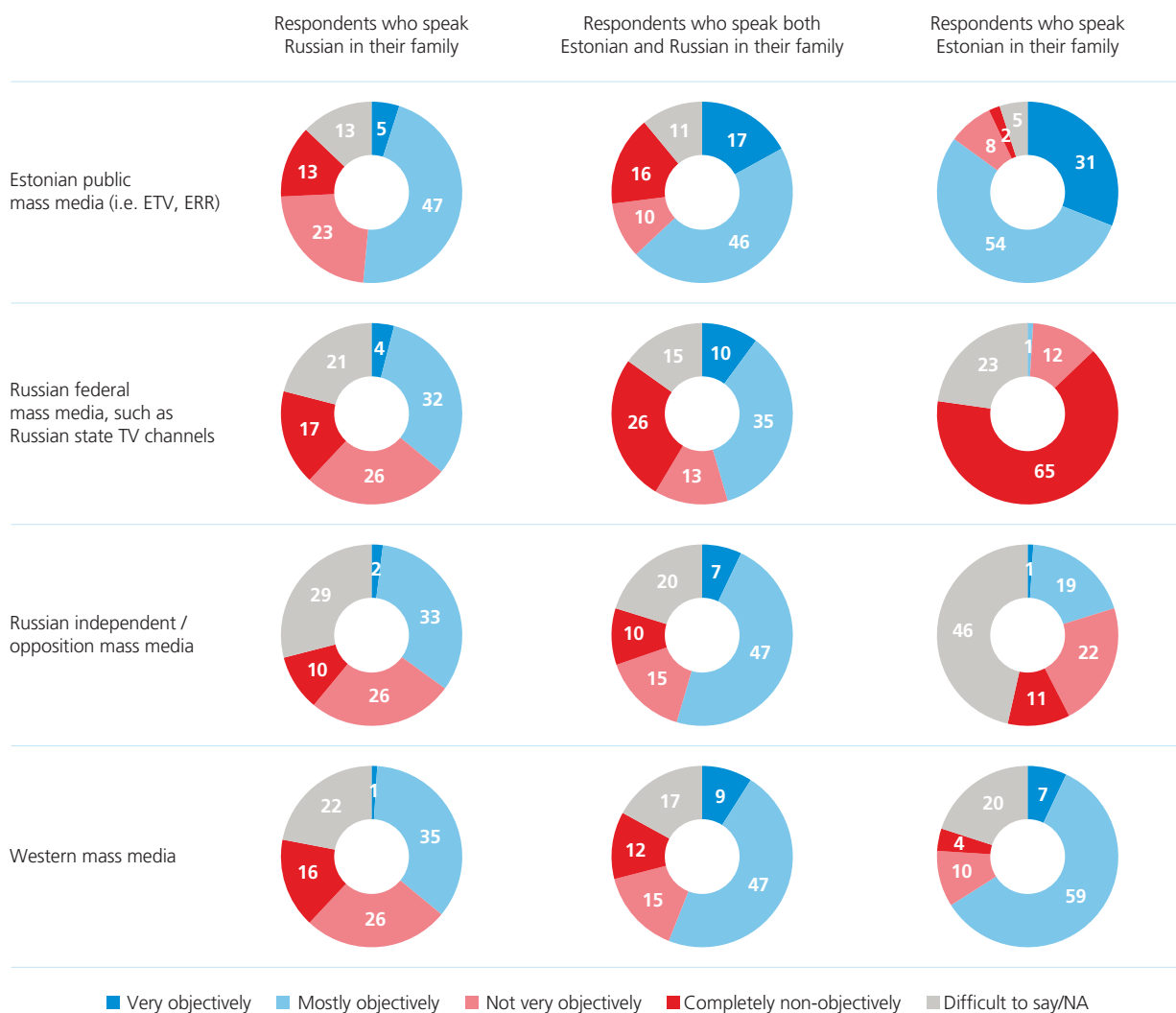


Figure 5
How would you assess how objectively such media is covering of what is happening in Ukraine?
 Answers depending on the language spoken in the family. All figures in %



■ Very objectively
 ■ Mostly objectively
 ■ Not very objectively
 ■ Completely non-objectively
 ■ Difficult to say/NA

Figure 6
Various statements have been made in society regarding the Russian invasion of Ukraine and the course of these events
 Answers depending on the language spoken in the family

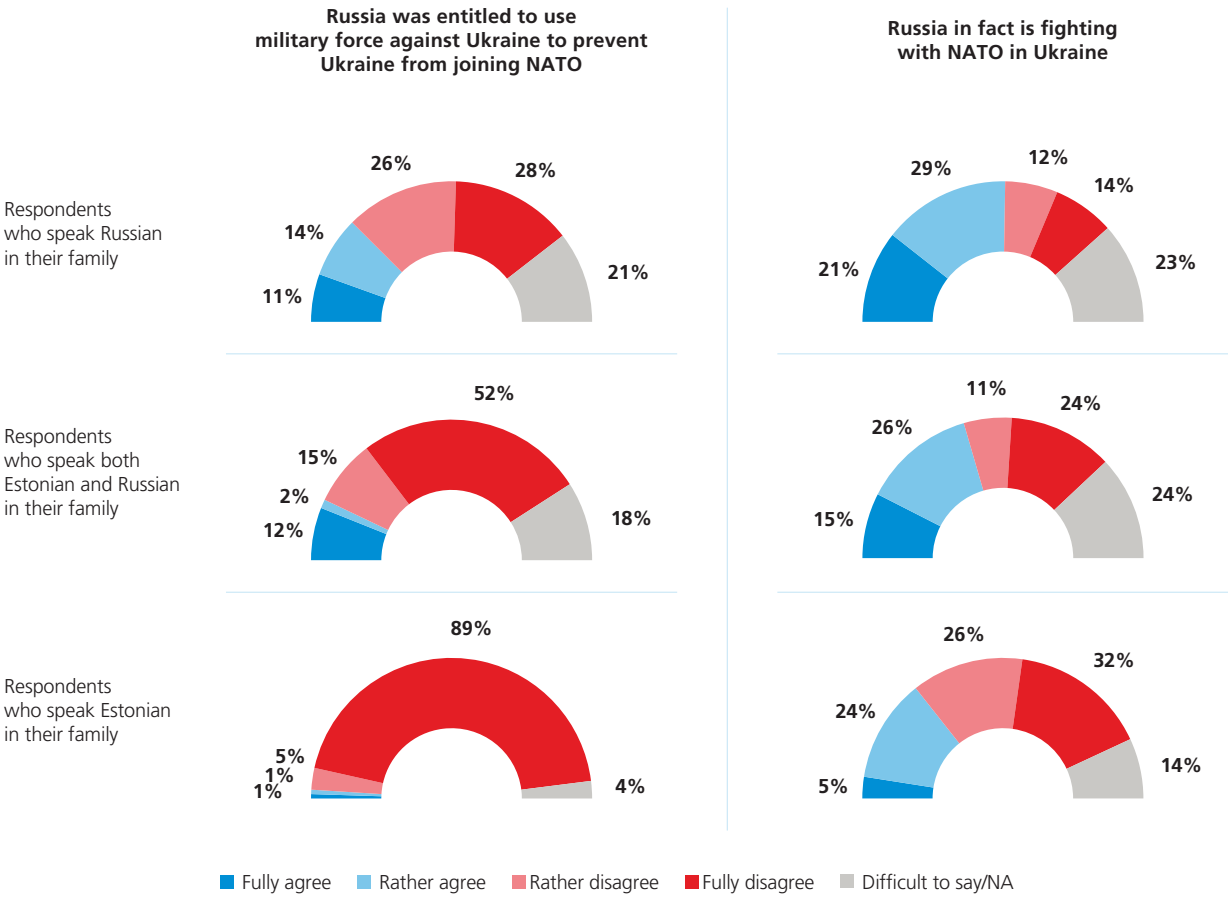
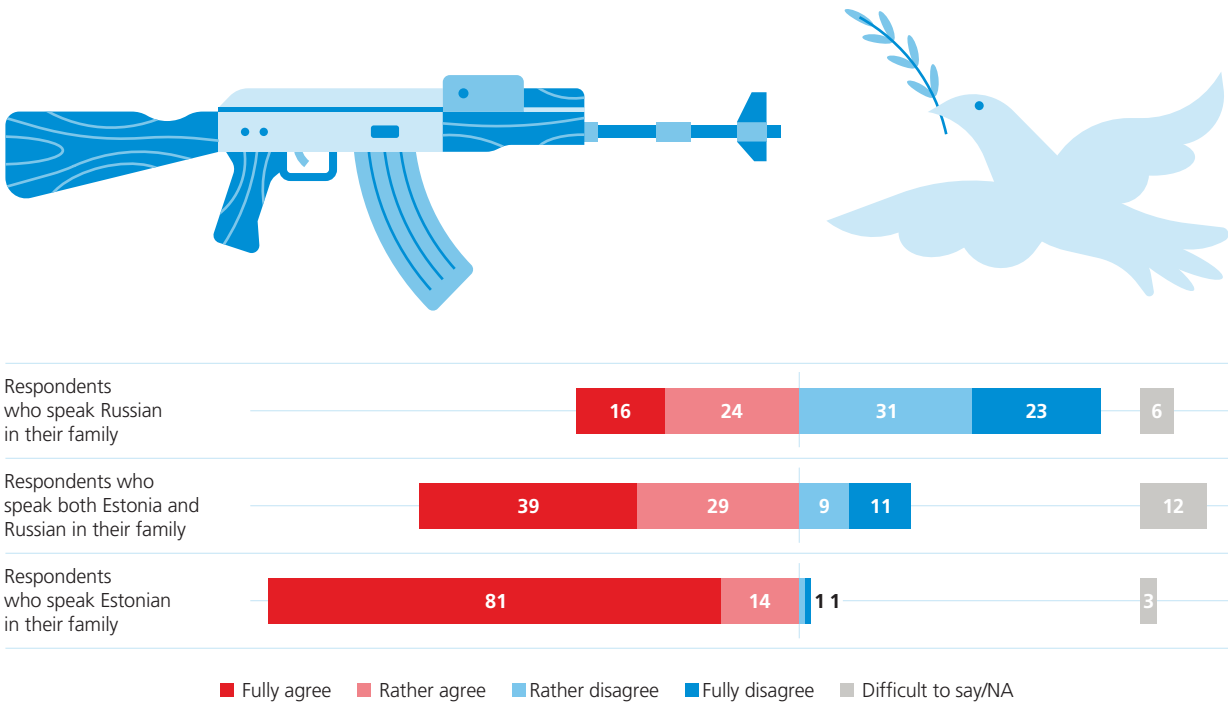


Figure 7
In the following, I will ask you to assess various statements that have been made in the mass media. To what extent do you agree or disagree with the following statements: Russia is a threat to peace and security in Europe
 Answers depending on the language spoken in the family. All figures in %



2

LOOKING TOWARDS UKRAINE: CAUTIOUS SOLIDARITY

The relationship between Russians and Ukrainians even before the war was not easy. On the one hand the two societies are very close. There are many mixed marriages – about 30%, according to the data. But there has always been a patrimonial approach by Russia towards Ukraine. Relations were too close, the Ukrainians might say. As one anecdote puts it, if a Russian offers to share something with a Ukrainian “like a brother,” the Ukrainian should say no and insist instead on a fair 50-50 share. But even this uneven brotherhood changed after 2014 with the annexation of Crimea, the subsequent conflicts in and around Ukraine, and now the military aggression of Russia against Ukraine.

When asked with which of the two belligerents they sympathize with, half of the Russian-speaking majority refuses to take a side, while 28% are on the side of Ukraine and 17% on the side of Russia. In comparison, 80% of the Estonians stand with Ukraine (figure 8) and 89% believe that Russia is responsible for the outbreak of the war. For the Russian-speaking minority the latter question poses a challenge: About one third see Russia as the culprit, 20% the US, 9% Ukraine, and 6% NATO. One fifth prefers the answer “difficult to say” (figure 9).

Accordingly, the Russian-speaking minority is cautious about the prospect of the West arming Ukraine to the extent that Kyiv could defeat Russia and liberate all the territory it occupied. One third support that option. But 55% disagree to a varying extent. Again, for Estonians the answer is easy – 89% fully agree with supporting Ukraine militarily to defeat Russia (figure 10). The Russian speakers have sympathies towards Ukraine, as will be shown with regard to refugees. But to support the defeat of Russia itself seems to be too big of a burden for their Russian identity. This becomes especially clear when looking at North-Eastern Estonia with its main city of Narva, where a majority of the Russian speakers live. There, 73% disagree with the prospect of arming Ukraine (figure 11).

When asked about Estonia taking in Ukrainian refugees, Estonian society in general is welcoming. The Estonians agree with 94% for and only 3% against, while the Russian-speaking minority is slightly less enthusiastic, with 72% in favor and 23% opposed (figure 12). When it comes to Russian citizens fleeing their country because of persecution, hardship, or avoiding mobilization, the Russian-speaking minority is less forthcoming: 53% would accept them, but 38% would

Figure 8
Regarding Russia's so-called military operation against Ukraine, which of the belligerents do you sympathise with?
Answers depending on the language spoken in the family

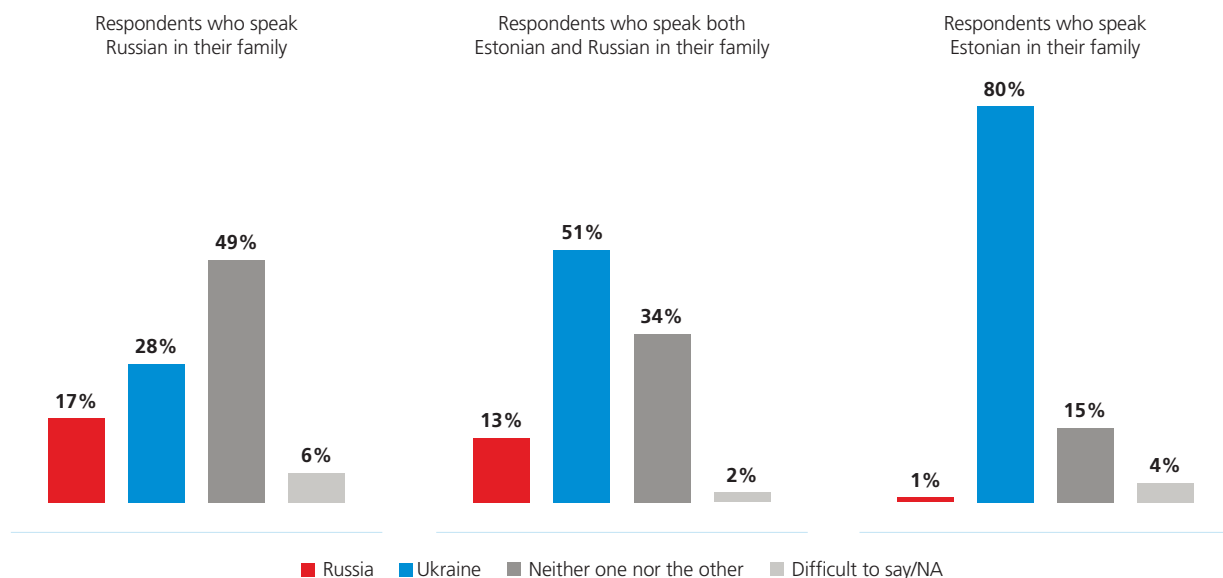


Figure 9
Who do you think is primarily responsible for the outbreak of hostilities in Ukraine?
 Answers depending on the language spoken in the family. All figures in %



Figure 10
To what extent do you agree or disagree with following statements: Western countries should arm Ukraine to the extent that it is able to defeat Russia completely and liberate all its territory (including Crimea)
 Answers depending on the language spoken in the family. All figures in %

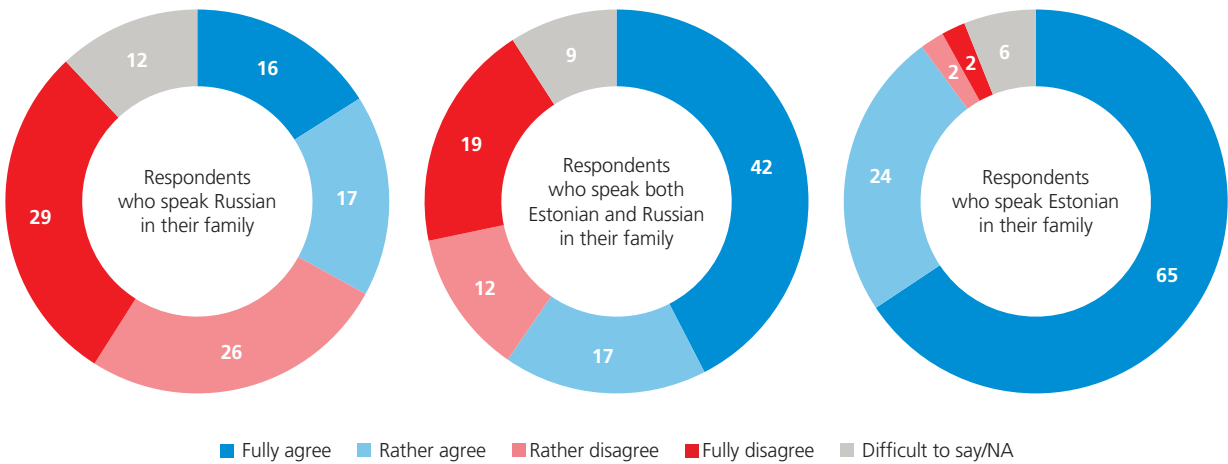
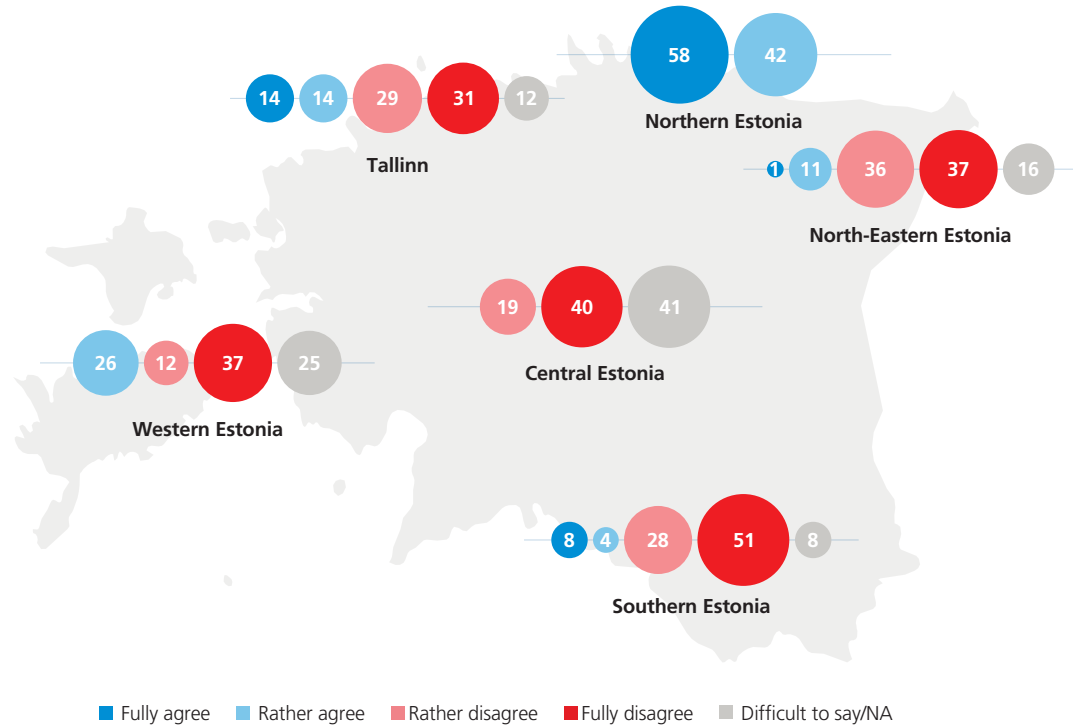


Figure 11
To what extent do you agree or disagree with following statements: Western countries should arm Ukraine to the extent that it is able to defeat Russia completely and liberate all its territory (including Crimea)
 Answers depending on who speaks Russian in the family. All figures in %



not accept any refugees at all from Russia. The Estonians are even less welcoming in this case: 32% would accommodate them, but 61% are opposed (figure 13).

When looking at Russia’s arguments justifying the war, the difference between the Russian-speaking minority and the Estonians could not be bigger. Whereas 61% of the Russian-speaking minority believe that Russians and Ukrainians are one nation, 83% of the Estonians oppose that argument. Almost 40% of the Russian-speaking minority believe that Western countries and Ukraine threaten Russia’s security,

while 87% of the Estonians disagree. And whereas 52% of the Russian-speaking minority do not agree with the claim that Ukraine is a territory taken from Russia, 93% of the Estonians disagree with this statement (figure 14).

The survey shows a cautious solidarity with Ukraine on the part of the Russian-speaking minority. But only to a certain extent, which does not include any defeat of Russia, at least not for the vast majority of the Russian speakers. And it also seems difficult for them to re-adjust to a new situation, where the sympathy in general lies with Ukraine and not with Russia.

Figure 12
A large number of Ukrainians have fled to some European Union countries. What do you think Estonia should do about Ukrainian refugees?
 Answers depending on the language spoken in the family

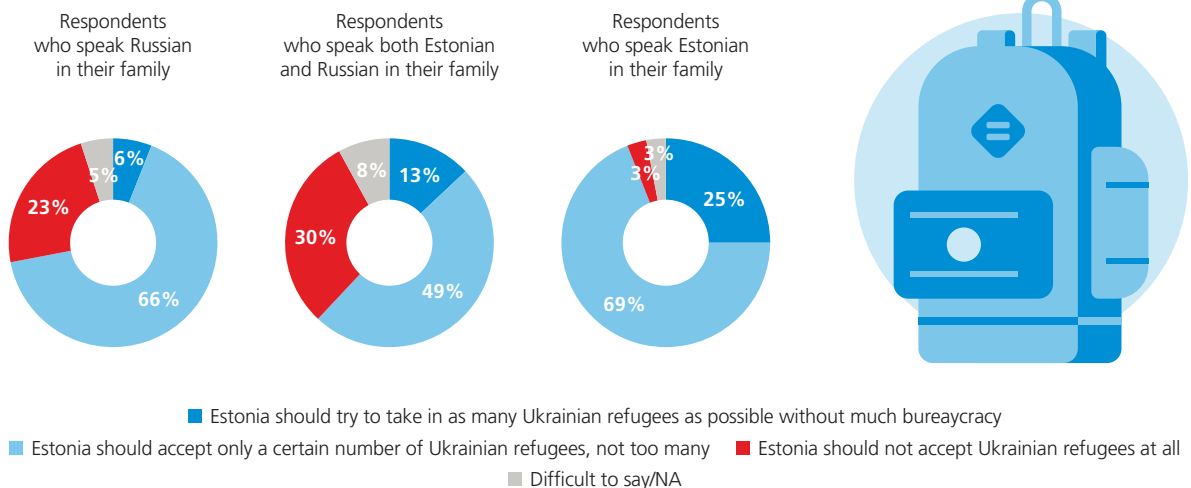


Figure 13
A large number of Russia citizens are currently fleeing to other countries in order not to get mobilized and to avoid different persecutions and hardships. What do you think Estonia should do about Russian refugees?
 Answers depending on the language spoken in the family

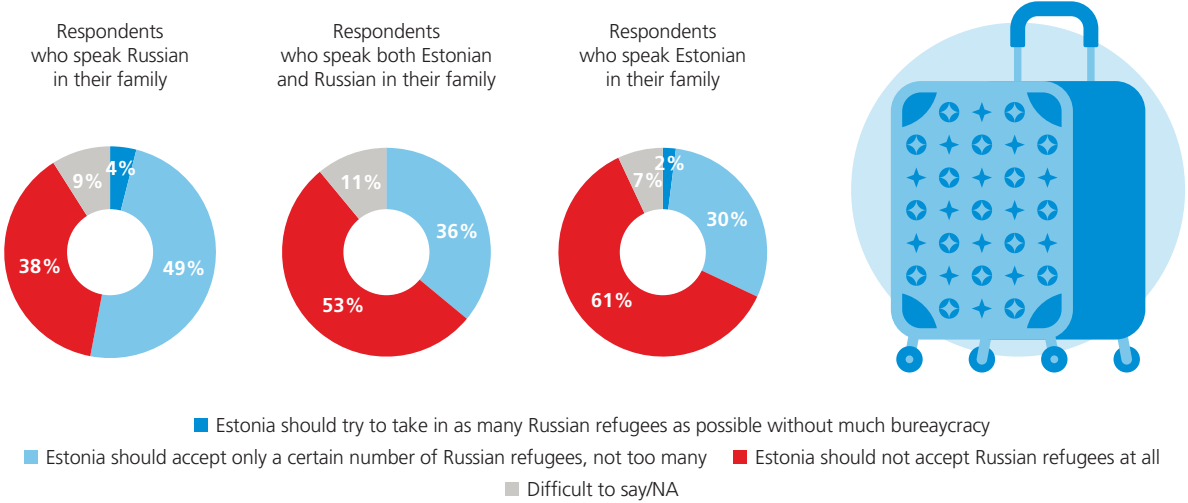
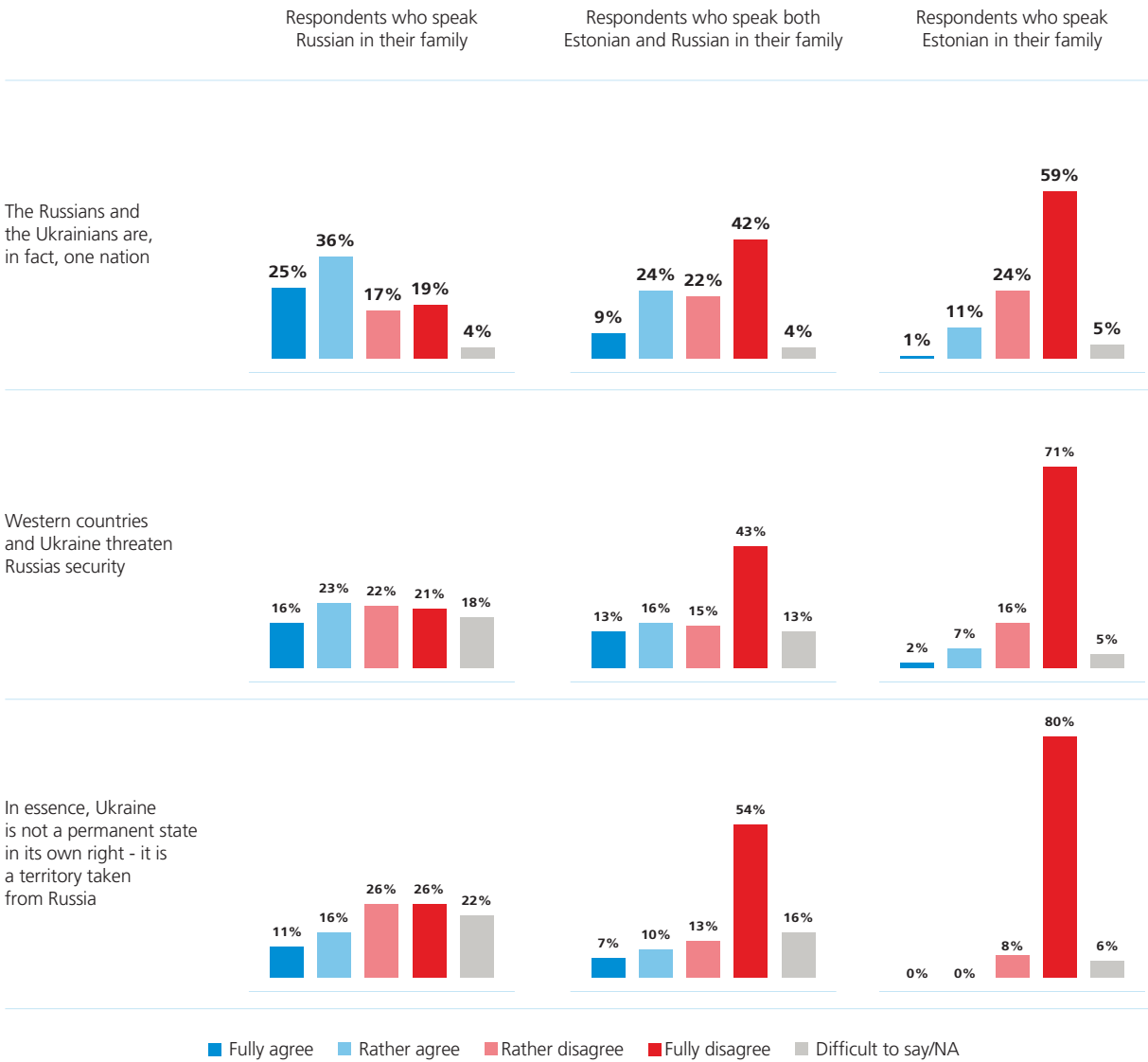


Figure 14
Various statements have been made in society regarding the Russian invasion of Ukraine and the course of these events.
 Answers depending on the language spoken in the family



3

LOOKING TOWARDS THE WEST: STILL SUSPICIOUS

Russia has always maintained a certain wariness towards the West, skeptical of its motives in working with Russia. Did the West genuinely believe in cooperation or was it always based on egoistic motives to keep Russia down and the West up? Since Peter I opened the window towards the West in the 18th century there have been opposing camps in Petersburg and Moscow: those who saw the West as the sine qua non for modernization and those who felt that Russia needs its own modernization, based on its own possibilities and needs. The Russian-speaking minority is even more torn, because they face an additional element in the equation – Estonia. Many Russians do not feel themselves as part of a minority but rather as equal citizens of the Baltic country, especially those who were born in Estonia.

That might explain why one third of the Russian speaking-minority feel that Estonia might lose its sovereignty to Brussels,

to the EU bureaucracy. Another 43% think this is possible, but unlikely (figure 15). With such fears in mind, almost 40% of the Russian-speaking minority think that Estonia should work neither with the EU nor with Russia to maintain the values of Estonia (40% support cooperation with the EU, only 9% with Russia). Concerning doubts about the EU, the Estonians have a similar opinion, with 37% agreeing that Estonia should work neither with the EU nor Russia (figure 16).

The most important ally of Estonia for both the Estonians and the Russian speakers is Finland, followed by the country's neighbors Latvia and Lithuania. The Russian-speaking minority does not favor the US or the UK (figure 17). The Estonians disagree, and are grateful especially to London as responsible for the Enhanced Forward Presence of NATO in Estonia. The Russian-speaking minority see as allies Germany (38%) and Sweden (36%).

Figure 15
In your opinion, what is the possibility that such events can happen in Estonia and in the world in the future: Total loss of Estonia's sovereignty and getting under Brussels control
 Answers depending on the language spoken in the family

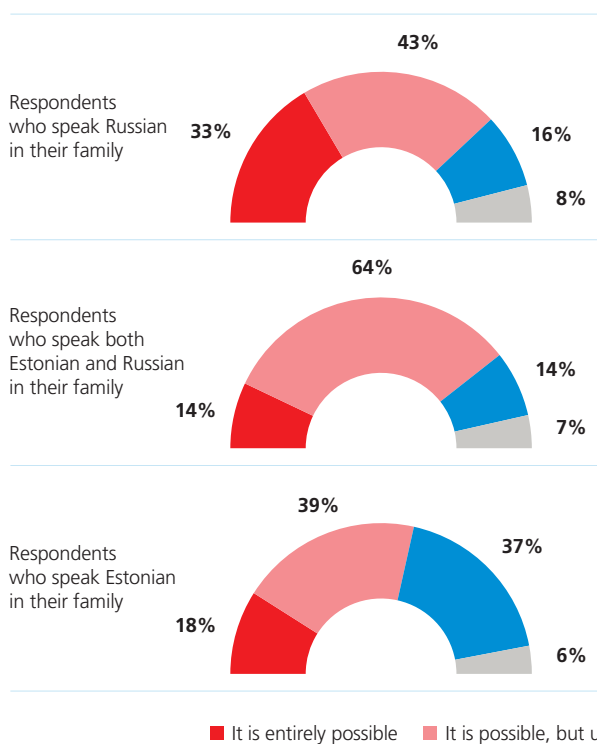


Figure 16
With whom should Estonia more cooperate to achieve the following?
 Answers depending on the language spoken in the family. All figures in %

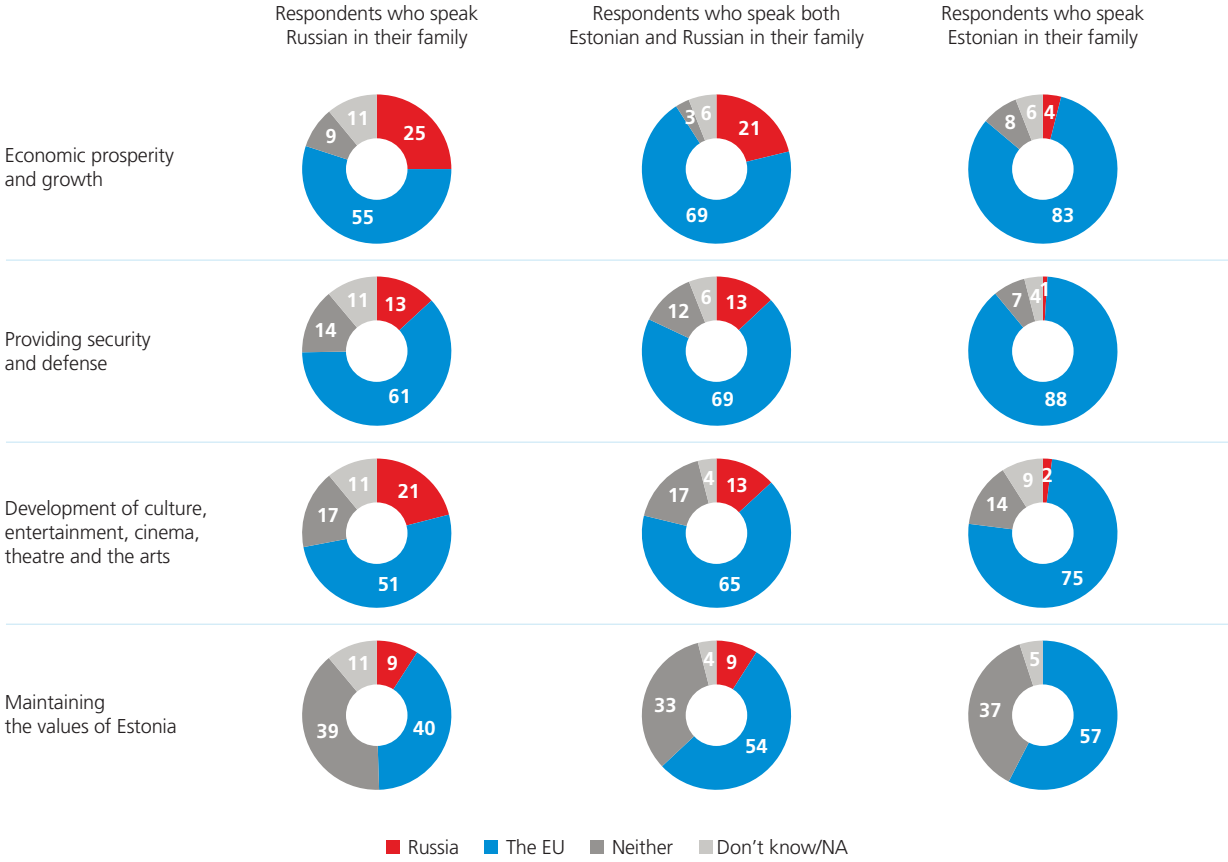


Figure 17
Which of the following countries do you consider to be Estonia's most important allies?
 Answers depending on the language spoken in the family. All figures in %

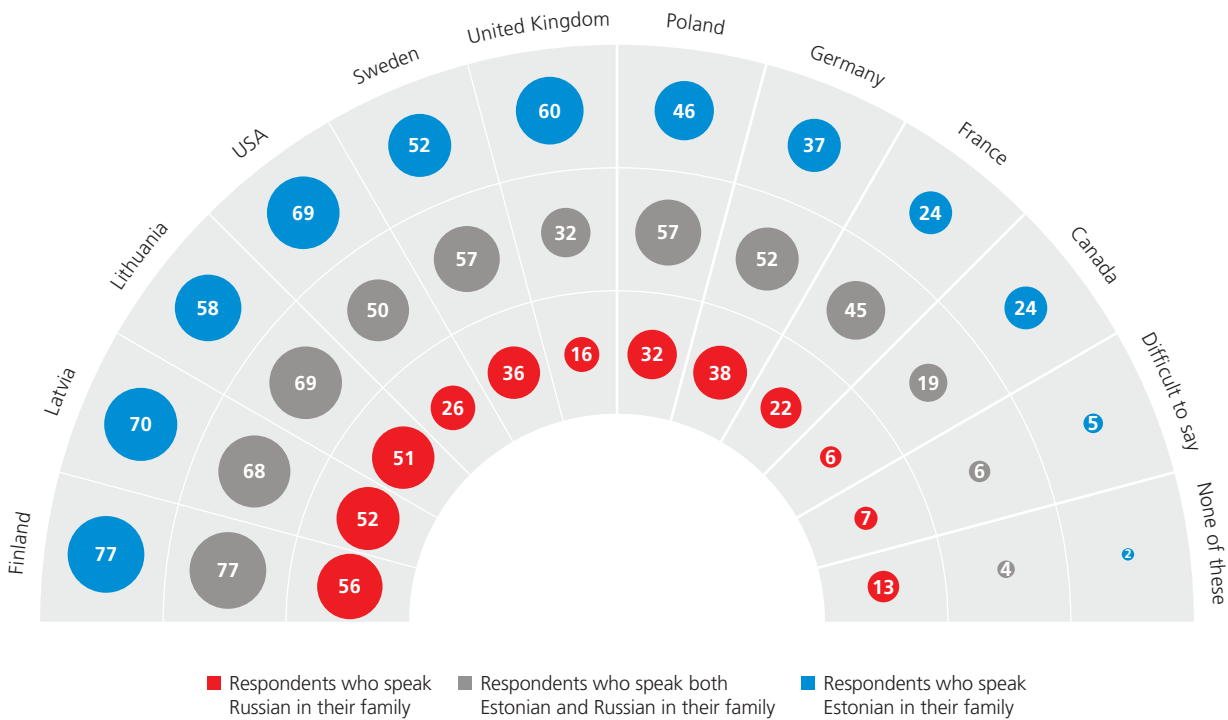
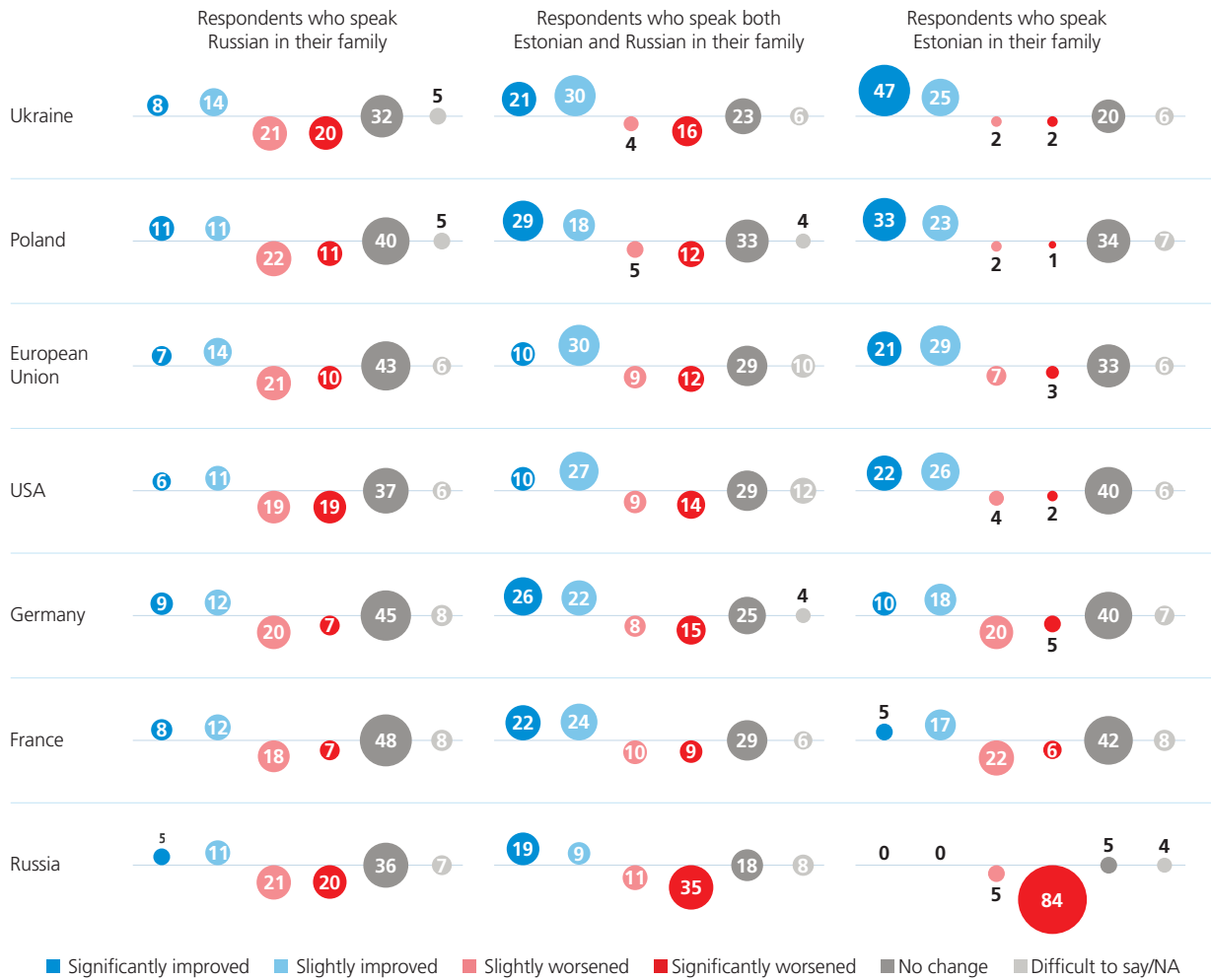


Figure 18
In overall, how has your opinion of these countries changed since the Russian invasion of Ukraine?
 Answers depending on the language spoken in the family. All figures in %



When it comes to changing attitudes towards different countries after the war, the views of the Russian-speaking minority have become more negative in all cases. Interestingly enough, the countries for which the most opinions have become more negative are Ukraine and Russia (both 41%), more than the US (38%) or Poland (33%), which are both countries usually seen as having a negative stance towards Russia. The view towards Germany and France has also become more negative for 27% and 25% of respondents, and towards the EU for 21%. For the majority of Estonians the view of Ukraine has improved by 72%, while the view of Russia has worsened by 89% (figure 18).

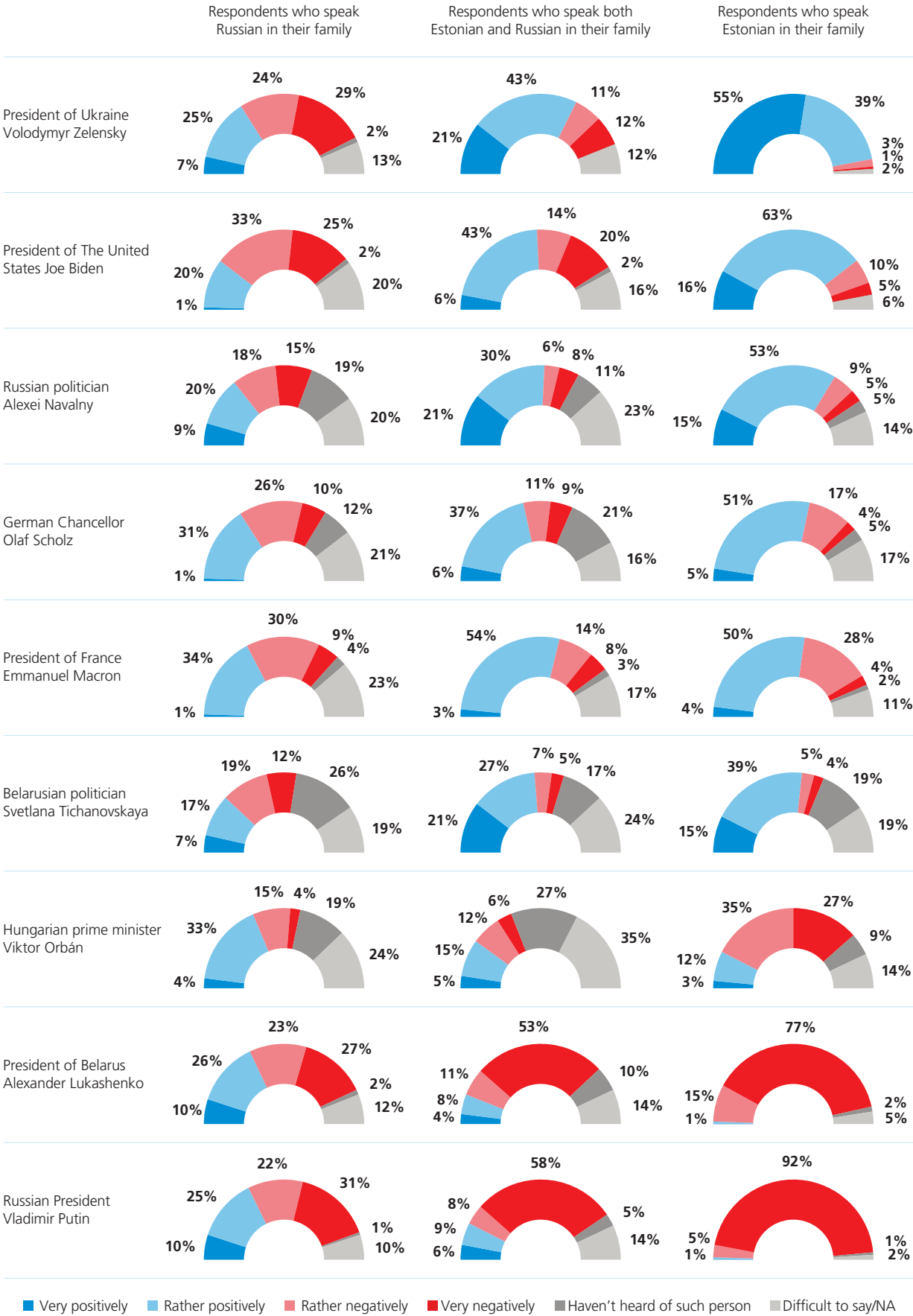
These numbers correspond with the ratings of major political leaders. The Ukrainian president Volodymyr Zelensky is seen positively by 94% of Estonians, followed by US president Joe Biden (79%). The Russian-speaking minority favors Hungarian prime minister Viktor Orban (37%) and Belarusian president Alexander Lukashenko (36%). The Russian president Vladimir Putin and French president Emmanuel Macron are both rated positively by 35% of Russian speakers, but negatively by greater numbers (Putin 53%, Macron 39%). The Russian-speaking minority has no clear international political champion (figure 19).

Germany’s special relations with Russia seem to be over, also in the opinion of Russian speakers in Estonia. Germany is not seen as a special ally, nor has the Russian-speaking minority seen any improvement in the relationship since the beginning of the war. And German chancellor Olaf Scholz is seen more negatively than positively.



Figure 19
Please tell me how you rate each of them: do you rate this person's performance very positively, rather positively, rather negatively, or very negatively?

Answers depending on the language spoken in the family. All figures in %



4

LOOKING TOWARDS ESTONIA: DIFFICULT RELATIONSHIP

The Russian war against Ukraine has had quite an impact on Estonian society. The Russian-speaking minority has always been a challenge for the Estonians, because they feel that the minority should have left Estonia right after the country regained independence in 1991. But the minority stayed – partly because they do not feel themselves as a minority, and partly because they no longer view themselves as Russians but rather as Baltic Russians who do not want to go back. At the same time, they feel cornered and not welcomed. The Russian war against Ukraine has again brought their difficult

relationship with the Estonian society up to the forefront of public discussion.

Over half of the Russian-speaking minority and the Estonians agree that serious ethnic conflicts between Estonians and Russian speakers in Estonia are possible, but unlikely. Almost one quarter of the Estonians think this is entirely possible, while 14% of the Russian speaking minority supports that view (figure 20). Interestingly, 57% of the Estonians think that the attitude in the country towards the Russian-speak-

Figure 20
In your opinion, what is the possibility that such events can happen in Estonia and in the world in the future: Serious ethnic conflicts between Estonians and Russian-speakers living in the Estonia
 Answers depending on the language spoken in the family

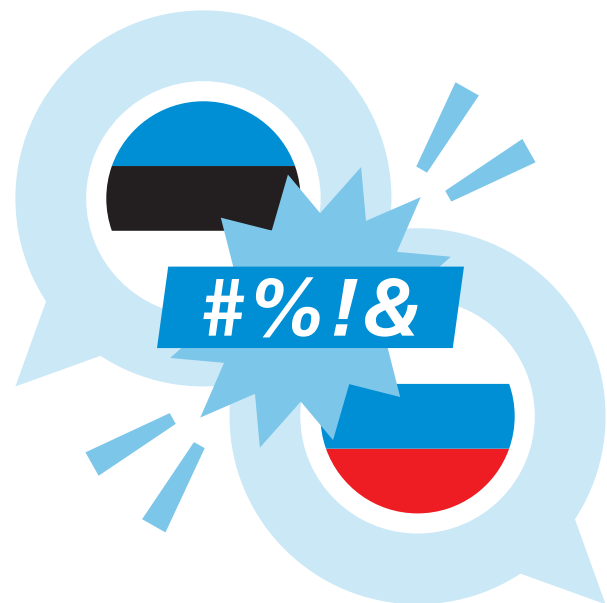
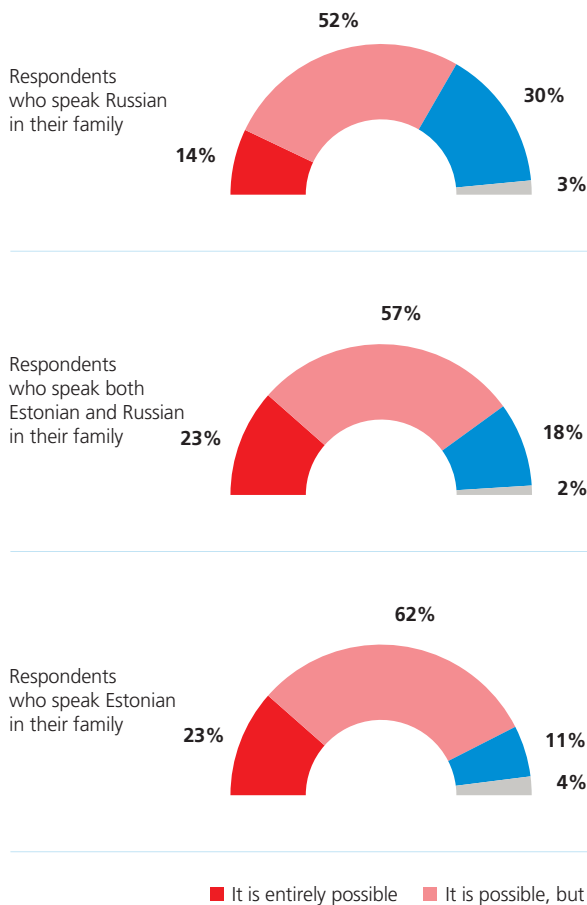
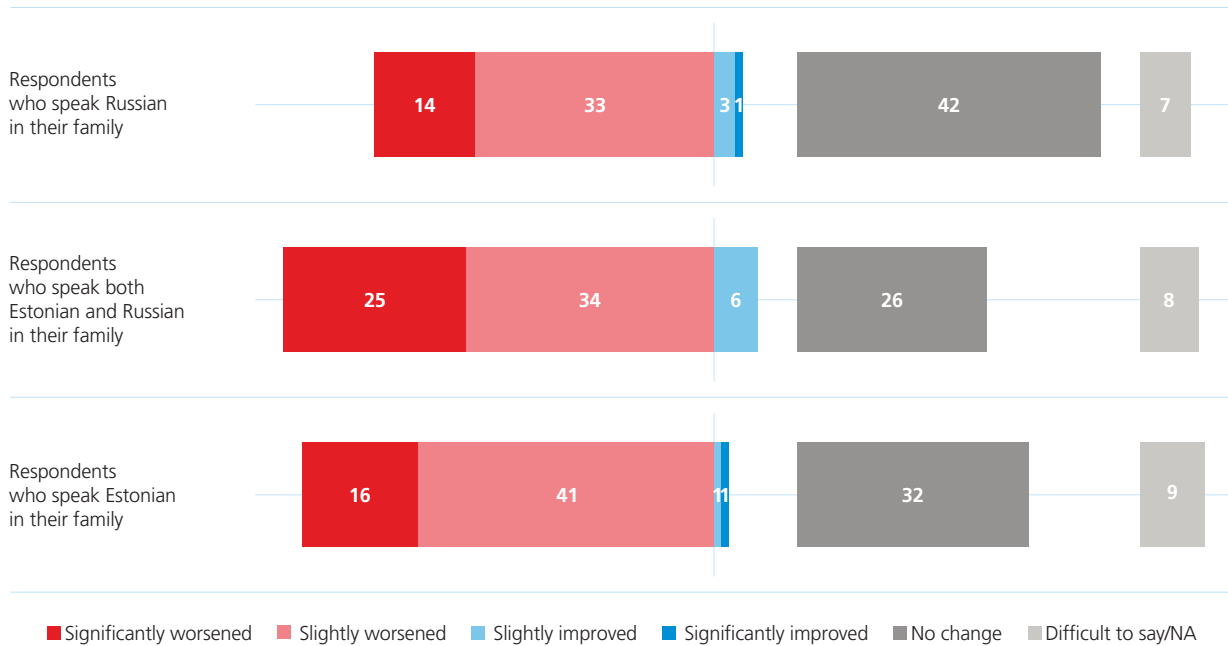


Figure 21
Taking into account your own personal experience and observations, has the attitude of Estonians towards the Russian-speaking population of Estonia changed since the Russian invasion of Ukraine? Has it...
 Answers depending on the language spoken in the family. All figures in %



ing minority has worsened, whereas 47% of the Russian-speaking minority thinks that. 42% of them feel that the attitude has not changed (figure 21).

But 50% of Russian speakers do think that there is discrimination against people who do not know or only have poor knowledge of the Estonian language. Only 16% of the Estonians think this (figure 22). And there are more major differences concerning views towards societal topics. The Russian-speaking minority looks very critically towards the demolition of monuments dedicated to the victory of the Soviet Union in the Second World War: 67% disapprove and only 5% approve, while 57% of the Estonians approve and only 12% disapprove (figure 23).

Over half of the Russian-speaking minority feels that there are not enough political parties or politicians that represent

their interests. 81% of Estonians believe that their own interests are represented by political parties (figure 24). In general, free expression of one’s opinion is possible. Nonetheless, over 50% of the Russian-speaking minority feel that it is difficult to speak freely about Estonian history in the event that their opinion differs from the official one. By the same token, 58% of Russian speakers think that the same difficulties apply when it comes to discussing the Russian military invasion of Ukraine. Estonians see no such problems (figure 25).

One of the core questions the Estonians have for the Russian-speaking minority is that of patriotism and loyalty. Will they support the state in the event of war, possibly against Russia? When asked about their loyalty, 65% of the Russian-speaking minority answered that they are rather or definitely patriots of Estonia, whereas 28% said that they are rather or definitely not (figure 26).

Figure 22
To what extent do you agree or disagree with the following statements: There is discrimination in Estonia against people who do not know or have poor knowledge of the Estonian language
 Answers depending on the language spoken in the family

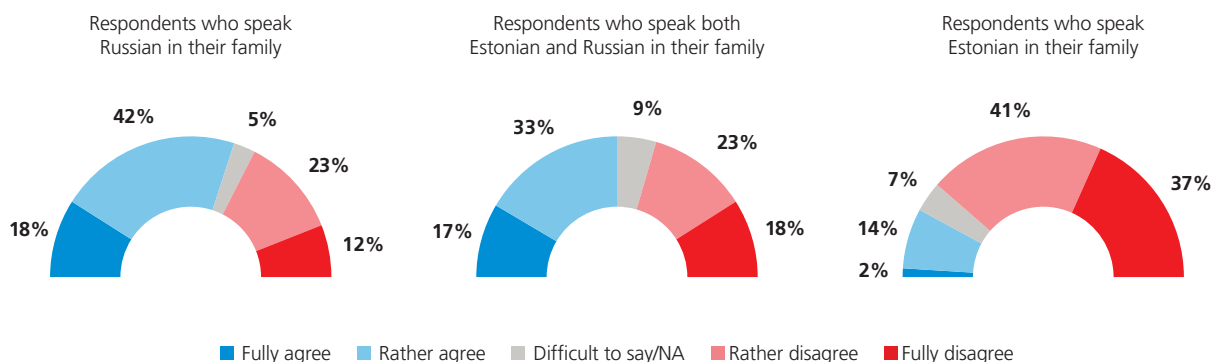


Figure 23

In February 2023, the Estonian Parliament decided that all monuments glorifying the Soviet regime, including those dedicated to the USSR's victory in the Great Patriotic War, should be demolished in Estonia. What is your attitude to this decision?

Answers depending on the language spoken in the family

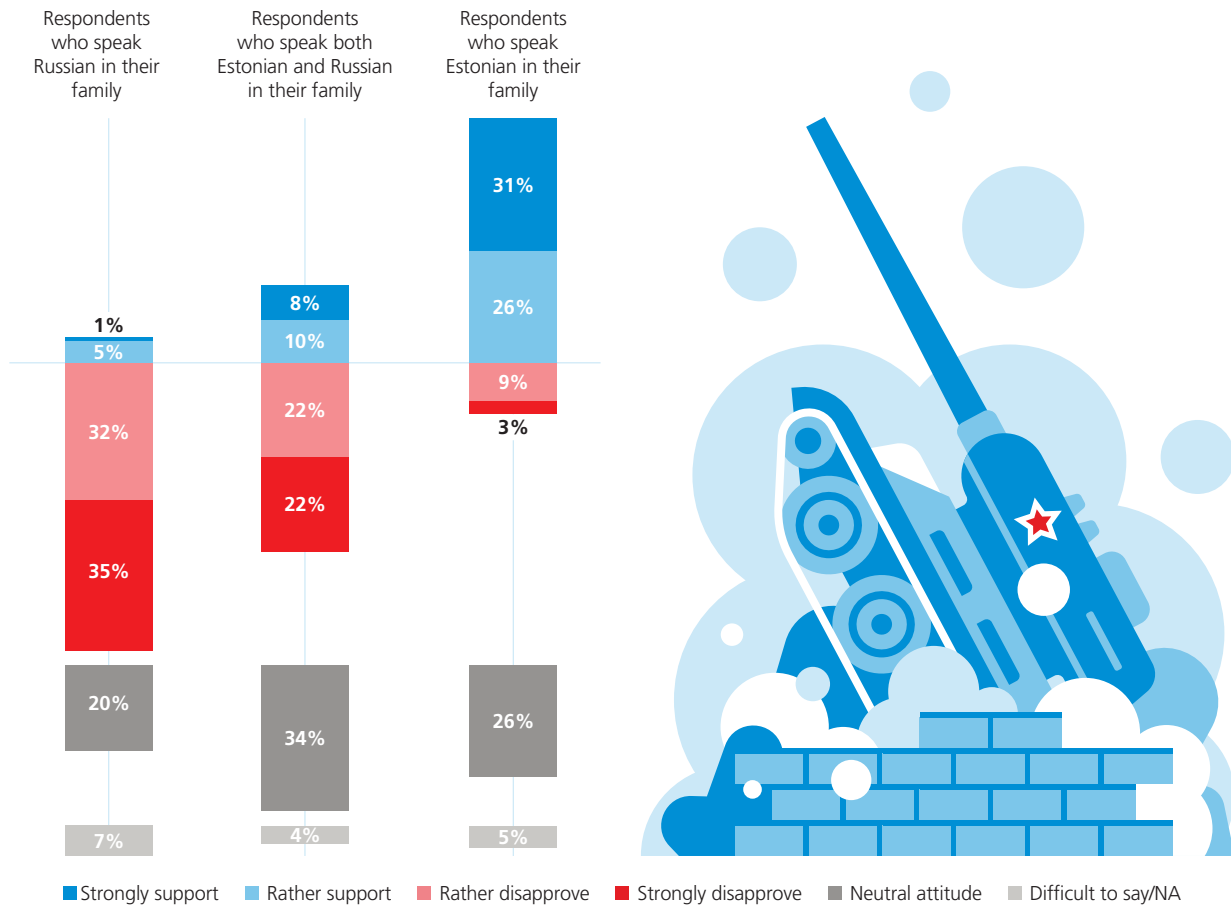


Figure 24

Thinking about the last parliamentary elections, are there any parties and/or politicians in the Parliament that you would say also represent your interests?

Answers depending on the language spoken in the family

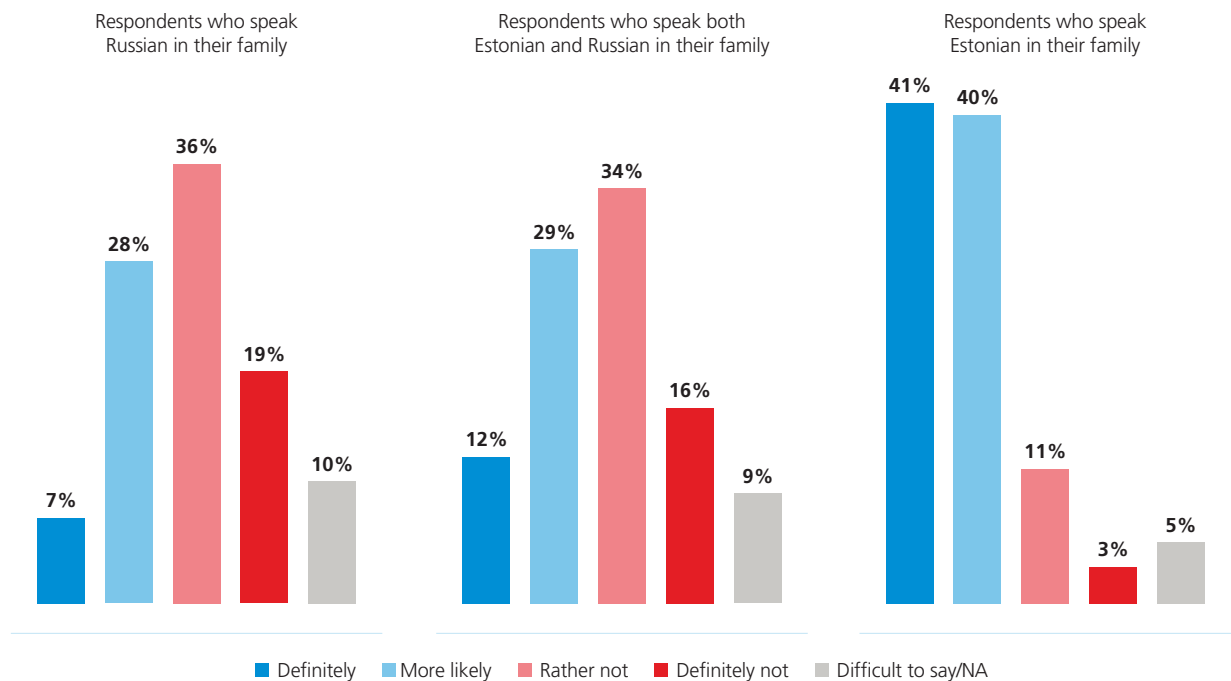


Figure 25

Do you think that people in Estonia can now freely and without fear express their opinions on such issues?
 Answers depending on the language spoken in the family

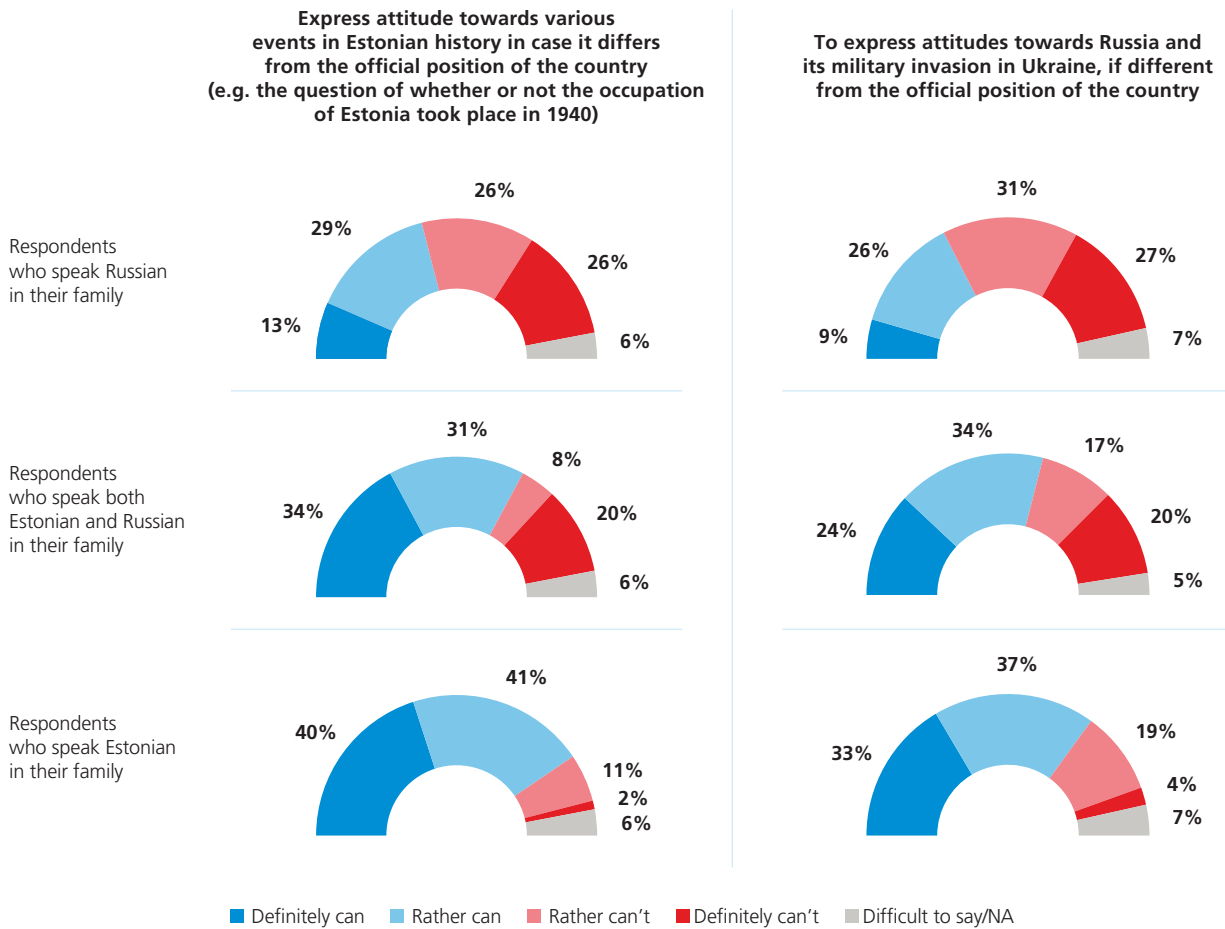
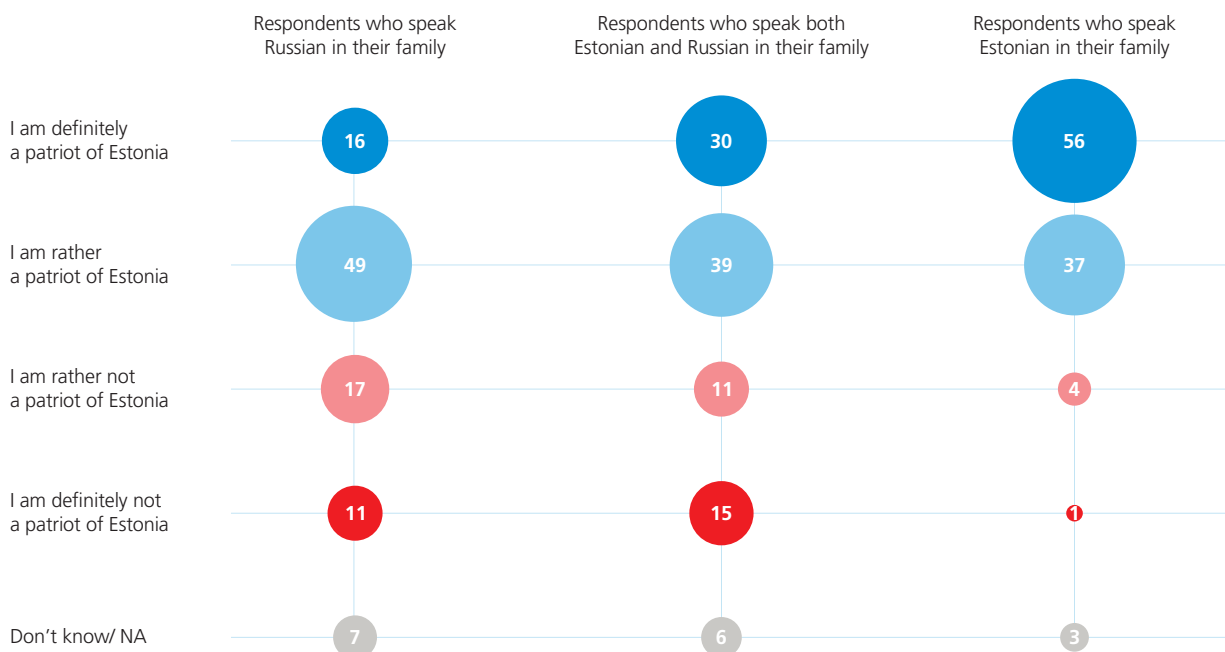


Figure 26

Thinking about the state of Estonia, please tell me to what extent do you consider yourself a patriot of Estonia?
 Answers depending on the language spoken in the family. All figures in %



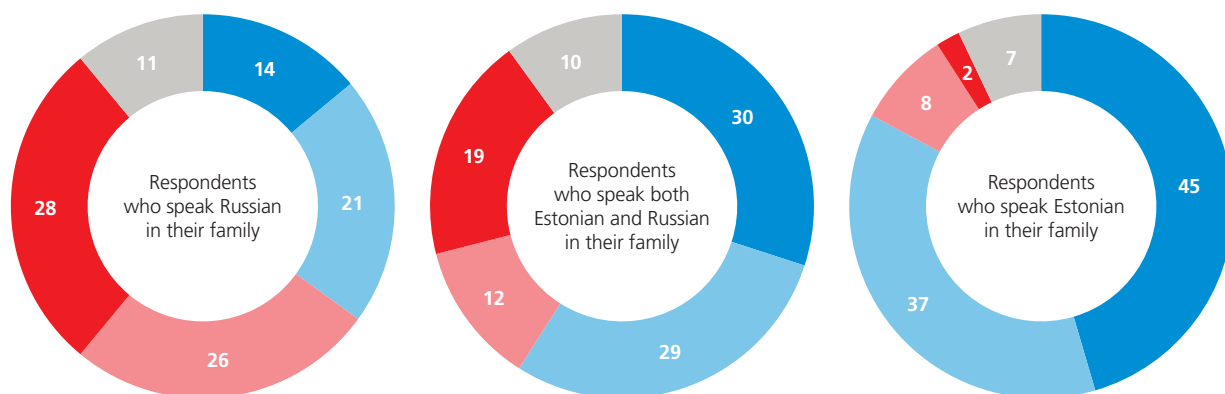
CONCLUSION

It is not surprising that the answers of the opinion poll show that the Russian-speaking minority in Estonia is not monolithic. More than 30 years have past since Estonia regained its independence. The legacy of the Soviet Union is increasingly seen as a thing of the past. Estonia has made amazing progress in all directions, including EU and NATO membership. Russia chose a different path, which in 2022 lead to a military

aggression against Ukraine. The Russian speaking minority observed its neighbor's actions from a close distance and drew its own conclusions.

As pointed out in this analysis, there remains a group among the Russian speakers that exhibits a disturbing closeness to Russian propaganda and disinformation. They hold a more

Figure 27
To what extent do you agree or disagree with following statements: European Union and NATO countries should further support Ukraine militarily, even if Russia threatens to use nuclear weapons as a result
 Answers depending on the language spoken in the family. All figures in %



Answers depending on who speaks Russian in the family. All figures in %

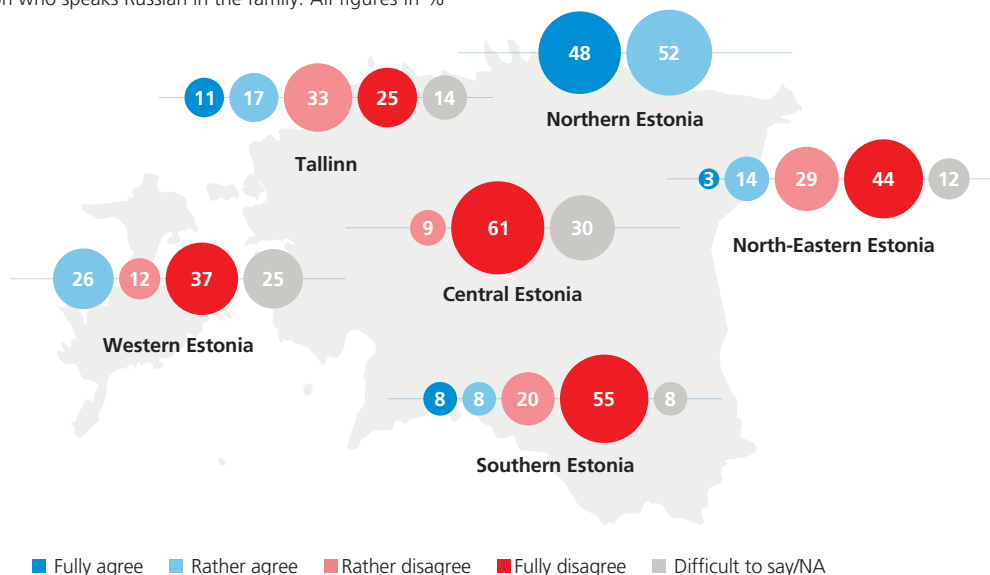
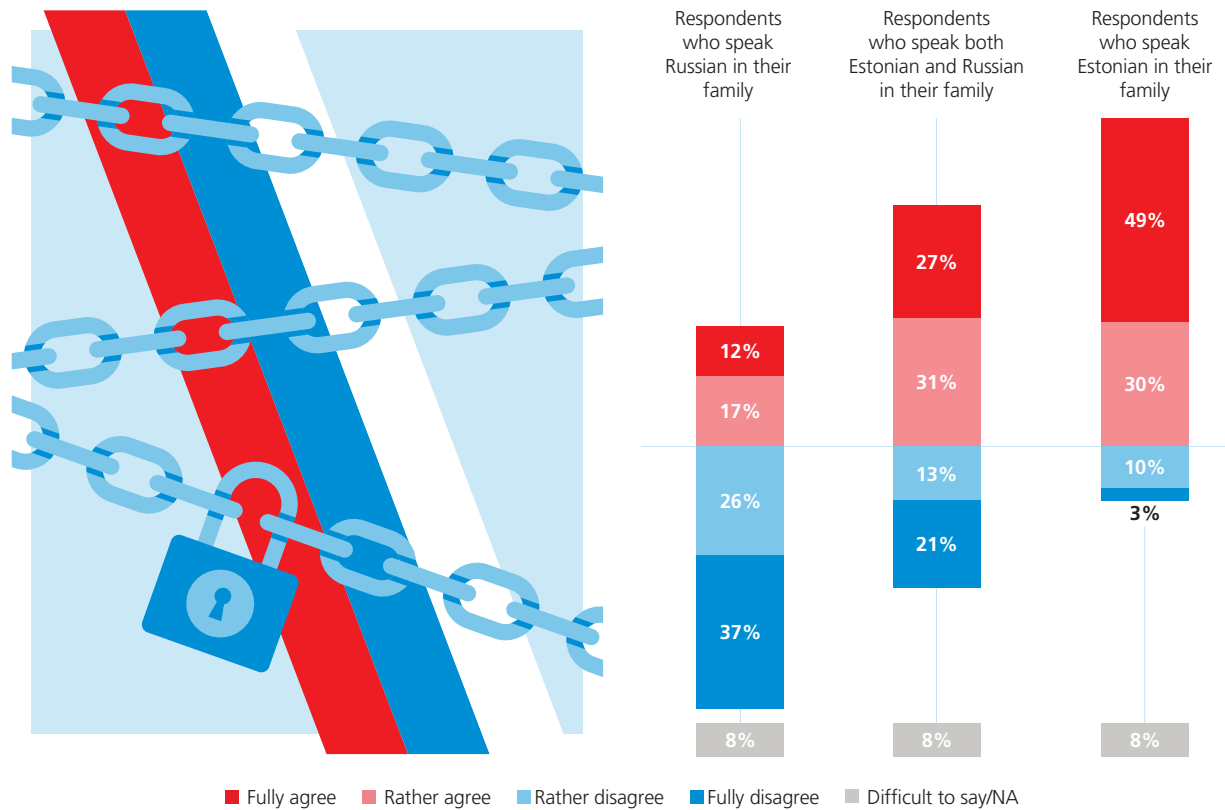


Figure 28

To what extent do you agree or disagree with following statements: More severe economic sanctions should be imposed against Russia than current ones, even if this would mean a lower standard of living in Estonia

Answers depending on the language spoken in the family



positive attitude towards Russia compared to the Estonian-speaking majority. Ukraine is still partly viewed not a properly independent state or as merely a puppet of the US. A majority of Russian speakers do not want to side with Ukraine in the war, yet feel at the same time that siding with Russia's position does not feel right. Old clichés, such as the US or NATO as the eternal enemy, can be seen in a couple of answers.

But a fair number of the Russian speakers do criticize Russia, its threat to Europe, its disinformation, and its current president. Members of this group see Russia as being responsible for the war in Ukraine. They see themselves as Estonian patriots and see the value of friendly neighboring states like Finland, Latvia, and Lithuania. Their perception of Russia has worsened since the beginning of the war.

And then there are those who try to bridge the seemingly unbearable contradictions of being Russian in Estonia by finding compromises as in suggesting cooperation with both the West and Russia. At the same time, a majority do not feel that there is a favorable climate for open discussions on historical and political disputed topics. It cannot be excluded that this perception may have led some respondents to adjust their answers to certain questions to what they considered more acceptable responses.

There are still major differences between the Estonian-speaking majority and the Russian-speaking minority. 54% of the

Russian minority does not want to further support Ukraine militarily if this could lead to the current war spiraling into a conflict with nuclear weapons (nonetheless, 35% still favor support). For the Estonians, 82% still endorse support in such a case, with only 10% disagreeing. Interesting are different answers in the North-Eastern part of Estonia with the main city of Narva, which is 95% Russian-speaking in comparison to the average answers. Here 73% of the Russian-speaking minority are opposed (figure 27).

A similar contrast can be seen if one looks at the answers to the question concerning support for sanctions even if it means a lower standard of living. 63% of the Russian speakers oppose sanctions in this case, whereas the Estonian majority supports sanctions, at well over 79% (figure 28).

The Russian war against Ukraine is a great challenge for the Russian-speaking minority in Estonia. Not only do they have to come to terms with their position towards the war, they are also more strongly affected by any potential backlash against Russia, such as the destruction of Soviet war memorials at home in Estonia. And finally, they have to accept that the Russian Federation is moving away from Europe in particular and the West in general – for the first time since the 18th century.

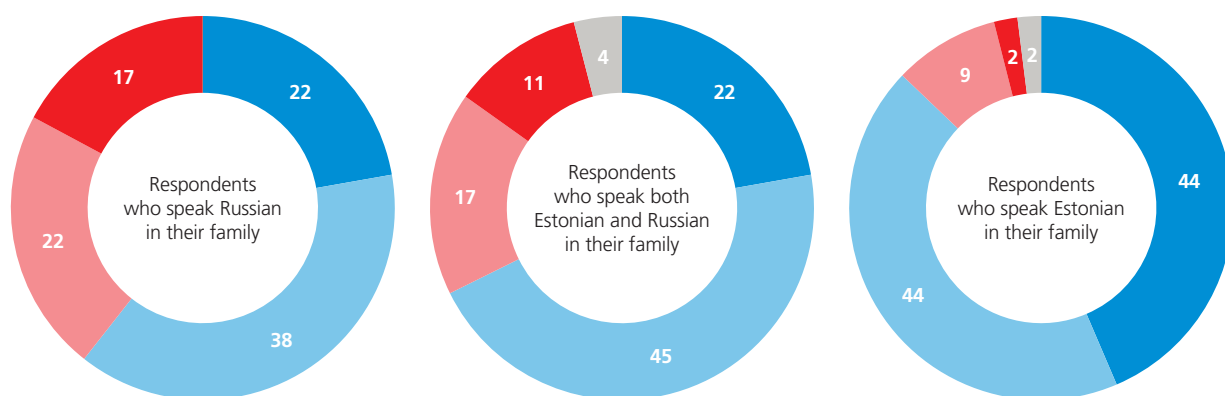
One can either deal with the problem or ignore it. The survey revealed that almost 39% of Russian speakers are not or rather are no longer interested in what is happening in Ukraine.

An exception is the North-Eastern part with Narva. In contrast, only 11% of the Estonians are not interested (figure 29).

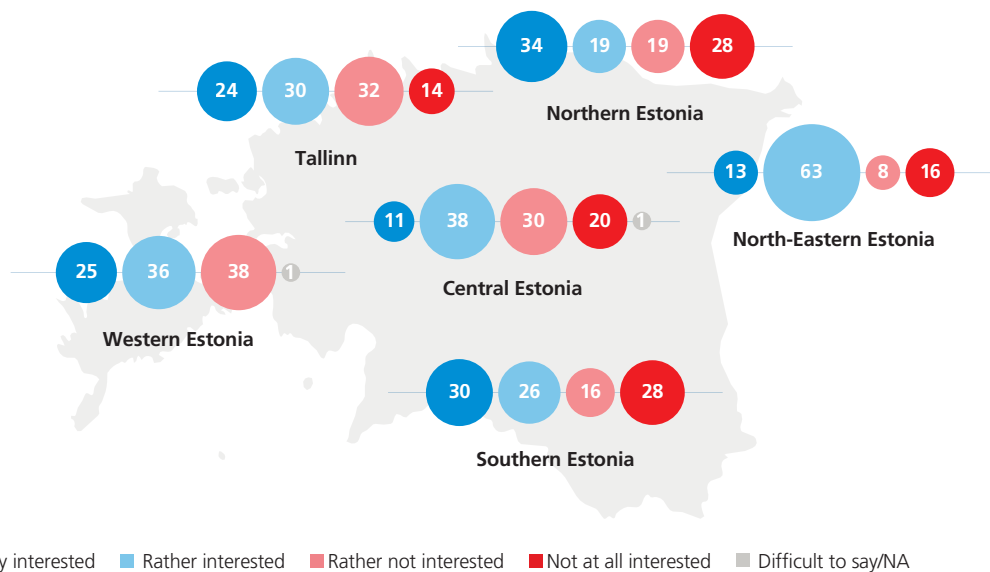
In general, the Estonian government has to come up with answers to the following questions: How to engage those

parts of the society that do not want to be engaged? Is it up to the Estonian state to offer bridge-building measures, to bring the Russian-speaking minority more inclusively into the rest of the country? Or are the two parts of the society each simply waiting for the other side to move first?

Figure 29
To what extent are you interested in what is happening in Ukraine? Are you...
 Answers depending on the language spoken in the family. All figures in %



Answers depending on who speaks Russian in the family. All figures in %



ABOUT THE AUTHORS

Dr. Reinhard Krumm, born in Hamburg, Germany. From 1991 to 1998 he worked as a journalist in the former Soviet Union, being the Baltic correspondent for Deutsche Presse-Agentur (dpa) in Riga from 1994 to 1996 and serving as the Moscow correspondent of Der Spiegel magazine from 1996 to 1998. He then joined the Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung, directing offices in Central Asia (Tashkent) and in the Russian Federation (Moscow) as well as the Department of Central and Eastern Europe (Berlin). In 2016 he set up and directed the Regional Office for Cooperation and Peace in Europe (Vienna); since November 2021 he has been the head the Regional Office for the Baltic States (Riga).

Tõnis Stamberg is a managing director of Turu-uuringute AS since 2005. He started marketing research area on 1999 and have worked in several positions in Turu-uuringute AS. Tõnis holds a master's degree in Sociology from the University of Tallinn. He has coordinated several international and local research projects for EU institutions and different universities in Estonia.

Irina Strapatsuk was born and is currently employed in Estonia. She has been engaged in the field of sociology since 1988. During the years 1988-2016, she held various positions (ranging from survey manager to data analyst programmer) at the sociological company Saar Poll. Since the autumn of 2016, she has been employed at the company of social and market research, Turu-uuringute AS, where she serves as a project manager and research analyst. She obtained her degree in Russian Philology from Tallinn University.

Graphic design: **Agris Bobrovs**

FES IN THE BALTIC STATES

The vision of FES Baltics is to see the Baltic States as stable democracies with a prosperous economy, a just social system and as important partners in international alliances.

To achieve this, FES promotes dialogue between German, Baltic and global representatives from politics, business, civil society and academia. The aim is to overcome challenges in the areas of geopolitical security, social division, and the reconciliation of economic and social interests.

The FES has been represented in Riga, Tallinn and Vilnius since 1991 and actively supports the political, economic and social transformation processes.

IMPRINT

Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung | Riga office
Dzirnavu iela 37-64 | LV-1010 | Latvia

Responsible:
Dr. Reinhard Krumm | Director of the FES in the Baltic States
Phone: +371 27 330 765
<https://baltic.fes.de>
<https://www.facebook.com/FES.BalticStates>

Orders/Contact:
Uelle.Keskuela@fes.de

Commercial use of all media published by the Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung (FES) is not permitted without the written consent of the FES.

FEELING CORNERED

An Analysis of the Russian-Speaking Minority in Estonia



The military aggression of Russia against Ukraine had an impact on Estonian society. The Russian-speaking minority is trying to cope with the consequences and their lingering effects. Most difficult are three challenges – (1) the war itself against Ukraine, also a former republic of the Soviet Union, (2) the reaction of the Estonian government towards the Russian-speaking minority, and (3) the seeming end of a long relationship between Russia and Europe.



Parts of the Russian-speaking minority still remain suspicious of the West. They are critical of its institutions, such as the EU and NATO. They are worried about different values and view politicians in the West and the East differently than the Estonian majority. Most importantly, they analyze the war in line with the arguments of Moscow – that Ukraine and Russia are one nation and one territory.



There are major differences of opinion regarding Estonian society. Especially controversial are topics such as language, the tearing down of Soviet monuments, and political representation – or lack thereof. The relationship between the Estonian majority and the Russian-speaking minority is seen as problematic. One reason is that the Russian-speaking minority does not feel itself represented well by parties or politicians.

Further information on the topic can be found here:

<https://baltic.fes.de>