



Communication with linguistic minorities in Estonia during the COVID-19 pandemic: Lessons learned



Tallinn University



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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

In a multicultural and multilingual society, such as Estonia, effective intercultural communication is key to the inclusion and social participation of communities with low command of the official language. The COVID-19 health crisis proved that failure to reach all groups in society impacts whole countries negatively. However, little research attention has been paid to intercultural crisis communication to open up new paths and solutions.

The present study was developed in response to this need and is an output of the project "Improving Communication with Migrants for Crisis Preparedness: Lessons Learned From COVID-19", which was carried out by researchers in three countries, namely Estonia, Finland and Latvia. Its aim is to suggest rapid-response crisis communication strategies for delivering information to linguistic minorities during emergencies. Furthermore, due to this study's transnational nature, it seeks to strengthen cooperation between the states of the Baltic Sea Region in dealing with cross-border emergencies and find ways to use the knowledge generated by this cooperation to address problems at the local/state level.

To achieve the main goal, we sought to map obstacles in communicating with non-Estonian-speaking communities within Estonia and identify good practices that could be implemented in the future. To this end, we interviewed representatives from organisations that have played key roles in the communication effort during the pandemic crisis. These stakeholders came from five Estonian sectors, namely government institutions, companies, higher education institutions, NGOs and the media.

The results show that, in addition to the underlying distrust of state institutions among the population, there have been several obstacles that have further aggravated the situation and perhaps put society at risk, including insufficient information available in non-official languages or the slow provision of this information; conflicting or confusing messages from official sources; the viral spread of misinformation in different spheres, such as social media; a lack of cooperation between governments and other stakeholders; and monolithic strategies that are not adapted to the needs and concerns of specific communities, such as the approach adopted during the vaccination campaign.

The identification of these obstacles and the ways in which various stakeholders have addressed them has provided the basis for making some recommendations for future crises.

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Introduction

Although the COVID-19 pandemic resulted in a global crisis, an accounting of its national context is essential to the understanding of the measures taken and the communication challenges that emerged during this health crisis.

MULTILINGUAL LANDSCAPE IN ESTONIA

According to the latest data from the Estonian Department of Statistics, Estonia is currently home to more than 1.3 million inhabitants (2022). In terms of ethnic composition, 69% of these inhabitants are Estonians, with the rest claiming to belong to other ethnicities, of which the largest minority are Russians, accounting for just over 23% of the population (Statistics Estonia, 2022). Even a brief glance reveals that the presence of such a large minority group creates all the necessary conditions for a natural multilingual landscape. However, due to historical conditions, the situation is far more complex. According to data from 1941, Estonian society was once much more monoethnic. At that time, out of slightly more than one million inhabitants, almost 90% were Estonians, 7% were Russian and the remaining 3% claimed multiple other ethnicities (Maiste and Puur, 2018). After the annexation of Estonia to the Soviet Union, the country underwent heavy Russification, which resulted in the creation of a parallel language education system and the political dominance of the Russian language. Due to the Soviet occupation, the proportion of Russians in the country increased dramatically from 7% in the 1940s to over 30% in the early 1990s. After the restoration its independence, the Republic of Estonia focused extensively on the preservation, development and facilitation of Estonian as the language of the nation, to be used in bureaucratic matters, education, commerce, media and multiple other spheres.

The Estonian Integration Monitoring (EIM) report states that the Estonian language-centred model has been a main feature of Estonian language policies since the 2000s (EIM, 2020, p.102). Both majority and minority inhabitants agree that Estonian language proficiency is an indispensable feature for integration into Estonian society. However, there is a notable difference in priorities. While for Estonians, language proficiency is a vital and necessary feature of their identity, non-Estonians tend to see language as providing access to inter-ethnic communications and the labour market and a way to overcome political and social barriers. Nevertheless, the Russian and English languages remain strong components of the linguistic landscape. The importance of the Russian language has continued due to the large percentage of Russians in Estonia and their uneven geographical distribution.

Comparing the EIM 2008, 2015 and 2022 survey data, we can see that the percentages of non-Estonian respondents who actively speak Estonian in Ida-Virumaa (the easternmost region of Estonia) were 13%, 19% and 21%, respectively, while for Tallinn, these same percentages were 35%, 42% and 50% (EIM, 2020, p.30). Despite the steady growth, the figures are rather small, which reflects a certain regional isolation of the Russian-speaking community. At the same time, the rise of English further complicates the Estonian linguistic landscape. English, being a globally recognised lingua franca, significantly improves opportunities in the Estonian labour market but puts an additional strain on the Estonian educational system.

The Estonian educational system has made attempts to solve the above-mentioned challenges. Basic comprehensive education in Estonia lasts 9 years, while the secondary level covers 3 years. At the basic level, there are five possible alternatives, namely Estonian, Russian, English, Finnish and Estonian for language immersion. The Estonian language immersion system is mainly used in Russian schools, where the children are taught exclusively in Estonian for some time (e.g. for one school year), while the rest of the time, some classes are taught in Russian, and others are taught in Estonian. There is an early immersion programme that starts in the first school year, and a late immersion programme, which begins closer to the end of the basic level. At the secondary level, all schools use Estonian as a language of instruction, but some of them teach all subjects in Estonian, while others use the 60/40 system (60% of subjects are in Estonian, and 40% of them are in Russian). However, from the point of view of Estonian law, all secondary schools are Estonian-language schools (Law on Basic and Upper Secondary Schools, 2010).

Over the last 20 years, the following trends in the multilingual landscape have emerged:

- The Estonian integration model focuses on the Estonian language and is slowly but steadily moving society in this direction, changing the educational system and the language landscape in general. From 2008 to 2020, Estonian language proficiency among minorities steadily increased from 32% to 41% (EIM, 2020, p.30).
- The Russian language is still very important and widespread. Considering its geographical distribution and the fairly high number of ethnic Estonians who are fluent in Russian (51%, according to EIM (2020)), it is a large part of the linguistic landscape.

- The English language is gradually gaining ground, especially among the younger, educated generation: 47% of Estonian EIM respondents claimed to have an active knowledge of the English language, while for minorities, this figure was around 21% (EIM, 2020, p.33). In addition, the Estonian economy continues to attract more skilled immigrants for whom English is the lingua franca, at least for the time it takes to acquire the necessary level of Estonian.
- In general, the focus on the Estonian language as a means of integration should not be perceived as entirely exclusive. All three languages, Estonian, English and Russian, play important roles in the institutional framework, and significant portions of public administration services and print and media products. To a certain extent, school education is available in all three languages. This factor should be considered throughout this report.

PANDEMIC SCENARIO IN ESTONIA

COVID-19 Timeline

In Estonia, the evolution of the pandemic was rather different from that for other European regions, and the first wave was not as severe as in other countries, such as Italy, Spain, France and Germany. However, safety measures were taken in the face of global concern. The situation in Estonia escalated by the end of 2020. Figure 1 below shows the evolution of the pandemic in Estonia (number of people infected per week).

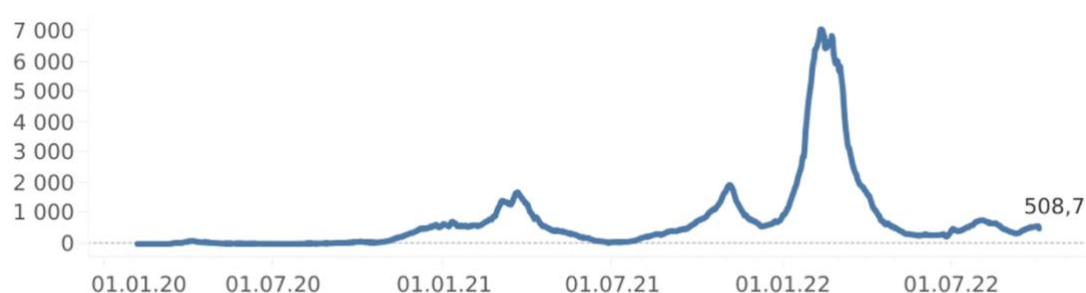


Figure 1. Number of people infected per week¹

The main events outlining this health crisis are as follows:

- On 27 February 2020, the Minister of Social Affairs Tanel Kiik confirmed the first case of COVID-19 in Estonia during a morning TV programme (Vasli, 2020). According to Kiik, the worst-case scenario would mean up to 30,000 cases and even a dozen cases was to be considered "a serious health scourge" (Salu, 2020).

¹ The graphs regarding Covid infections and vaccination rates were retrieved from the Estonian Health Board website; source: <https://www.terviseamet.ee/en/coronavirus/coronavirus-dataset>

- On 12 March, Estonia declared a state of emergency until 1 May (later extended until 17 May). All schools, museums, concert halls and theatres had to close, and conferences and sporting events were cancelled; however, libraries and universities were allowed to remain open (Koorits, 2020). In hospitals, prisons and social welfare institutes, visits were restricted, thus disrupting numerous non-urgent medical appointments and hospitalisations, undoubtedly causing problems for some patients and their families.
- In spring 2020, the number of cases in Estonia was quite low; when the state of emergency was declared, the number of positive cases stood at 27. At the end of the first wave in May 2020, 18% of the population wanted the emergency measures to be eased, 64% were satisfied with the measures and 15% wanted them to be tightened (Makarova, 2020, p.29).
- The first reported death from Covid occurred on 25 April (Nael et al., 2020) and by the end of May 2020, the number of deaths had risen to 63. During this month, 23% of all those infected required hospitalisation and 3% died.
- In early summer 2020, the number of cases was still fairly low, but the infection rate began to increase in August and September, leading first to a "strong recommendation" that masks be worn, then to an obligation to wear masks, followed by the 2+2 rule in public spaces in November and the closure of schools in December 2020 (Kook et al., 2020). However, the state of emergency was not renewed, and the restrictions during the second wave were somewhat more nuanced, including, for example, exceptions for religious gatherings.
- In the spring of 2021, Estonia had the highest relative infection rate in the world (Eesmaa, 2021), which led to the introduction of further restrictive measures on 11 March. Schools were closed and did not reopen for face-to-face classes until May.
- In this period, protests emerged demanding the lifting of the restriction measures and disputing a change in the legislation that granted, among other things, increased rights to the Ministry of Social Affairs and the Health Board regarding the storage and processing of people's data (Kelomees, 2021). Nonetheless, the situation in the country was perceived as critical by 81% of the population and protests against the restrictions were widely criticised in the media. According to polls, only 11% of respondents expressed support for the protests, and this percentage did not differ considerably across Estonians and other nationalities (Turu-uuringute AS, 2021, p. 24). The restrictions were in place until the end of May 2021.
- In autumn 2021, the pressure on healthcare facilities from newly infected people continued to grow, and in early November 2021, despite new restrictions passed by the government, Estonia was again at the top of the world charts for infection rates.

Vaccination

The first vaccine was administered on 27 December in the Ida-Viru region to a doctor working in the Covid department (Gamzejev, 2020), but few vaccinations were given until larger batches of vaccine arrived in Estonia in February 2021. The government announced the decision to vaccinate healthcare workers, staff and residents of nursing homes, those over 70 years old, those with chronic diseases and first responders first. On 17 May 2021, when the general public vaccination campaign started, 37% of the population was already vaccinated (Odamus, 2021). However, it soon became evident that interest in vaccination in the pre-selected risk groups was lower than expected, e.g. a number of teachers and doctors did not show up for an injection (Vainküla, 2021). In addition, the vaccination rate in the general population also did not meet expected targets, despite the availability of vaccines and multiple vaccination points. In October 2021, it was reported that more than 200,000 doses of vaccine were available, but supply exceeded demand (ERR, 2021).

The graph in Figure 2 below shows the vaccination numbers in the country from the beginning of 2020 to the present.

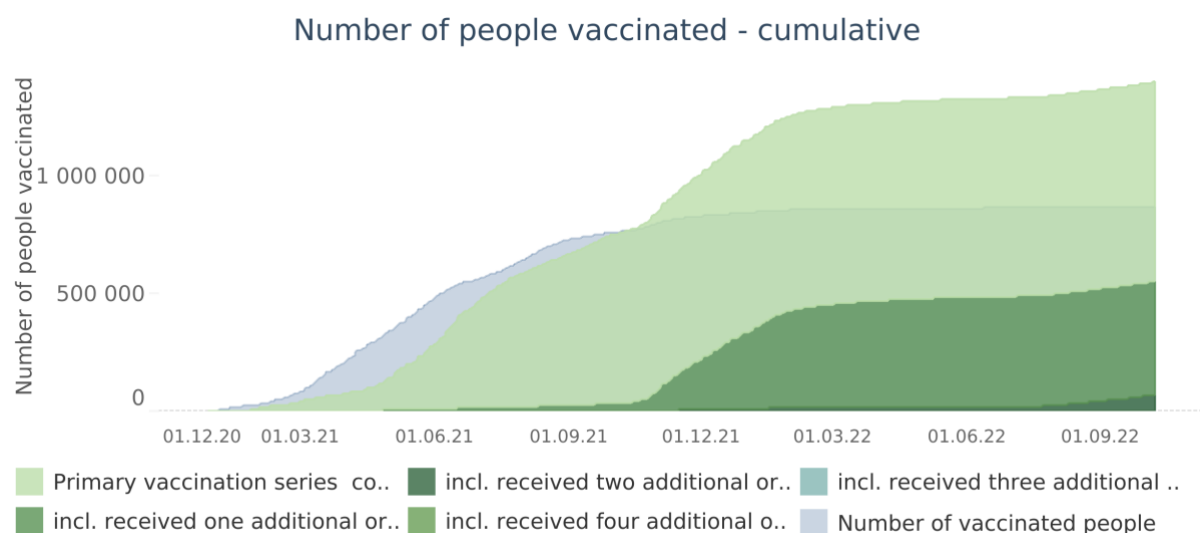


Figure 2. Vaccination rate in Estonia

In addition, the regional distribution of vaccines to the Russian-speaking regions in the east of the country did not meet its initial target, as can be seen in the following map (Figure 3).

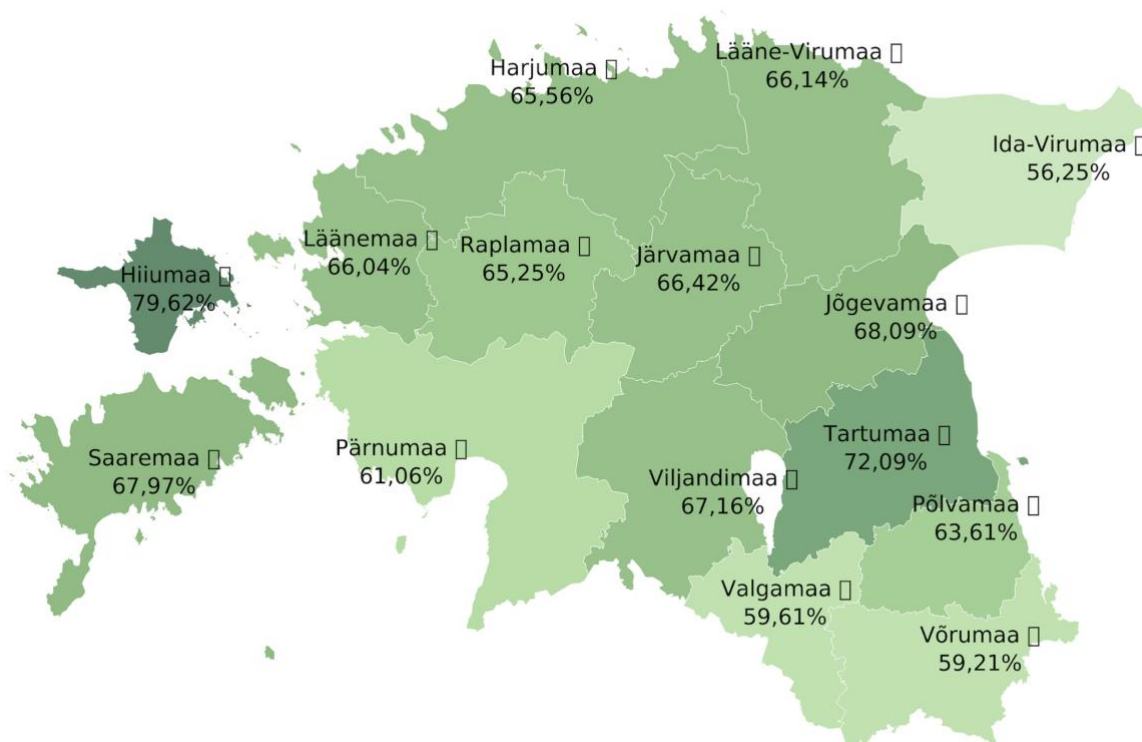


Figure 3. Vaccination rate in October 2022 (primary vaccination series completed)

Starting in September 2021, Estonian employers were required by the state to perform risk analyses in the workplace. In addition, an update of the regulations on biological agents in August 2021 allowed employers, as an additional preventive measure, to ask workers for proof of negative COVID-19 test results or vaccination. This measure involved employers in the vaccination campaign. However, despite these additional actions, in May 2021, only 40% of respondents reported that they were motivated to get vaccinated due to the efficacy of the vaccines, only 32% considered COVID-19 to be a dangerous disease and 9% reported that they would get vaccinated because of the requirements in the workplace. Meanwhile, 50% of respondents who did not want to be vaccinated believed that the vaccines had adverse side effects (Turu-uuringute AS, 2021, p. 30), while 35% of this group did not trust any sources of information (ibid, p. 34).

Communication During the Pandemic

Weekly government press conferences and crisis committee conferences became two of the official channels for disseminating information about the COVID-19 pandemic. These conferences were broadcast online and simultaneously interpreted into Russian starting in March 2020. The Tallinn City Council also started to broadcast two separate weekly press conferences in Russian and Estonian languages online in March 2020. According to the March 2020 survey commissioned by the State Chancellery, additional sources of information were general internet sources both in Estonia and abroad, social media channels, radio, the state helplines in Estonian (1266) and Russian (1227) and newspapers (Turu-uuringute AS, 2020, p. 7).

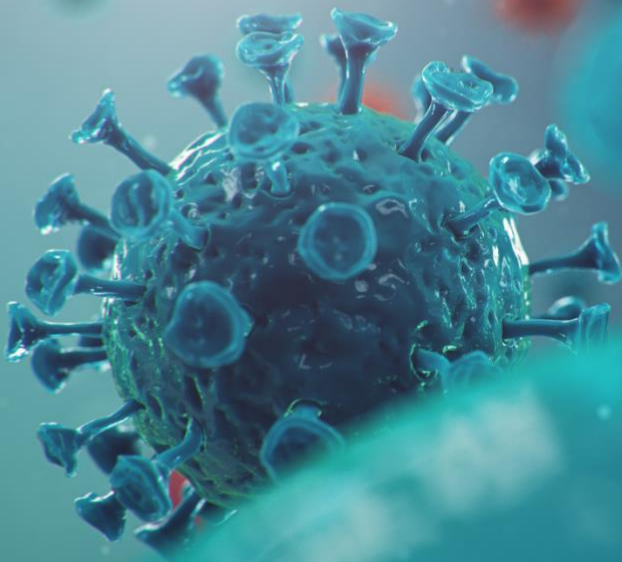
The main sources of information on COVID-19 and the emergency situation for the general public continued to be Estonian internet portals and ETV broadcasts. Compared to Estonians, non-state internet channels (including social media), along with the Russian-language state channel ETV+ and Russian-owned TV channels, were more important for residents of other ethnicities. However, the popularity ratings of Russian state channels in terms of COVID-19 information somewhat declined among respondents of other nationalities from the beginning of the pandemic in March 2020 (21%) to the end of May 2020 (15%) (Makarova, 2020, p. 9).

From the beginning of the emergency situation, conflicting messages regarding the spread of Covid were noticeable. For example, in mid-August 2020, the acting head of the Health Board said that COVID-19 did not spread among children. This opinion was later reversed by virologist Andres Merits, who claimed that children over the age of 10 could infect each other and teachers. These conflicting statements caught the attention of the Chancellor of Justice, who called for greater consistency in Health Board messaging (Palgi, 2020).

The main criticisms emerging from this period reflect the absence of an articulated government action plan (Whyte, 2021; Ossinovski, 2020; Saar, 2020) and unclear communication (Sildam, 2020; Tikerperi, 2020; Otsmaa, 2020). On 13 January 2021, the government resigned and the new governing coalition viewed the health and economic crisis caused by the pandemic as one of their main challenge (Kaasik, 2021). Despite the change, in May 2021, polls showed that only 56% of respondents were satisfied with the management of the pandemic in Estonia (Turu-uuringute AS, 2021, p. 45).

While some criticisms centred on communication to the population as a whole, some have focused on the communication issues with Russian speakers, in particular. For example, communication expert Raul Rebane called for a mass vaccination and mask campaign targeting the Russian-speaking community in March 2021 (Rebane, 2021), while Jevgeni Ossinovski, former Minister of Health and Labour, advocated for the establishment of a separate unit within the communication department to reach out to Russian speakers, as this was an area where the most could be achieved and where the least effort had been made (Ossinovski, 2021). This lack of communication channels to engage with Russian speakers in Estonia emerged as a major challenge (Vaino and Whyte, 2021), particularly given the conflicting messages coming from the Russian Federation's communication sources, to which Russian speakers often turn for information.

In the COVID-19 preparedness plan for the 2022/2023 virus season, one of the important preventive measures listed is the need to recruit more Russian-speaking doctors and experts to act as Covid spokespersons (Ministry of Social Affairs, 2022, p. 37). However, this is the only mention of foreign language communication in the plan.





Methodology

In this section, we explain the methodology used for this research study, which used two approaches:

1. Collect documentary evidence
2. Interview relevant stakeholders

DOCUMENTARY EVIDENCE

Firstly, we collected background information on communications by official sources in order to establish what kind of material was disseminated and in which languages and to obtain an initial idea of what the shortcomings and strengths in those communications might have been. Official information provided by the government of the Republic of Estonia can be found mainly on the website Kriis.ee, managed by the government's communication bureau. This website was launched during the pandemic to provide information regarding the current situation, restrictions and measures during the COVID-19 pandemic. It now also includes a webpage with details on the security situation in the wake of the war in Ukraine entitled "Security situation in Europe".

In addition, we consulted information provided by other relevant actors to determine the non-official languages in which messages had been disseminated and the amount of information that had been circulated. For this purpose, we looked at official websites of districts and municipalities, such as Tallinn and Lasnamäe; higher education institutions, such as Tallinn University and the University of Tartu; and news disseminated by local newspapers published in Russian and English, such as ERR and Delfi.

This initial screening was the first step in designing the interviews.

INTERVIEWS

Interviews were conducted with representatives from five sectors that disseminated pandemic information in languages other than Estonian: governmental institutions, companies, higher education institutions, NGOs and the media.

The purpose of these interviews was to determine how these actors coped with the challenges in communicating with their target group regarding the crisis. We conducted 13 semi-structured interviews with open-ended questions. The questions were slightly adapted for specific interviewees. However, all the interviews addressed nine main topics, with several questions per topic:

- **Provision of information in languages other than Estonian** regarding restrictions, safety measures, vaccination and other issues. For instance: In what language(s) was this information provided? Was the information in different languages provided at the same time?
- **Sources of information.** For example: What sources were used to gather the information? If different sources were used, how were those sources used?
- **Format of the information.** For instance: Was the information already available in the format and language you needed?
- **Coordination and translation.** For example: Who coordinated this activity? What were the tasks involved in this coordination? Who translated the information? Were there specific instructions for translating it, such as glossaries?
- **Dissemination channels.** For instance: What channels were used to disseminate the information [such as institutional websites, social media, newsletters, signs in the public space]? Were the same channels used to disseminate information in the different languages? Why or why not?
- **Reception of information.** For example: Did you receive any kind of feedback from the target group regarding this communication (e.g. as comments to posts on social media)? Did you change your communication strategies based on this feedback?
- **Cooperation with other stakeholders.** For instance: With which organisations or institutions did you cooperate in the communication effort and how?
- **Obstacles encountered.** For example: What were the main challenges in communicating information in non-official languages? How were they resolved?
- **Good practices identified.** For instance: What good strategies can you identify in your communication plan? What would you do differently based on the knowledge and experience you have now? Could you think of any initiative/action that has not been implemented and should be, either by your institution or by other actors?

The interviews were conducted via Zoom, recorded and then transcribed/summarised. The stakeholders interviewed via their representatives were as follows.

Governmental Institutions

Republic of Estonia Government Communication Unit. In particular, Kriis.ee, the main information portal run by the government of the Republic of Estonia, and thus the main official channel in the country, for the pandemic.

Interviewees: Küllike Haide, current editor-in-chief of Kriis.ee, and Laura Hiietamm, Service Manager of Single Point of Information, who is responsible for the FAQ section of Kriis.ee.

Lasnamäe District Government. Lasnamäe is the most populous administrative district in Tallinn, and Russian speakers account for 60% of its total population.

Interviewee: Ivan Lavrentjev, who, at the time of the interview, was counselor of the Lasnamäe District Government and responsible for the institution's communications.

Tallinn City Office. Tallinn is the capital and most populous city of Estonia and has one of the most linguistically diverse populations in the country.

Interviewee: Kati Niin, spokesperson of the communication department

Tallinn City Centre Government, "Tallinn City Centre for New Arrivals Project". This project was launched in 2020 with the aim of involving the growing English-speaking community in the city centre in the social life of the district and in decision-making processes.

Interviewee: Svetlana Štšur, who, until November 2021, was project manager of the Tallinn City Centre for New Arrivals Project.

NGOs

Estonian Refugee Council. This council is a provider of direct support to refugees and other vulnerable groups. They provided assistance and information during the pandemic to ethnolinguistic minorities in Estonia and are one of the most active actors in the reception of Ukrainian refugees.

Interviewee: Anu Viltrop, Head of Support Services, Estonian Refugee Council.

Integration Foundation. This public body is responsible for enacting Estonian integration policies (established in 1998 as the Non-Estonians Integration Foundation). Due to the language focus of the integration policies, it primarily sponsors Estonian language courses, Estonian language cafes (spaces for speaking Estonian), various cultural programs and events and a limited number of research activities.

Interviewee: Irene Käosaar, at the time of the interview, Director of the Integration Foundation.

Higher Education Institutions

Tallinn University. Tallinn University has about 7,000 students, of which more than 10% are international students, and offers programmes in Estonian and English. It also employs almost 500 academic staff, of which approximately 17% are foreigners. According to the QS index, it is among the top 1% of the universities in the world.

Interviewee: Rein Olesk, who, at the time of the interview, was Head of Communications at Tallinn University.

University of Tartu. This university is the largest (about 15,000 students in 2022) and oldest university in Estonia (established in 1632). It offers multiple programs, in Estonian and English. According to the QS index, it is among the top 2% of the universities in the world. Even though the primary campus is situated in Tartu, it also has two regional colleges in the cities of Narva and Pärnu.

Interviewee: Sandra Sommer, Press Officer at the University of Tartu.

Companies

Viru Keemia Grupp. This private company is the largest oil-shale producer in Estonia. It is located in Kohtla-Järve, and 80% of its 1200 employees are Russian speakers. The company provides its internal communications in two languages and has been a major provider of crisis-related information to its employees during the pandemic.

Interviewees: Kersti Laar-Alikhanova, Internal Communications Specialist (Public Relations Department) at Viru Keemia Grupp (VKG), and Ksenia Moskvina, Safety and Quality Manager at VKG.

MDC Max Daetwyler Eesti. This private metallurgy company, with a continuous production cycle, has around 80 employees, of which 20% are able to communicate in Estonian, while 80% prefer Russian or Ukrainian and have only limited (or no) knowledge of the state language. The production process requires the physical presence of workers on the premises, so communication efforts were directed towards the need for vaccination to ensure smooth production.

Interviewee: Kristi Rander, Human Resources Manager.

Wise. This global technology company helps its over 13 million customers to send, spend, hold and receive money. It is one of the world's fastest growing, profitable technology companies. Wise's global team is over 4,000 people and Tallinn is home to Wise's biggest office, with over 1500 people from 110 nationalities. Their main language for internal communication is English.

Interviewee: Kristi Rebane, Public Relations Manager, Wise, Estonia.

Media

ERR. This news outlet has an English-language version as part of the Estonian Public News Broadcast Company (Eesti Rahvusringhääling). It administers several channels primarily producing television news and shows in the Estonian and Russian languages. It also maintains supporting websites in Estonian, Russian and English.

Interviewee: Helen Wright, editor-in-chief of ERR.

Delfi. This private network of internet media portals primarily operates in Estonia and Latvia. In Estonia, it is a part of a consortium including Eesti Ekspress and Eesti Päevaleht. Delfi publishes its materials in the Estonian and Russian languages. The Russian language portal Rus.Delfi has an autonomous newsroom, which does not only publish news translated from Estonian, but also produces original content.

Interviewee: Andrey Shumakov, editor-in-chief of Rus.Delfi.



Findings

LANGUAGES OF DISSEMINATION

Pandemic-related information provided by the stakeholders interviewed was mainly disseminated in three languages, Estonian, Russian and English. As explained in the "Multilingual landscape" section, Estonian is the only official language of the Republic of Estonia, whereas Russian is the second most spoken language, with the number of Russian speakers exceeding 300,000, and English is used as the lingua franca by a smaller percentage of the population. However, taking into account the target groups of the various stakeholders, there was some diversity in the languages used in their respective communications (see Table 1).

Table 1. Languages of dissemination

Stakeholder/ Language	Estonian	Russian	English	Arabic	Turkish
Kriis.ee	X	X	X		
Tallinn City Office	X	X	X		
Lasnamäe District Government	X	X			
Tallinn City Centre for New Arrivals Project			X		
Integration Foundation	X	X	X		
Estonian Refugee Council	X	X	X	X	X
Tallinn University	X		X		
University of Tartu	X		X		
Viru Keemia Grupp	X	X			
MDC Max Daetwyler Eesti	X	X			
Wise			X		
ERR	X	X	X		
Delfi	X	X			

SOURCES OF INFORMATION

The main sources of information for all interviewees were official national sources, such as the Health Board State portal (Terviseamet), kriis.ee and public announcements made by the Prime Minister, the Ministry of the Interior and the Ministry of Foreign Affairs.

Some interviewees also mentioned vaksineeri.ee (the official portal with the widest coverage of vaccination information), Riigi Teataja (State Bulletin) and the World Health Organisation.

Although some of the information gathered by the interviewees was available in the languages stakeholders required, they often undertook or commissioned translations themselves because the desired information was not available in the relevant target language or unclear or messages from different sources conflicted.

FORMAT OF THE INFORMATION

Stakeholders mainly provided information in a text-based format in emails, newsletters or text messages. They disseminated Covid case numbers, restrictions, safety measures and vaccination information.

Messages were also provided in a visual format, especially in the workplace (by companies and universities) and public spaces (by government institutions), through signs, boards or stickers as well as videos related to the vaccination campaign and safety measures.

Audio messages were also used by various stakeholders taking the form of radio announcements within the company (e.g. VKG) or phone calls (e.g. Daetwyler).

COORDINATION AND TRANSLATION

Communication in non-official languages was generally coordinated by the interviewees themselves, and translations were carried out by in-house staff as well as subcontracted translators, as can be seen in Table 2 below.

Table 2. Responsibility for translation tasks

Stakeholder	Translation
Kriis.ee	In-house translation team but outsources some translations to a contractual partner
Tallinn City Office	In-house translation team but outsources some translations to a contractual partner
Lasnamäe District Government	Information translated by the bilingual communication team
Tallinn City Centre for New Arrivals Project	Most of the translations are done by the project manager, but the translation of the newsletter is outsourced
Integration Foundation	In-house translators, bilingual team
Estonian Refugee Council	Translations were mostly provided by volunteers RUS and EN: Volunteer translators TR: Volunteer translators and contractual partners AR: Translation undertaken by a bilingual member of staff
Tallinn University	Information translated by the bilingual communication team
University of Tartu	Information translated by the bilingual communication team
Viru Keemia Grupp	Information translated by the bilingual communication team, but for longer texts, the company uses the services of two external translators
MDC Max Datewyler Eesti	In-house bilingual staff
Wise	Information translated by the bilingual communication team
ERR	In-house translators
Delfi	In-house translators, bilingual team and technical assistance

DISSEMINATION CHANNELS

Companies and universities used internal communication channels, such as intranets, emails or Slack, and external ones, such as news and blog posts on official websites, to inform their employees and students about COVID-19 developments. In addition, in physical spaces, signs and boards were used. Some of these channels were also used by NGOs, and the Estonian Refugee Council created two Whatsapp groups to send shorter and more iconic versions of the information provided by the authorities to make it more accessible.

The media distributed Covid information through print and digital versions of newspapers, radio and television channels as well as videos on their websites and other sites, such as Youtube.

Local government institutions, on the other hand, disseminated information through their official websites, press conferences and press releases, newspapers, online articles and broadcasts through the city media channels, e-mails, leaflets, SMS, posters and signs. Both Tallinn and Lasnamäe also distributed leaflets in various languages in the apartment buildings where the infection rates were higher. In addition, Tallinn City Office launched the podcast series "Tallinn Talks" and the newsletter "Tallinn in Brief" specifically for English speakers. Further, the New Arrivals Project disseminated information in English through its newspaper "Kesklinna sõnumid" ("Messages of the downtown") and its newsletter.

Finally, public institutions (government and education) and the media also distributed information in various languages through their Facebook pages (see Table 3).

Table 3. Languages used on Facebook pages of government and education institutions

Stakeholder/ Language	Estonian	Russian	English
Estonian Government	X*		
Tallinn City	X**	X	X
Lasnamäe	X	X	
Tallinn University	X		X
University of Tartu	X		X
ERR	X	X	X
Delfi	X	X	

*The Kriis.ee website does not have its own Facebook page; however, it does provide a link to the government FB page (Stenbocki Maja), which is only in Estonian. In addition, the Health Board has its own FB page (Terviseamet), which includes mainly posts in Estonian, while some posts are in Russian (especially during the vaccination campaign) and an occasional post is in English.

** The FB group Tallinn City Centre for Expats, created as an initiative of the Tallinn City Centre New Arrivals Project, has more than 5000 members and has also been used to disseminate information during the pandemic, such as information on safety measures and vaccination points.


RECEPTION OF INFORMATION

Most stakeholders sought feedback to some extent from their target group to help them adapt or improve their communication strategies, although most often they had no specific channel or system for gathering this information.

The government opened the 1247 helpline for questions about COVID-19 and registration for vaccination in May 2021, and the queries received were posted on the kriis.ee website either in the FAQ section or in other relevant categories in the three primary languages, namely Estonian, Russian and English.

The Facebook pages also allowed for feedback on the effectiveness of the messages. The Tallinn City Office observed increased interaction with posts that conveyed information in a compact and simplified way; for example, a webpage in English that contained all the relevant crisis information in Tallinn, and a single listing of all the vaccination points. In addition, the City Centre New Arrivals Council was established, which attracted the attention of foreigners and ambassadors, 12 of whom were selected to become members. The council met regularly to discuss relevant issues and served as a bridge between local authorities and the English-speaking communities.

The Estonian Refugee Council organised structured interviews in March and April 2021 to clarify the needs and biggest problems.



Tallinn University conducted a focus group with international students to find out whether they were satisfied with communications; the clearest message received during this event was that messaging should be strictly informative, without any noise.

The University of Tartu monitored interactions with newsletters, webpage news and social media.

Companies such as Wise received direct feedback from their employees, and Daetwyler monitored the vaccination rates provided by official sources and those employees who provided HR with this data on a voluntary basis. They also organised an information event with a nurse from ELBRET where employees could ask questions and raise concerns.

VKG put great emphasis on disseminating COVID-related information. Although they mention that employees preferred to call to ask questions directly, VKG organised two Zoom briefings (in Estonian and Russian) in which they gathered COVID-related questions that were later answered in separate sessions with medical specialists. In addition, they read and monitored social media messages to gather misinformation to debunk in their monthly newsletter.

COOPERATION WITH OTHER STAKEHOLDERS

Cooperation between different communication actors during Covid was rather low, with several stakeholders stating that there had been no cooperation at all, just individual work within their company/organisation, following government guidelines.

Local governments stated that there had been some cooperation, e.g. between Lasnamäe district and some schools, which led to the organisation of a number of lectures.

Some interviewees referred to individual contacts with colleagues from peer institutions, but there was little mention of collaboration between governmental institutions and other stakeholders, except in the case of VKG. This company cooperated with Terviseamet, the Ministry of Social Affairs and the Ministry of Economic Affairs and Communications. The aim was mainly to obtain relevant information for their employees and organize on-site vaccination clinics. In addition, they organised information sessions with the Estonian Employers' Confederation and cooperated with medical professionals and healthcare companies during communication efforts.

OBSTACLES ENCOUNTERED

The interviewees reported obstacles when communicating with linguistic minorities in their institutions or organisations, mentioning the following common barriers:

- Lack of a previous crisis communication plan. No previous emergency at the global level had had such an impact at the local level, and the existing crisis plans that some interviewees mentioned were described as outdated. For several stakeholders, however, this was understandable, as they felt that it was impossible to prepare for such an event and that one must act according to the circumstances. Others felt that a clear emergency plan should be developed by the state.
- Missing information in non-official languages. The amount of information from official sources provided in Russian and English was lower than that provided in Estonian, and stakeholders who needed to address their target groups had to resort, in many cases, to translating the information themselves.
- Shortage of resources. Closely related to the previous point, this is a common issue, especially for organisations with fewer financial resources. While some stakeholders were able to allocate part of their budget to hire translators or had staff who could take on translation tasks, others lacked the resources to translate all relevant information. When it could be provided, information in non-official languages was often distributed with some delay, sometimes leading to mistrust.
- Ineffectiveness of the vaccination campaign. Messages to different communities, even when available in target languages, were generally homogenous. Some interviewees regretted that there were no specific messages from the government targeting the vaccine hesitant.
- Lack of clarity in messages. Several interviewees mentioned that the information provided by official sources was too complex and inaccessible and called for the use of clearer and simpler messages that could be understood by all citizens. The poor quality of, and lack of fluency in, official translations into Russian were also mentioned.
- Confusing or conflicting messages from official sources. This item was a recurring concern throughout the interviews, with several interviewees stating that it was not possible to inform their target group clearly when the messages they received from different official sources were conflicting or changed within a short period of time. In the case of the vaccination plan, there were changes in the guidelines, generating mistrust. For example, Tallinn University was informed that all employees of educational institutions, including universities, were in the priority group for vaccination against COVID-19. Thus, it started compiling a list of employees who wanted to be vaccinated. Then the ministry decided that university employees would not be in the priority group.



- Conflicting messages from the government and medical professionals. VKG mentioned that they encouraged their employees to consult their family doctors, but several doctors discouraged vaccination. Companies and NGOs cannot control such situations, as they are not run by medical professionals. Several interviewees called for more collaboration between the state and family doctors to address risk and misinformation as well as encourage greater vaccination compliance.
- Misinformation. One of the challenges faced by almost all organisations was the viral spread of misinformation, especially regarding vaccination and its side effects. Social media became an arena for heated debate, reflected in hundreds of posts and publicly exposed messages. Delfi noted that at some point, they had to turn comments on the website and Facebook page off due to the amount of profanity, hate speech, shared links to questionable blogs or websites and expressions of unproven statements. In comparison, during the war in Ukraine, comments on the website and in Facebook groups have been open and reflect diverse opinions.
- Distrust. Distrust, in part, is a consequence of the barriers mentioned so far. Trust in government is particularly low among some segments of the population. This underlying, pre-pandemic problem becomes more apparent in times of crisis. Some interviewees claim to have placed great emphasis on gaining the trust of their employees or population, but outside their sphere, their influence is extremely limited.



GOOD PRACTICES IDENTIFIED

- Simplifying messages to reach target groups and help them understand the information provided. Several stakeholders made the effort to simplify messages from official sources and make them more accessible.
- Employee support during the pandemic. Wise provided mental health support for its staff through its Employee Assistance Programme. Because its employees worked mostly remotely, virtual events were organised, such as yoga, cooking classes and virtual coffee breaks. Such activities allowed employees to take breaks, stay in touch with their team members and share experiences beyond work-related matters.
- Supporting vulnerable groups. VKG provided recommendations for isolated people during the pandemic when they felt that the local government was not delivering accessible information for older people.
- Increased interaction between communities. The Estonian Refugee Council used the same channels to provide information in different languages to bring different communities together.
- Monitoring the reception of information. Several stakeholders monitored their social media accounts to assess the effectiveness of messages, interaction with different types of posts and so forth.
- Use of less-frequently utilized channels to reach additional sectors of the population. For example, the use of flyers in apartment buildings with higher infection rates, Whasapp channels and SMS.
- Intense effort to inform employees and build trust. Several of the non-governmental stakeholders demonstrated a special commitment to keeping their employees informed, creating effective messages and gaining employee trust. As an example, the employee vaccination rate at VKG, a company that devoted a great deal of resources and energy to communicating with its employees, was 90% in February 2022, 35% higher than the region average (RUP, 2022).

- Greater emphasis on communication with English-speaking communities. Several interviewees emphasised the need to strengthen communication with English speakers. Although this community is small compared to the Estonian- and Russian-speaking communities, the number of people using English as a lingua franca in Estonia continues to grow. As an example of good practice, the Tallinn City Centre for New Arrivals Project has contributed to providing information to this community and improving their inclusion in society. As a result, the Ministry of Culture has made similar agreements in Pärnu and Rakvere.
- Improving distance learning and communication practices. The Integration Foundation stressed the significance of distance learning and the continuation of educational activities during the pandemic. The same views were expressed during interviews with university representatives. Instructors adapted quickly, and hardly any courses were cancelled. At the same time, the pandemic changed communication within these communities considerably. For example, the use of chat rooms and work messengers to keep in touch with colleagues and for work meetings has become normalised. In general, even the requirements for a physical presence in the workplace have changed.



Recommendations

In this report, we have outlined some lessons learned from the experiences of various actors in their efforts to communicate with communities with limited proficiency in Estonian during the COVID-19 crisis. The most important recommendations from the point of view of the researchers involved in this study are the following:

- Develop greater cooperation between governmental institutions and other stakeholders involved in the distribution of information during a crisis in order to:
 - Receive feedback from those stakeholders who are in closer contact with the target groups and can provide better insights into the effectiveness of communication strategies as well as the main challenges.
 - Design communication strategies that highlight the mediating role that non-governmental stakeholders play in building trust with target groups when trust in state institutions is not as strong as desired.
 - Support organisations and institutions requiring more resources to collaborate in the communication effort.
- Reinforce communication in non-official languages from the outset of an emergency to avoid increasing mistrust and less reliable sources from becoming sources of information.
- Simplify messages to make them more accessible to the population.
- Tailor messages in different languages for diverse communities by considering the needs of particular groups (level of trust in authorities; usual sources of information, including foreign sources, and accessibility of formats).
- Encourage and train in the use of machine translation in emergency situations to overcome problems involving, for instance, a lack of financial resources, distributing information rapidly and shortages of professional translators for particular language combinations.

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