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INTERPRETING AND CRISIS

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VACCINATION NARRATIVES IN A MULTILINGUAL SOCIETY

On intercultural communication and trust

Tanya Escudero and Jekaterina Maadla

Introduction

The health crisis caused by COVID-19 has clearly revealed (Uusküla et al. 2022, 155; Eesmaa 2021) that the problems arising from communication with ethnolinguistic minorities on essential matters, such as those related to the pandemic, have repercussions for society as a whole. In this sense, it has become evident that there is a need for a crisis communication plan that includes the entire population, not only by providing information in the languages used by different communities within the society, either as a mother tongue or as a lingua franca, but also by identifying the best channels and strategies to reach those target populations. In a distinctly multilingual and multicultural society such as Estonia, not taking these diversities into account can lead to serious problems during a health crisis.

In Estonia, although Estonian is the only official language, Russian is spoken by an ethnolinguistic minority that makes up a third of the population. In addition, English is used as a lingua franca by a smaller segment of the population. This variety may raise questions about the availability of information, its accessibility, its effectiveness and the public's trust in the official sources. Regarding the latter, the last COVID-19 survey reports provided by the Estonian Secretary of State (Riigikantselei 2022) show that trust in the state institutions is almost 20% lower among ethnolinguistic minorities than among Estonians.

Health inequity within the Russian-speaking ethnolinguistic minority has been a national problem for a long time (Lai and Leinsalu 2015) and statistics show that non-Estonians have had a 40% lower acceptance of the vaccine, and that this gap has been relatively stable since September 2021 (Riigikantselei 2022), with vaccination rates being the lowest in regions where the percentage of the Russian-speaking population is higher (Republic of Estonia Health Board 2021).

The aim of this chapter is to study the narratives related to vaccination in Estonia that can be found among Russian and Estonian speakers on the Republic of Estonia's Health Board (Terviseamet) Facebook page in order to understand to what extent intercultural communication practices in Estonia during the COVID-19 crisis have an impact on how the population has reacted to the information provided and what other factors might have influenced these reactions, paying particular attention to issues of trust. However, it is important to note that the narratives studied

on the Health Board's Facebook page may not necessarily represent the sentiments of the general population, but rather provide insights into some of the views present among it.

Research context

The need for communication with linguistic minorities during the COVID-19 pandemic has triggered the interest of researchers in translation and intercultural communication. For instance, the project *Communicating COVID-19 translation and trust in Ireland's response to the pandemic* focused on understanding “the maturity level of translation as risk communication in the COVID-19 pandemic in Ireland and its role in behaviour change among diverse language communities” (O'Brien, Cadwell, and Zajdel 2021). In a similar vein, the report “Enhancing COVID-19 public health communication for culturally and linguistically diverse communities: An Australian interview study with community representatives” (Karidakis et al. 2022) aimed at studying the strategies employed by culturally and linguistically diverse community organisations to improve communication about COVID-19, as well as identifying gaps and challenges during this communication effort. Such studies have been undertaken throughout the globe, focusing on the particular needs and situations of specific regions, such as China (Wang 2019) or Greece (Lees 2021).

Regarding communication during the pandemic, one issue that deserves particular attention is the multilingual provision of information related to vaccination. The EU agency European Centre for Disease Prevention and Control warned in 2021 that there was “emerging evidence of low COVID-19 vaccination rates in some migrant and ethnic minority groups in the EU/EEA” (ECDC 2021, 1). Among others, one of the solutions proposed in this report is to develop strategies that “include culturally and linguistically tailored and targeted public health messaging, co-designed with affected communities, translated into key migrant languages and effectively disseminated” (ibid). In this context, the British Academy-funded STRIVE project (Sustainable Translations to Reduce Inequalities and Vaccination Hesitancy) aimed at studying the “linguistic and cultural barriers that may prevent migrants from getting vaccinated against COVID-19” while understanding how translation can help overcome such barriers, based on the lessons learned from the COVID-19 vaccination campaign in Italy¹.

Although these studies and projects can help to understand how certain communication practices might influence the population, the evolution of the pandemic has varied across countries. Also, linguistic and cultural landscapes differ in each region, as do the historical events that are still relevant today and underlying intercultural challenges. It is, therefore, necessary to pay attention to the particular conditions in each region for understanding the reception and impact of translation practices. In Estonia, however, research on translation or intercultural communication during the crisis is very limited, despite the fact that there were evident communication issues, and underlying factors such as distrust of government, illustrated by some criticisms from institutional representatives and public figures. In this regard, the project “Improving communication with migrants for crisis preparedness: lessons learned from COVID-19”, hosted by Tallinn University and led by Tanya Escudero, studies the intercultural communication practices implemented in Estonia during the pandemic crisis. Its aim is to map the obstacles to communication in non-official languages in Estonia, Finland and Latvia, identify good practices and provide guidelines that can provide a rapid response to future emergency situations².

At the beginning of 2021, the Estonian government's main concern was the vaccination campaign. However, despite the provision of information, in the first half of 2021, it became clear that interest towards vaccination among the risk groups was lower than anticipated. On the other hand, the distribution of vaccines in regions with predominantly Russian-speaking populations did not

reach the initial target set by the government (Kook 2021; Wright 2021a), and the situation did not improve in the following months, with some counties, such as Ida-Viru on the Russian border, reaching barely 55% (Republic of Estonia Health Board 2021). At the national level, the target was not met either; in September 2021 Estonia missed the 70% vaccination rate that the European Union had set as the target earlier that year (Wright 2021b).

These data raised substantial criticism regarding the government's crisis communication, such as that by President Alar Karis, admitting that the government had fallen short in its communication efforts and that messages were not clear enough for the communities they were intended to reach (Whyte 2021). Also, psychologist and scholar Andero Uusberg pointed out that the abundance of information as well as the sometimes contradictory content were not facilitating uptake of the vaccination programme (Vasli 2021). Moreover, others made reference to communication with Russian speakers in particular. Communication expert Raul Rebane urged for a massive vaccination and protective mask campaign aimed at the Russian-speaking community as early as March 2021 (Rebane 2021), while Jevgeni Ossinovski, a former minister of Health and Labour, called for the establishment of a separate unit within the communication department for targeting Russian speakers, as this was where the least effort had been made and where more could be achieved (Ossinovski 2021). The lack of communication channels to reach out to Russian speakers in Estonia has also been mentioned as a major challenge (Vaino and Whyte 2021), especially given the conflicting messages coming from the Russian Federation communication sources to which Russian speakers in Estonia often turn to for information. The fact that Russian-speaking³ Estonians turn to Russian resources for their information should come as no surprise. Not only is the direct vicinity of the Russian Federation an important factor, but there is also a legacy of affiliation with Russian identity and subsequently a distance towards Estonian authority. According to the report by The National Institute for Health Development in the spring of 2020, the degree of trust in Estonian official information channels and healthcare professionals among Estonian and non-Estonian speakers was quite similar (69% and 66% of respondents). However, among Estonian respondents, the level of trust in Estonian National Broadcasting Channels was 27% higher than among non-Estonians, while 41% of the latter group acknowledged using and trusting Russian Federation TV and radio channels and portals. This shift in aligning oneself with specific other media for information purposes is not exclusive to the Russian-speaking minority. One-third of non-Estonian-speaking respondents used and trusted TV and radio channels from other foreign countries, not including Russia (Tervise Arengu Instituut 2021).

Unfortunately, research on the reception and impact of the information by different segments of the population in Estonia is mainly lacking, although it is essential to be able to adapt communication strategies in the event of an emergency. In this regard, it has been observed that “in recent processes of health communication, social media have emerged as propellers of networked information flows rather than as instruments of top-down information transmission” (van Dijk and Alinejad 2022, 26). Social media, therefore, serves as a research tool, as it can help us understand how the population has reacted to the information provided—in this case in relation to vaccination in Estonia—and provide further insight into the reasons for these reactions. Some of these reactions may not be feasible to observe through other research methods such as interviews or focus groups, where the presence of the researcher could potentially influence the participants' responses. However, the presence of bots and unknown number of unique users must be taken into account. Additionally, it should be considered that the users of the Health Board's Facebook page may not necessarily be representative of the wider Estonian society.

Research methodology

To achieve the goal mentioned earlier, we will analyse the comments written in Estonian and Russian as replies to the posts that were disseminated in two languages at the same time as parallel posts by the Republic of Estonia's Health Board (Terviseamet) on their Facebook account. Terviseamet is the main agency of the Ministry of Social Affairs, responsible for, among other things, surveillance, prevention and control of communicable diseases and risk analysis in epidemiology⁴. Its website is officially in Estonian, Russian and English, and the Board also has social media accounts on Facebook, Twitter/X, YouTube and Instagram, with its Facebook page being the most active and participative. Although the website offers information in three different languages, the main flow of the Facebook page is in Estonian, with a few posts published in Russian and occasional posts in English. While the posts in Estonian cover a wide range of topics (statistics about new cases, measures, public gatherings, technical problems on their website, etc.), Russian posts are practically limited to promoting the vaccination campaign.

The number of posts published in Russian during 2021 was rather low (Figure 21.1). Although it increased during the beginning of the vaccination campaign, it declined after May, except for the month of August; in the last two months of the year, all posts were published only in Estonian.

We have selected three of the months of 2021 with the highest number of posts in Russian: April and May, when vaccination started to become accessible to the general population; and August, when, despite the availability and accessibility of vaccines, vaccination rates increased very slowly. Since for some of these posts, the comments are disabled (six out of 26 posts), we have worked with 20 posts in each of the two languages and their comments, which amount to 2605.

First, we will include a quantitative analysis of the number of comments, shares and reactions to the same posts published in Estonian and Russian. The data reflected throughout this study corresponds to the number of comments and reactions, not users. Therefore, several comments may have been made by the same user. Additionally, we must be careful in this step, as the reactions can be easily misinterpreted. For example, an angry reaction (angry emoticon) to a news item about police intervention in an area where restriction measures were not followed could show disapproval of the public's failure to comply with the rules, of the police who intervened (if this is perceived as a violation of people's freedom) or of the government's actions in relation to the restrictions, among other plausible alternatives.

Second, we will conduct a manual qualitative analysis in which we will examine the different public narratives (Baker 2014, 161) constructed by different groups in relation to the vaccination campaign in Estonia, with the focus on negative or positive perceptions of the process, arguments in support or opposition and reasons for trust or mistrust in the information provided.

Third, we will study how different narratives and reactions might relate to major events or information provided by governmental institutions and the media (such as mass vaccination campaigns) by comparing the results of our previous analysis with the timeline of main events regarding the pandemic in Estonia.

Discussion

COVID timeline in Estonia

The coronavirus pandemic officially started in Estonia on 27 February 2020, when Minister of Social Affairs Tanel Kiik spoke during a morning TV programme about the first confirmed case of COVID-19 in Estonia (Vasli 2020). The information was later confirmed during a government

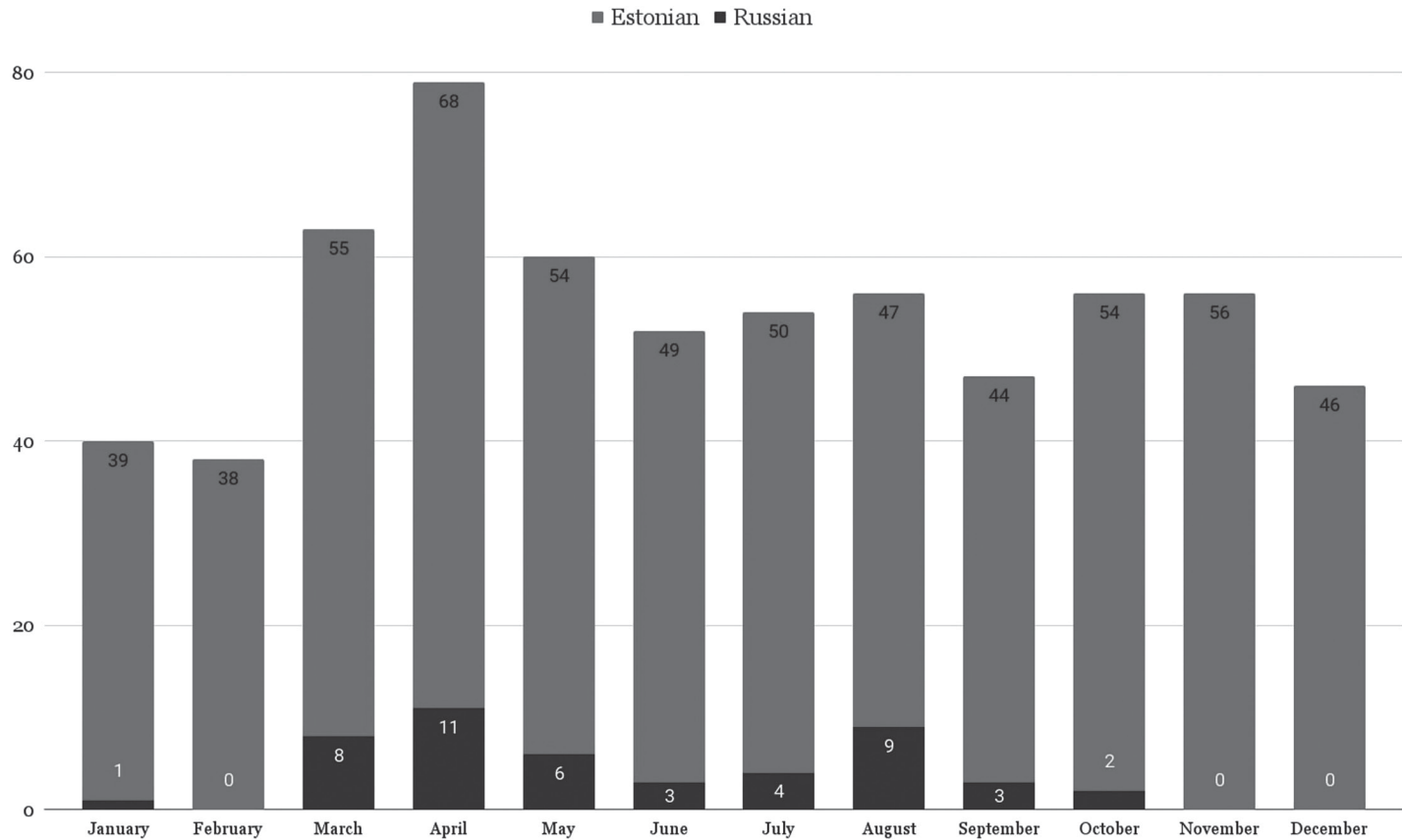


Figure 21.1 Number of posts in Russian and Estonian on Terviseamet Facebook page

press conference which became one of the official channels for disseminating information about the coronavirus pandemic. On 12 March 2020, Estonia declared an emergency situation in force until May 2020. Although the number of cases during most of 2020 was not severe, as was the case in other European countries, by the end of the year the situation deteriorated significantly⁵. In November 2020, the rule of wearing masks in public rooms and the 2+2 rule was introduced, and from December 2020 onwards, schools were closed in Estonia (Kook, Sarv, and Nael 2020). While the vaccines seemed to bring hope to many parts of the world, in Estonia, the uptake was not as high as desired.

The first vaccine was administered on 27 December 2020 in the Ida-Viru region to a doctor from the COVID department, and larger batches of vaccines arrived in Estonia in February 2021. The government announced a decision to vaccinate risk groups and frontline workers first. By March 2021, the number of patients in hospitals was critical and Estonia topped the world rankings in terms of relative infection rate. Despite the accessibility of vaccines to most of the population already in May 2021, the acceptance was rather low. Already at the beginning of the vaccination period, it became clear that interest in vaccination in the pre-selected risk groups was lower than expected, and in September the regional distribution of vaccines to the Russian-speaking regions did not meet its initial target. During the following months, the number of vaccine recipients increased very slightly.

Posts and reactions on Terviseamet's Facebook page in April and May

Although April was the month with the highest number of posts published in Russian, these did not reach 14% of the total for the whole period⁶. During these two months, the posts in Russian were mostly limited to translations of some news published in Estonian related to the vaccination campaign, but also videos with similar background messages addressed to two different audiences, Estonian and Russian speakers, that were published once again three days later. Posts in both languages were generally published only a few hours apart. Despite the small number of posts in this language, the engagement of Russian speakers was relatively high, considering that comments were disabled for two of the seventeen items.

Although the vaccine narratives in many cases coincide in the languages we are discussing, there are some differences in these parallel posts on which we will focus.

On the (in)efficacy of COVID vaccines

The most attention in May and April focused on a video in Estonian with Russian subtitles on why parents should vaccinate their children. There were two separate posts, one in Estonian (1179 reactions, 283 comments) and one in Russian (238 reactions, 90 comments). The percentage of emoticons expressing anger at this particular post was the highest within the observed period, i.e., 20% for the Russian post. The Estonian post also elicited negative reactions, but only 3% of the total number of reactions to this particular post.

The Russian-language narratives referred to the USSR's "life-saving" vaccines versus the useless COVID vaccines as organised by the Estonian government, sometimes claiming that they are not necessary at all, as the pandemic is a hoax (eight of the comments analysed in this period followed this narrative). Comments in Estonian did not include positive reminiscences about the Soviet vaccination programme, however, there were people who admitted to having been vaccinated in their childhood, although they made some statements (in Estonian) against this particular vaccine against Coronavirus, such as "I am not against vaccination, but I am against being

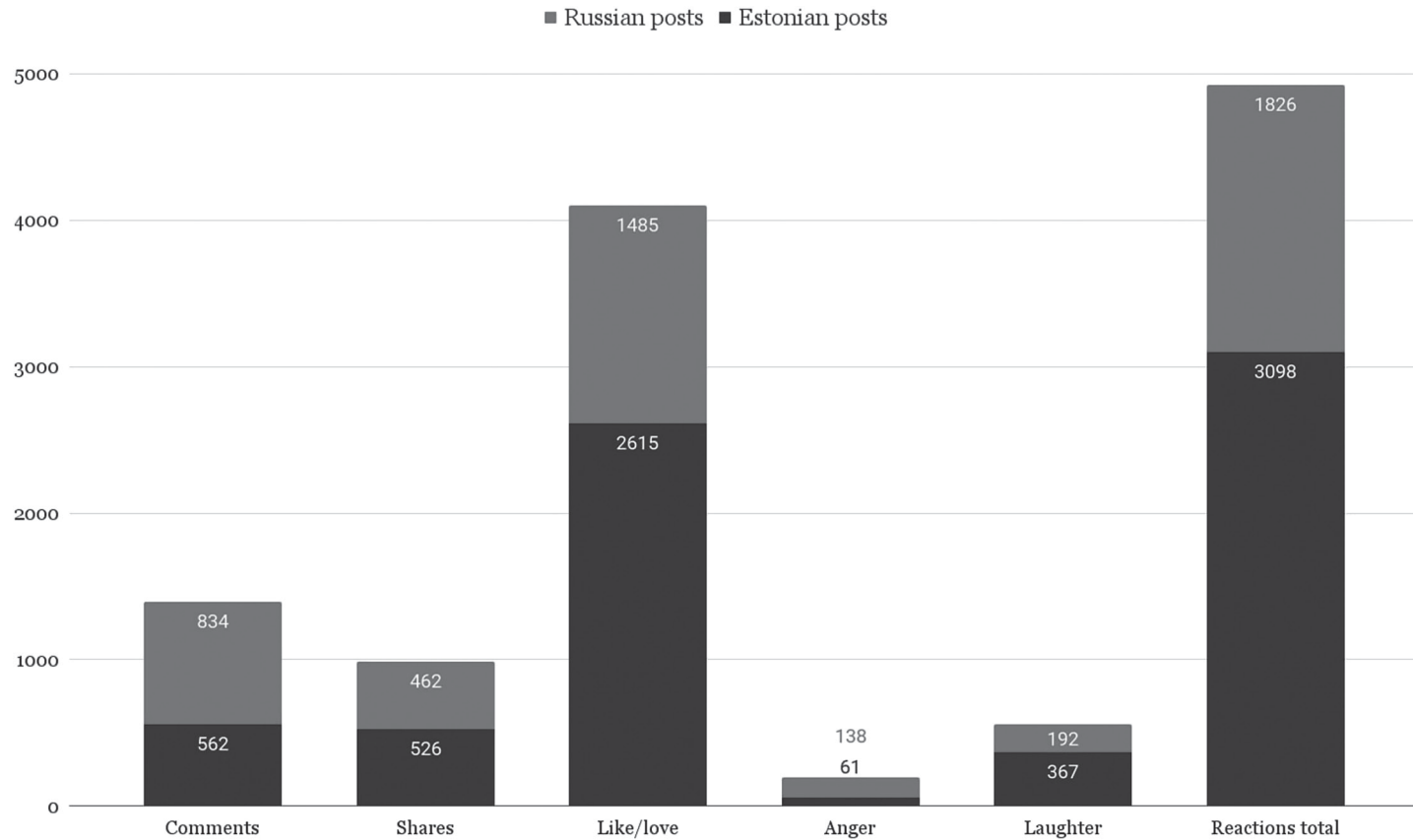


Figure 21.2 Number of comments and reactions to parallel posts in April and May

a lab rat”. The discussion also included the lack of information on the deaths of those vaccinated against the coronavirus, and this statement was repeated on ten occasions throughout the observed period. This was also highlighted as a differentiating factor between effective vaccination against polio, measles, etc., and ineffective vaccination against coronavirus.

On Western vaccines versus Sputnik

Sputnik V, the vaccine for COVID-19 developed in Russia, was mentioned in the Estonian comments 23 times, three of them with positive connotations, but the majority (eight comments) referring to the desire of Ida-Viru residents (predominantly Russian-speaking) to be vaccinated with Sputnik, “which never arrives”, as a reason for low vaccination rates. Sputnik is also mentioned as a freedom-of-choice option in both Estonian and Russian narratives.

Among the 23 comments in Russian, we can also find two strands: against and in favour of Sputnik. On the one hand, some users mention the difference in reporting vaccination-related deaths in Europe and Russia, suggesting that Russia does not provide objective information (to support this argument, the same users rely on global and national media and institutions, the Estonian Prime Minister or even relatives).

On the other hand, some users argue about the alleged false information on Sputnik’s negative side effects and low efficacy in Slovenia and Argentina. Advocacy for Sputnik is stronger among Russian speakers in the data sample. Two comments were made in Estonian regarding the willingness to use the Sputnik vaccine, compared to ten comments made in Russian. However, the Russian narrative on the issue often includes responses questioning the effectiveness of the Sputnik vaccine, suggesting a lack of evidence to support its efficacy.

On 8 April, Terviseamet published a post informing about the speech in Russian that was to take place a few days later to inform the population about the vaccination. In response to this post, which was the most shared and commented on in April (with 85 shares and 227 comments), there is also a discussion about the ineffectiveness of Western vaccines and the preference for the Russian vaccine, with one of the users claiming that “through Russian-language propaganda, people are forced to poison themselves with Western medicines” and that “the Russian language text does not change Western shit into Sputnik”. Other Russian-speaking users also mentioned that Russian speakers understand that they are being deceived, and claimed that this kind of information should not be in Russian, but in “inaccessible language spoken by the public officials”—referring to Estonian.

On the vaccination campaign as propaganda

In April, Terviseamet launched the “Thank you, Dad” and “Thank you, Mom” campaigns, in which Estonian celebrities—two actors, a TV presenter and a rapper—thanked their parents for vaccinating their children for protecting their health. The videos targeted different language groups: two videos in Russian and two in Estonian were published in separate posts where the description was written in the language used in the promoted video.

The subsequent comments in Russian and Estonian were very different. The comments in Russian were mostly negative. Out of a total of 67 comments on the campaign, none expressed approval, and a striking 45 angry emoticons were included in the 231 reactions. In contrast, for other posts, the number of “angry” emoticons was typically fewer than ten. Commenters used words like “propaganda” and “idiots” to describe the individuals featured in the video, and some pointed out that it was the state’s responsibility to administer vaccinations rather than leaving it to

individual mothers. It is worth noting that comments made in Estonian were less negative, with only six “angry” emoticons out of 215 reactions.

In Estonian comments, propaganda is generally associated with the information coming from the Russian Federation, referred to as “enemy of death”, “sweet neighbour” and “foreign forces”, although the Estonian state and anti-vaccine propaganda are also present.

On the quality of communication

When it comes to comments related to the communication during the pandemic, Estonian speakers mainly mention the lack of clarity of messages, e.g., regarding self-isolation measures, vaccination appointments or mistakes in the posts related to the number of doses administered.

Russian speakers, on the other hand, sometimes mention the use of the Russian language to disseminate messages as a propaganda weapon or criticise the lack of information in their language. Some users commented on the post published on 9 April in Estonian wondering why it had taken so long to communicate to the Russian-speaking population, and one suggested that communication could be improved by making parallel posts in Russian and Estonian.

It is worth noting that, despite numerous questions from Russian speakers in these posts addressed to Terviseamet regarding the composition of the vaccines, side effects, statistical data, etc., Terviseamet did not provide any answers to these questions, although it did engage in communication with some comments in Estonian.

Posts and reactions on Terviseamet’s Facebook page in August

In August, Terviseamet published nine parallel posts in Russian and Estonian, all of them regarding vaccination, i.e., information about vaccination points, celebrations for reaching a certain number of people vaccinated and campaign videos. For four of them, however, the comments were disabled and, therefore, not included in the analysis. Although the number of reactions to these posts is higher in Estonian, Russian speakers comment and share the posts more actively, considering the number of Russian speakers in the country.

Regarding the narratives that can be found in this period, there are some common ones, such as the inefficacy of vaccines. The arguments, however, have changed from the previous period, and the main reasoning is that those who are vaccinated are still getting infected and transmitting the virus as well. This type of narrative is common in both Russian and Estonian comments. Russian-speakers’ advocacy of the Sputnik vaccine is also still present, but not as frequent as in April and May.

Other common topics in both languages are the unreliability of the information (especially in the two posts celebrating the number of vaccinated), the indignation over the fact that the vaccinated can move freely (thanks to the COVID pass), even though they can still spread the virus, and the continued refusal to be vaccinated.

On the side effects of vaccines

It is common in the comments in both languages to condemn vaccines for their side effects and the vaccine is often called “poison” by both Estonian and Russian speakers, e.g. “This so-called vaccine contains more poison than the virus itself” and “Let them inject themselves with this poison [...] and watch and wait for the consequences”. Among the comments in Russian, it is more

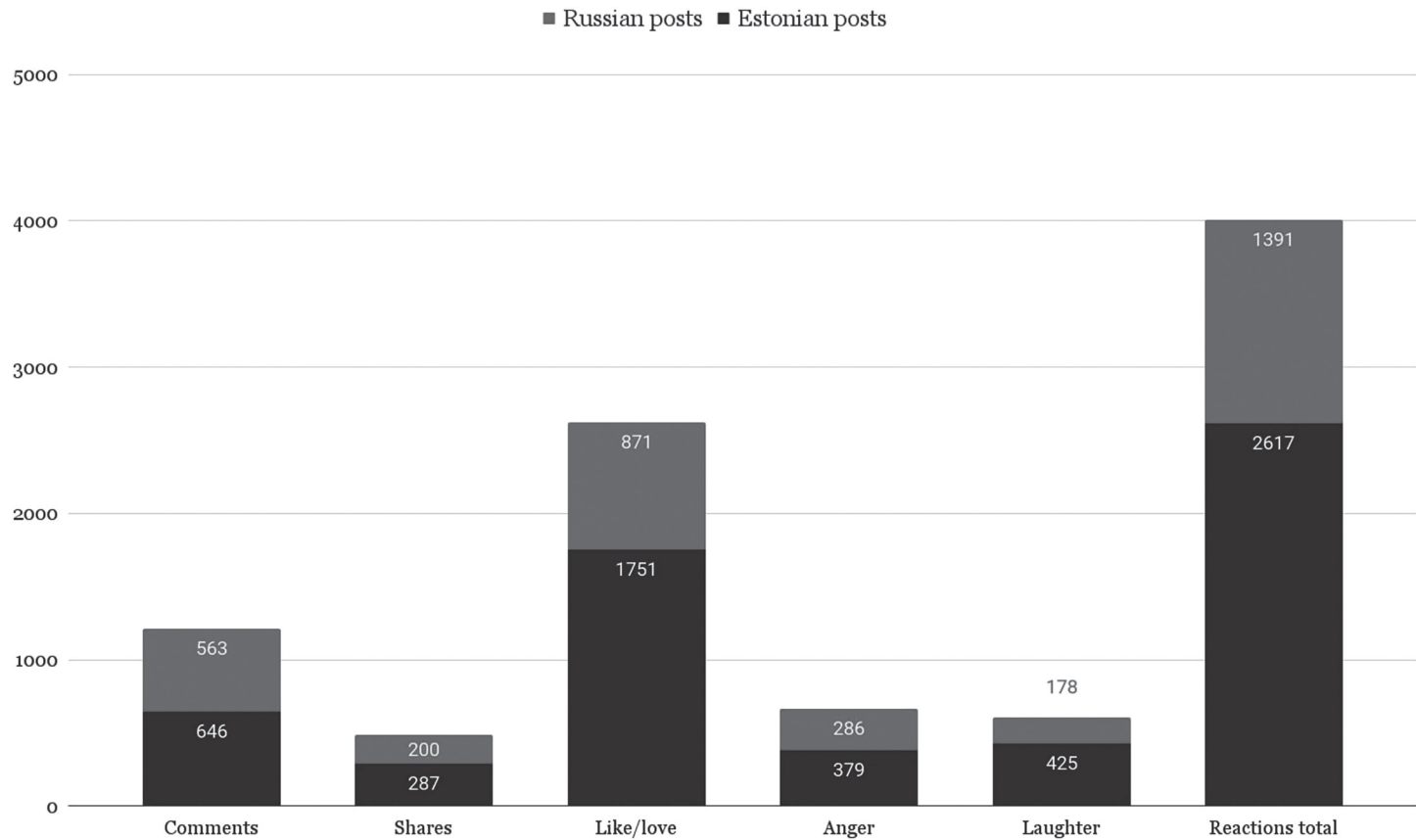


Figure 21.3 Number of comments and reactions to parallel posts in August

frequent than among those in Estonian to find personal stories of friends, family or neighbours who, after having been vaccinated, had serious side effects and needed treatment or even died.

On Terviseamet's insistence on vaccination campaigns

This is a very frequent topic in both languages, as the vaccination campaign was running for months, with daily posts. Reactions range from insults to the Terviseamet and the government to simple assertions that those who have been willing to get vaccinated already did and that people should be free to choose.

The reactions, however, are blunter in the comments to the post published on 2 August, which includes a video featuring three public figures in Estonian society: Kersti Kaljulaid, at that time President of the Republic of Estonia; Anne Veski, a famous Estonian singer who has recorded in Estonian and Russian; and Arkadi Popov, Chief Medical Officer of the Estonian Health Board's crisis team, promoted by the government as a spokesperson with the Russian-speaking community.

As responses to this post, accusations of promoting propaganda aimed at Terviseamet and the celebrities who lend their image to the campaign are frequent in both languages, with the latter receiving insults such as "pathetic frauds" and being repeatedly asked how much they have been paid to act as public relations agents. The comments in Russian, however, focus on the figure of Popov. For several users, his appearance in this campaign is a disappointment and a way of using his image to advertise the vaccines; and the whole campaign in which he appears is reminiscent of the USSR.

On the use of the Russian language only when it suits the government's purposes

The video mentioned before was recorded in both languages for the two parallel posts. In one of them, therefore, the then president, Kersti Kaljulaid, can be seen encouraging the population in Russian to get vaccinated, which has provoked reactions of surprise and mockery in the comments, such as "No, she has started speaking in Russian, it seems that she is really in a pickle...", "Our 'mother' is speaking Russian", "Started speaking in Russian for the sake of vaccination? No need!..." and "Comrade President, have you forgotten that we are in the age of Estonian?".

These reactions among the Russian-speaking users in our corpus sample reflect their mistrust of the authorities' attempts to speak to them in Russian in some cases and to "punish" or evade the use of Russian in others. For example, there is a system of fines for teachers in schools and kindergartens with Russian as the language of instruction for not mastering Estonian to the required level (Tamm 2008), and for a long time, even the President's speeches on New Year's Eve were not subtitled or translated into Russian.

Conclusion

As mentioned, comments were deactivated for the only two English posts published during this period. In recent years in Estonia, there has been a growing demand for English as a lingua franca due to the recent migration of populations from around the globe to supply skilled workers in fields such as IT or research, as well as the call for international students. However, this demand has not been met, including in terms of communication on pandemic-related matters.

Negative narratives about vaccination can be found in both Estonian and Russian, which is perhaps not surprising in social media, where negativity enjoys a rather wider diffusion (Fine and Hunt 2021). On the other hand, the situation during the pandemic (number of cases, hospitalisations

and deaths) was never as critical in Estonia during the first and second waves as it was in other countries (such as Spain, Italy or the UK), nor were the measures and restrictions, therefore, as pronounced. This may also have contributed to the fact that the population of Estonia did not see the seriousness of the situation and the need for vaccines as strongly.

Data show that vaccine reluctance is fairly high in Estonia, particularly in non-Estonian communities, in particular the Russian-speaking minority. Political and media spheres have pointed to a lack of communication with these communities. However, this is a complex case, not only because Estonian society is clearly multilingual and multicultural, but also because of the conflictive and sensitive historical context in the country and the high level of fragmentation between Estonian and Russian-speaking communities.

Russian language communication has not received the necessary attention in the posts published by Terviseamet, despite the large number of speakers in Estonia. This, in combination with the underlying problems of segregation of the Russian-speaking minority, has led to the emergence of distinct public narratives among this group.

Particularly noteworthy are criticisms of the government's hypocrisy in using the Russian language when it serves its purposes, as is the case with vaccination campaign videos. Mistrust of Estonian political leaders and high-ranking Estonian officials, who since regaining independence have been changing their discourse by addressing the general public in Estonian or Russian, is very evident in the previously mentioned criticisms. Resentment may also be caused by the fact that the Russian-speaking population does not encounter Estonian politicians and high-ranking officials speaking to them in Russian or with the help of interpreters in the Russian-language Estonian media in relation to everyday problems. Even when attempts have been made to disseminate critically important information in Russian, the result has been sometimes questionable, e.g., on 25 March 2020, the government sent a text message to the population in Estonian and Russian to declare a state of emergency, however, the text in Russian contained half as much information as the Estonian text along with several abbreviations. After this case, which attracted the attention of the community and the media, the quality of state-translated COVID-related information became significantly higher.

Another narrative observed is the criticism of Western propaganda and vaccines and the call for Sputnik V. Messages in defence of Sputnik come from the Russian media, as well as from informal exchanges with family and friends (we have also seen how some of the anti-vaccine narratives are based on personal cases, acquaintances, etc.). The COVID surveys mentioned in this chapter also show, as expected, that it is more common among non-Estonians to turn to foreign sources for information regarding the pandemic. In addition, criticism of the AstraZeneca vaccine and its side effects in the Estonian media has most likely reinforced the distrust of vaccines.

The issue of lack of trust in the Estonian authorities and the media is something that was already tangible before this pandemic, but has been exacerbated by the COVID crisis. When a segment of the population does not trust the messages coming from the government, disseminating information in several languages cannot overcome such an obstacle, even less so when attention to minority languages is provided only at critical moments when the rest of the population is affected. In this respect, during a health crisis, and when trust issues are manifest, communication strategies need to be reviewed, especially if they are based entirely on top-down communication (Escudero et al. 2022). The use of new strategies and channels, in which part of society is addressed and reached through other institutions and actors functioning as mediators, can improve communication. However, it cannot substitute for a long-term strategy to overcome the linguistic polarisation and dichotomy between overt (monolingual) and covert (multilingual) language policy that has been consolidated for decades.

The research we have presented in this chapter must be seen in the context of its limitations. First, any generalisations from the case study data must be approached with caution. Second, the data used for this study has been retrieved from social media where not only the existence of bots is a factor to be considered but also the fact that we do not know the number of unique users. Finally, we must consider that the users of this page do not necessarily constitute a representative sample of Estonian society and the narratives found may be typical of a small group of this society.

Nevertheless, there is scope for more ambitious research that considers the reception of information in different languages in Estonia (including English, which is used as a lingua franca by a growing part of the population), not only in relation to a crisis, but on other important day-to-day issues. Such studies would help to better understand the weaknesses and strengths of communication with linguistic minorities, and would serve as a basis for developing communication strategies to support trust in the government and authorities when an emergency occurs.

Notes

- 1 More information about the STRIVE project, hosted by University College London and led by Federico M. Federici, can be found at www.striveproj.com/.
- 2 More information about this project, led by Tanya Escudero, can be found at <https://crisistranslation.tlu.ee/>.
- 3 The term ‘Russian speaker’ is used here to describe, or in some cases replace, the term ethnic Russian, since some Slavic minorities (including Ukrainians, Poles and Belarusians) adopted Russian as their mother tongue or lingua franca. The term ‘Russian speaking’ is also used in politics, legislation and news in the Baltic region (Apolevič and Kuzborska-Pacha 2022, 333).
- 4 During the first wave of the pandemic the crisis website of the Government of Estonia, kriis.ee, was created to deal exclusively with issues related to the pandemic. This website provides information on the number of cases, hospitalisations and vaccinations per day, collects information on measures and restrictions, vaccination points, etc. It also has a Q&A section fed by questions asked by the population on the State helpline (1247).
Currently, it is also being used to provide information on the Ukrainian refugee crisis, and includes information in Ukrainian on accommodation, social services, access to labour market or studies, and so on.
- 5 All the data regarding COVID infections and vaccination rates were retrieved from the Estonian Health Board website: www.terviseamet.ee/en/coronavirus/coronavirus-dataset.
- 6 In addition, there was one post published in English in May, stating that “Uninsured people and foreigners living in Estonia can get vaccinated against COVID-19 free of charge”. The comments to this post were disabled.

Further reading

Valentini, Chiara, Øyvind Ihlen, and Ralph Tench. 2022. ‘A question of trust. Exploring trust concepts, experiences and early observations from Europe’. In *Strategic communication in a global crisis. National and international responses to the COVID-19 pandemic*, edited by Ralph Tench, Juan Meng and Ángeles Moreno, 15–31. London: Routledge.

This chapter delves into the issue of trust during health crises and how it affects people’s ability to follow public health rules and guidelines. It also includes a discussion of trust at the micro, meso and macro levels, and includes examples in Europe during the COVID-19 pandemic.

Lee, Tong King, and Dingkun Wang (Eds.). 2022. *Translation and social media communication in the age of the pandemic*. New York: Routledge.

This volume examines the link between translation and social media during the COVID-19 crisis. Special attention should be paid to “Translating knowledge, establishing trust. The role of social media in communicating the COVID-19 pandemic in the Netherlands” (van Dijk and Alinejad 2022), as well as to “Parallel pandemic spaces: Translation, trust and social media” (O’Brien, Cadwell and Lokot 2022).

Vihalemm, Triin, and Veronika Kalmus. 2009. 'Cultural differentiation of the Russian minority'. *Journal of Baltic Studies*, 40 (1): 95–119.

This article can assist in understanding the situation of the Russian ethno-linguistic minority in Estonia, and the challenges faced by both the ethnic majority and the minority in “developing strategies to overcome the Soviet (colonial) past and to re-socialize into the new, transformational society”.

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