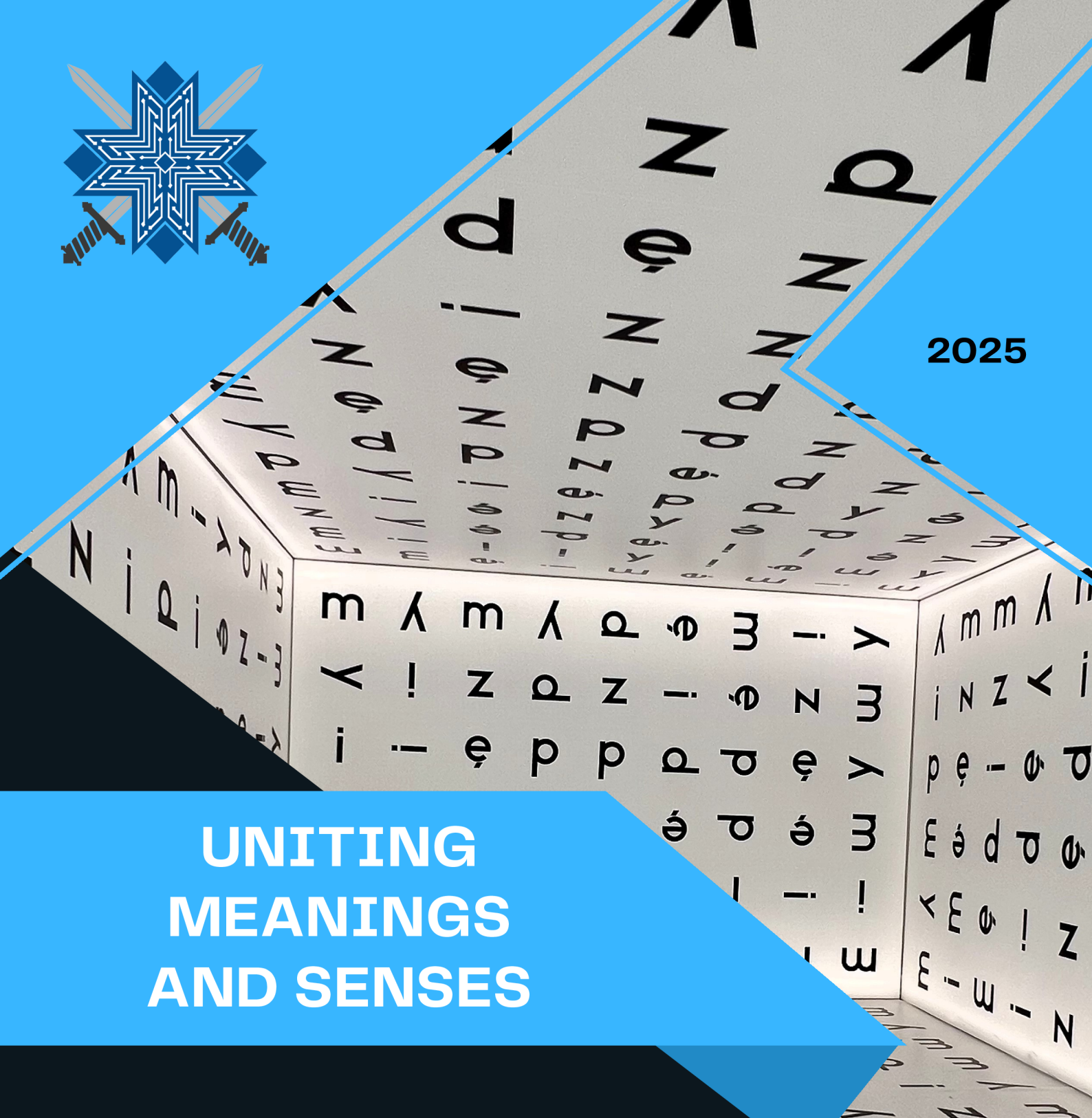

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UNITING MEANINGS AND SENSES

Developing narrative literacy among ethnolinguistic minority youth in Estonia

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Uniting Meanings and Senses: Developing Narrative Literacy among Ethnolinguistic Minority Youth in Estonia

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CONTENTS

INTRODUCTION

Despite long-lasting (and in general quite resultative) integration efforts, Russian-speaking young people in Estonia remain one of the most informationally vulnerable groups in society, partly because their consumption of information (including the content, their habits and patterns) differs from that of their Estonian-speaking peers.[1] As well as popular social networks and other mass media, their socio-political views and opinions are shaped by various factors, including conversations at home, intergenerational family values, interactions at school, participation in different leisure activities, and how they spend their free time with friends, who are very often Russian-speaking.

Research demonstrates that the differences in the information environments of Russian- and Estonian-speaking youth outweigh the similarities, and the context of Russia's war against Ukraine exacerbates the gap between media and young audiences.[2] Consequently, it could be argued that Russian-speaking young people in Estonia are semi-isolated in terms of information flows, making them more susceptible to manipulation, false beliefs and conspiracy theories. This also means they can become more vulnerable to malicious disinformation campaigns inspired or organised by foreign actors and/or local proxies.[3]

In light of Russia's ongoing aggressive war against Ukraine and Estonia's substantial support for Ukraine, as well as the significant influx of Ukrainian refugees into the country, the relations between Estonia's various ethnolinguistic groups have become particularly sensitive and are of paramount importance to the state's internal security. Particular attention should be paid to Ida-Viru county in the north-east of the country, where more than 80% of the population are Russian speakers facing socio-economic problems related to post-industrial transition, education reforms, limited job market and accelerated adaptation to new realities.[4]

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[1] Estonian Ministry of Culture & Kantar Emor. (2024). *Eesti ühiskonna lõimumismonitooring 2023: aruanne* (in Estonian). www.kul.ee/sites/default/files/documents/2024-04/EIM%202023%20aruanne.pdf

[2] Vihalemm, T. & Vunš, M. (2024). *Media engagement during Russia's war against Ukraine: reflections of young Russian-speaking Estonians and media professionals.* MedieKultur: Journal of media and communication research. https://doi.org/10.7146/mk.v40i77.141601

[3] Kremez, M. (2023). *Estonia's Russian-speaking audience's media attitudes, preferences and susceptibility to the spread of fake news and information disorder in media outlets.* Central European Journal of Communication, 16(1), 2. https://doi.org/10.51480/1899-5101.16.1(33).2

[4] Teperik, D. *et al.* (2024). *Rohepööre ja/või õiglane pööre? Ida-Viru väljakutsed ja võimalused* (in Estonian). ISBN 978-9949-7355-8-7. National Centre of Defence & Security Awareness. https://kaitsen.ee/wp-content/uploads/2024/06/Ida-Viru_report-EST_final.pdf

Therefore, given current and future challenges, it is crucial to research and consider the opinions and perspectives of Russian-speaking youth in this region, adopting a special, safe and people-centred approach. This is necessary to prevent possible conflicts caused by poor communication, false perceptions, and stereotypes formed by disinformation. In other words, **developing narrative literacy** among young people strengthens national security by providing a solid basis for understanding complex issues and reducing the impact of emotional, misguided responses.

Since outdated strategies of exposing disinformation and debunking myths are no longer effective, **fostering cognitive immunity** enables young people to anticipate, recognise, and resist manipulative narratives before they become entrenched in their thinking. This approach appears to be an effective, proactive method.[5]

Furthermore, analysing the views and perceptions of the younger generation will enable more targeted efforts to reduce the stigmatisation of Russian-speaking youth in Estonia, particularly in Ida-Viru county. This should ultimately accelerate integration processes within society and strengthen Estonia's national resilience.

[5] van der Linden, S. (2023). *Foolproof: Why we fall for misinformation and how to build immunity.* HarperCollins.

METHODOLOGY

Drawing on their experience of teaching and developing civic engagement, a team of experts from the National Centre of Defence & Security Awareness (NCDSA) developed an original methodology for working with young people from ethnolinguistic minorities in the socially and informationally vulnerable region of Ida-Viru. This methodology combines narrative literacy with various elements, including media consumption, information security, cognitive distortions, and socio-psychological processes such as trust, sense of belonging, community, identity, and perception of values.

Rather than simply teaching young people how to refute false information, which is not very effective in today's environment, the main idea was to develop attitudes and skills that would enable them to recognise and neutralise cognitive vulnerabilities in advance.

In 2024, a series of ten interactive seminars were held in Ida-Viru county. These were attended by 270 school students, aged 15–18, from the towns of Narva, Sillamäe, Jõhvi, Kohtla-Järve, and Kiviõli. Participation was entirely voluntary and agreed with the educational institutions' administrations. The seminars were held as part of the NCDSA project, which was implemented with the support of the Open Information Partnership Foundation and the US and Dutch Embassies in Estonia.[6]

Each seminar lasted around five hours and comprised a variety of activities, including lectures, interactive tasks, games, individual surveys and group discussions. The topics covered were based on current issues that matter to young Russian speakers in the region. Each seminar provided a generalised overview of the participants' opinions, beliefs, and perceptions, including an analysis of the most prevalent myths and misconceptions.

As the seminars were held in two stages, at the beginning and in the second half of 2024, it was also possible to track changes in student's perceptions of the information agenda over time. Additionally, the experts evaluated the alignment of views with the level of narrative literacy and information resilience, identifying areas requiring further study and public attention.

[6] The views and opinions expressed in this publication are those of the authors alone and do not represent the official stance of any institutions or organisations.

Of the more than 20 topics raised by participants, seven key themes emerged: geopolitics and security; media literacy; education; language and interethnic relations; the socio-economic situation; energy and ecology; and the upcoming local elections in 2025.

It is important to emphasise that this analysis was conducted from an ethnocultural narrative perspective, rather than within the classical sociological paradigm. This approach enabled the identification and description of the socio-psychological symptoms, value attitudes, emotional reactions and mental maps that characterise Russian-speaking youth in Ida-Viru. It also provided deeper insights into perception patterns and the reasons behind the dissemination of certain beliefs and ideas.

GEOPOLITICS AND SECURITY

Due to Russia's ongoing war against Ukraine and Ida-Viru county's proximity to the Russian border, geopolitical issues frequently appear in young people's news feeds. Although Ida-Viru has become a logistical dead end, its mental and cultural ties to its eastern neighbour remain strong, albeit gradually weakening.

Discussions about the war have many emotional and value-based aspects, as many residents have family and friends in both Russia and Ukraine. Furthermore, since 2022, a significant proportion of young people have come into direct contact with Ukrainian refugees, providing them with a first-hand understanding of the devastating consequences of military aggression.

Regardless of their place of residence or age, all students condemned the war. Most teenagers expressed sympathy for Ukraine and its people. Some participants did not clearly support either side, either because they were apolitical or because their primary concern was the fate of Estonia and their own region. There were also mentions of distrust towards both sides of the conflict. However, despite the sensitivity of the topic, it can be said with a high degree of certainty that none of the Russian-speaking young people in Ida-Viru county supported Russia's war of aggression. Furthermore, Ukrainian refugee students participating in the project noted the warm and sympathetic attitude of their Russian-speaking classmates.

Discussion of common myths was also sparked by the topic of Ukrainian refugees, notably. For instance, in early 2024, several groups claimed that Ukrainians were being prioritised for jobs over local residents, or that Estonia was supporting Ukraine too much. However, by the second half of the year, these narratives had largely disappeared from the agenda, having been replaced by local economic issues, such as tax increases and budget problems.

Another persistent myth that circulated in early 2024 was that Ukrainian children were more readily accepted into state high schools and other educational institutions, where they were supposedly given preferential treatment and special support. However, by the end of the year, this narrative had almost disappeared. Interestingly, Ukrainian students, who were present in some of the groups, demonstrated a higher level of general

awareness; they had been following political news on social media, mainly TikTok and Instagram, and later Telegram, even before the war began. Some of them even mentioned channels specialising in political analysis.

Geopolitical topics of particular concern to Russian-speaking youth in Ida-Viru included NATO's combat readiness, the US presidential election, and China's growing influence. There was a particularly high amount of disinformation and conspiracy theories about the US, which probably indicates sources of distorted information. Young people generally had a positive perception of China: they spoke about hard work, technological development, clear order, and the desire for peace. At the same time, almost no one mentioned human rights violations or the authoritarian system. This suggests that China is successfully creating persistent information myths that are believed by a significant proportion of Russian-speaking young people in Ida-Viru, and most probably beyond.

Opinions on NATO were divided, ranging from positive and neutral to strongly negative. Some statements echoed the myth that NATO had provoked Russia into aggression, that the Baltic states are merely being used as military training grounds and that Western armies are incapable of defending their allies. However, around half of the young participants expressed support for NATO, arguing that allied troop presence increases Estonia's security and deters potential Russian aggression. Most of these participants had personal experience of interacting with defence force representatives through national defence lessons, Estonian Guards' summer camps[7], programmes of the Estonian Defence League and/or events organised by the Estonian Defence Forces and NATO allies.

[7] Eesti riigikatsjad – Guards of Estonia – Стражи Эстонии, www.facebook.com/estonian.guards

MEDIA LITERACY

Although many schools now include a course on media literacy in their curricula, the results of the project show that its implementation is uneven. The level of media literacy among seminar participants varied significantly. Students from educational institutions that address media issues, implement media projects and have motivated teachers demonstrated a higher level of resilience to the risks of the information environment.

At the same time, the importance of the family cannot be overstated. Many teenagers noted that they receive information, including unreliable information, from their parents. This suggests that adults, lacking sufficient media literacy themselves, unwittingly convey outdated information or erroneous narratives. During the discussions, many young participants referred to myths they had heard at home. However, most participants said that they rarely asked their parents for their opinion.

Although some high school students were well-informed users of digital platforms and fact-checking tools, this was the exception rather than the rule. Most participants lacked structured knowledge of the criteria for assessing the reliability of sources. While they recognised the importance of understanding the author, purpose and origin of content, they rarely applied this knowledge in practice.

During group assignments, participants often cited alleged news portals as sources of truth without verifying their authenticity. A typical response was, *'If it's written on this portal, then it must be true.'* This tendency was particularly evident among younger students (ninth-graders), who rarely discuss media literacy at school or at home.

When asked about the risks of the online environment, Russian-speaking students in Ida-Viru most often cited the following three risks: 1) internet fraud, 2) political manipulation and 3) cyberbullying. Up to 63% of participants admitted to having encountered these issues on social media. However, some refused to answer, which may also indicate the sensitivity of the topic.

One encouraging aspect was the stories about teenagers explaining to their parents or grandparents why certain content is not trustworthy. For instance, one participant recounted how her grandmother had believed a video of 'fantastic animals' that had been

created using artificial intelligence (AI). She had to spend a long time convincing her grandmother that it was fake. Another participant talked about a video of *'Putin's speech about the imminent end of the war'*, which was also generated by AI. The other students in the group recognised the fake and explained why it could not be trusted. The girl noted: *'I was very surprised. Now I will be more careful about such things.'*

The main sources of information for Russian-speaking teenagers in Ida-Viru were:

- TikTok, with up to 56% of participants naming it as their main source.
- Telegram — up to 38%;
- Instagram — about 17%.

YouTube, Discord and Facebook were mentioned much less frequently. Moreover, information on these social media channels is almost always consumed in Russian. Estonian and English are used less frequently, even when searching on Google, using ChatGPT and watching videos.

One positive aspect is that some teenagers discuss questionable content with their relatives or peers. However, this is still the exception rather than the rule. Many participants said that they did not fully understand that entertaining or disturbing content (e.g. *'killer virus'*, *'killer vaccines'*, *'end of the world'*) could be misinformation. While such videos generally prompt scepticism among school students, many do not realise the potential risks. For example, participants often fail to recognise that false information about vaccination can have a negative impact on people's behaviour and health.

EDUCATION

The topic of education proved important to most participants in the discussion seminars, becoming particularly relevant in the second half of 2024. This was due to the transition of Russian-language schools to teaching in Estonian, which sparked a wave of questions and doubts among teenagers, as well as the spread of various myths.

The most common statement, heard in almost all groups, was that *'Estonian-language secondary schools and technical colleges are reluctant to accept Russian-speaking students'*. However, some participants had studied or were planning to study at Estonian-language schools themselves, which casts doubt on such generalisations.

One myth that provoked an emotional reaction was that *'the government believes switching to Estonian as the language of instruction will automatically lead to widespread use of Estonian everywhere'*. Young people lamented the lack of a language environment outside school and the lack of real opportunities to practise Estonian in everyday life. Conversely, some participants directly refuted the narrative that *'no one is learning Estonian'*, stating that they are studying the language and intend to continue their education in Estonian-language high schools and universities.

The following exaggeration was also often heard: *'All schools have already completely switched to Estonian.'* However, many teenagers noted that the transition is gradual, and that there is a shortage of qualified teachers who can teach subjects well in Estonian. Overall, young participants were more concerned with the quality of their education and declining motivation than with the change in the language of instruction itself*: 'They are forcing us to study in Estonian without materials, support, or understanding.'*

Several groups discussed the following myth: *'Russian schools began switching to Estonian because of the war in Ukraine.'* However, only a few participants knew that the decision on the reform had been made long before 2022. This indicates a lack of basic knowledge of educational policy issues among schoolchildren. Thus, Russian-speaking young people in Ida-Viru have emotional reactions to the reform and lack reliable information. Nevertheless, they are willing to learn and require clearer explanations of the objectives and stages of the reform, as well as quality support from school and the state.

INTERETHNIC RELATIONS AND LANGUAGES

School students in Ida-Viru did not always react strongly to topics such as interethnic relations and language policy. In some groups, for instance, these issues were discussed less actively than the economy or education. However, the issue became emotionally charged in several discussions, particularly when abstract accusations of so-called 'Russophobia' were raised.

Many participants said they had heard the claim that *'Russophobia is on the rise in Estonia'.* At the same time, many teenagers were unable to explain what this meant exactly, who was making such statements and what the basis for these accusations was. They cited adults — parents and relatives — or social media as the main sources of such statements.

Another common misconception was that *'all Russian citizens are being expelled from Estonia'.* This coincided with a period of active discussion in the media and on social networks about the deportation or voluntary departure of some pro-Kremlin activists who were Russian citizens. However, school students were rarely able to name any of these individuals or explain the legal context.

There were also many misunderstandings about the language situation. For instance, the students themselves refuted the statement that *'there is no Estonian language at all in Ida-Viru'*, explaining that such an opinion is more often expressed by people who do not live in the region. Another myth was that *'only Russian is spoken in Narva and only Estonian in Tallinn'*. Teenagers with experience of communicating in different parts of the country refuted this, citing their own experiences.

The schoolchildren found the rumour that *'you are fined for speaking Russian in Estonia'* or *'you cannot speak Russian in public'* particularly absurd. They emphasised that they speak Russian in everyday life and have never experienced any such restrictions.

At the same time, they encountered another myth based on a logical fallacy: *'If Russian were completely eliminated, everyone would immediately start speaking Estonian.'* While participants agreed that knowledge of Estonian is necessary, they emphasised that this can only be achieved through high-quality teaching and the creation of a proper

language environment. Despite their knowledge of the language and their desire to integrate, many expressed doubt that *'they would ever be fully accepted in Tallinn, Tartu and other places in Estonia.'*

The myth of the *'revival of the USSR'* and the possibility of *'Estonia joining the new Soviet Union'* surfaced in a number of groups. However, for most Russian-speaking teenagers, Soviet history and related topics remained distant concepts, existing only in textbooks or conversations with older people. At the same time, they found it difficult to interpret this topic, wondering who to believe, how to distinguish myth from reality and how to reconcile the views of their parents and teachers.

In general, Russian-speaking teenagers in Ida-Viru do not shy away from discussing interethnic relations, although the topic rarely arises spontaneously in conversation. High school students are the most active participants in these discussions. Content on linguistic and ethnic issues is rarely sought out deliberately; rather, it appears in social media feeds or is discussed by adults. Although young people often consider the older generation to be illiterate when it comes to the media, they remember what they hear from older people and it leaves a lasting impression. Emotionally charged statements are rarely fact-checked, and a critical attitude towards such narratives is poorly developed.

SOCIO-ECONOMIC SITUATION

The perception of the socio-economic situation among Russian-speaking young people in Ida-Viru is evidently shaped by a number of factors, including public opinion, family environment, and popular narratives on social media. Discussion seminars held in various towns in the region revealed several myths and stereotypes held by teenagers, most of which can be attributed to the socio-economic situation in Ida-Viru and Estonia as a whole.

Analysis of the discussions showed that the economy aroused the greatest interest — it was almost always the first topic mentioned. This highlights its importance in the daily lives of teenagers and their families. Three main groups of sub-topics emerged: general perceptions of the Estonian economy; the state of the Ida-Viru economy; and prospects for the personal development of young people.

Many of the topics discussed revealed a deep-seated scepticism and pessimism regarding the prospects for regional and national development. However, these views may also be indicative of limited access to reliable information and of stereotypical attitudes towards the issue. It is also important to note that teenagers' views may be influenced by the tone of discussions within their families, at school, and on local social media platforms.

Many groups have expressed the opinion that Estonia's economy is in a deep crisis. One of the reasons given was *'too much aid to Ukraine'*. This narrative is actively circulating on social media and in everyday conversations, reinforcing the idea that *'the government should take care of its own people first'*. Meanwhile, teenagers are rarely aware that spending on support for Ukraine accounts for a small proportion of the state budget in absolute terms and has almost no impact on social spending.

Another myth is the accusation that the former prime minister Kaja Kallas is responsible for the *'economic collapse in Estonia'*. Overall, negative attitudes towards the Reform Party were frequently expressed. Russian-speaking teenagers repeated superficial, politicised assessments without considering the impact of the pandemic or previous economic cycles. This indicates a lack of critical thinking skills and an inadequate grasp of causality.

The tax system was also a hot topic. Opinions boiled down to the assertion that *'taxes in Estonia are rising while salaries and pensions remain low'*. Teenagers are most likely to adopt such attitudes from adults. In rare cases, opposing arguments were heard, such as those regarding high salaries in the IT sector, but these did not resonate with the groups. Conversely, stories about miners, engineers, and energy sector workers whom the participants knew personally inspired greater trust. There was also discussion of the view that *'the state provides little support for small businesses'*, reflecting the region's widespread paternalistic attitudes.

Teenagers perceive the Ida-Viru region as an area with low wages, high unemployment and a lack of prospects. The phrase *'Ida-Viru is the poorest county in Estonia'* was repeated many times. Although participants did mention some positive developments, such as bonuses for teachers, the creation of technology parks and job opportunities in the police and rescue services, these examples were few and far between and did little to change the overall tone of the discussions.

The loss of economic ties with Russia was also discussed. According to some young participants, this had a significant impact on local businesses. At the same time, the impact of the so-called Green Transition was perceived almost exclusively negatively. School students often spoke about the closure of enterprises and the imminent cessation of mining operations, claiming that this was *'killing industry'*. The experts note that this fear is largely dictated by family concerns.

There was also a myth that *'European Union funds were being wasted in Estonia'*. However, when asked to provide examples of specific programmes or projects being implemented in the region, the Russian-speaking teenagers were unable to do so, even though they do exist.

Teenagers mainly associated their future with moving away. Many referred to Ida-Viru as a *'dead end'*, believing that a decent education and career could only be obtained in Tallinn, Tartu or abroad, with Scandinavia being the most commonly mentioned destination. There was also the myth that *'Estonia is a big village'*, symbolising a lack of trust in the state's capabilities and perhaps even a desire to restore ties with Russia.

Finally, the topic of drugs was discussed, particularly in Kohtla-Järve and Jõhvi. Some participants shared specific stories about acquaintances who had struggled with addiction. This topic reinforced the general sense of unease.

These examples highlight a lack of knowledge and critical perception of information among Russian-speaking young people in Ida-Viru, as well as a lack of vision for positive scenarios. To overcome these challenges, promotional and educational initiatives are needed, as well as discussions about the region's prospects and presentations of positive success stories from Estonia, particularly from Ida-Viru.

ENERGY AND ECOLOGY

The perception of Estonia's energy sector among Russian-speaking young people in Ida-Viru is closely linked to the local context, particularly the region's reliance on the oil shale industry and the importance of the so-called Green Transition. Although the topic of energy was raised less frequently than general economic issues during the discussions, it evoked a strong emotional response among the teenagers. This is because many families are directly or indirectly involved in extracting and processing oil shale, and producing electricity.

The most common narrative was that *'oil shale would soon become worthless, the mines would close and the region would be left without work'*. This opinion was accompanied by anxiety, hopelessness, and a lack of alternatives. Participants noted that the *'green transition to nowhere'* is perceived more as a threat than an opportunity. Almost none of the teenagers mentioned professional retraining programmes or projects designed to support workers in the energy sector, even though such measures already exist.

Another popular myth concerns electricity prices. Many Russian-speaking students in Ida-Viru claimed that *'Estonia has the most expensive electricity in the EU'*, a narrative actively promoted by adults and the media, and perceived by teenagers as fact. Some also suggested that *'if it weren't for the Green Transition, everything would be cheaper and the shale stations would still be operating'*. However, most participants were unaware of how the single energy market or the CO_2 emissions quota system worked.

Notably, despite their concerns, attitudes towards renewable energy sources were generally positive. When the conversation turned to the environment, poor air and water quality were the issues that the students most often mentioned. However, nobody linked these environmental issues to the activities of the shale industry, highlighting the fragmented nature of environmental thinking.

News of the potential construction of a nuclear power plant in the region sparked additional interest among the young participants. Some rumours were mentioned during the discussions: *'They say that all hazardous waste will be stored in Sillamäe'*, but the participants could not specify which substances were involved or where this information came from.

Thus, the attitudes of young Russian-speaking people towards energy and environmental issues are shaped by persistent myths, fears of job losses, a lack of information about transformational reforms, and an inability to see the connection between local environmental problems and the region's industrial model. Overall, discussion of environmental issues was limited to specific local problems, highlighting the participants' narrow view of environmental and climate challenges. This emphasises the importance of systematic outreach and of involving students in discussions about the future of Ida-Viru in the context of the energy transition and related reforms.

LOCAL ELECTIONS 2025

In 2024, Russian-speaking students in Ida-Viru discussed participating in the elections. In Estonia, citizens and permanent residents aged 16 and over are eligible to vote in municipal elections. Most seminar participants were in this age group or close to it and were generally aware of their right to vote.

Many teenagers were also aware that Estonia intended to deprive Russian and Belarusian citizens of the right to vote in local elections. This issue was widely debated in society in 2024, finally being decided by parliament in 2025. However, the young participants were not overly concerned about this issue, as most of them held Estonian citizenship and would not be affected by any restrictions.

Interestingly, despite being aware of their rights, few Russian-speaking young people were willing to vote. Between 50% and 67% of teenagers in various groups said that they did not intend to participate in the October 2025 elections. Similar arguments emerged, such as *'Nothing will change anyway'*, *'I don't know who to vote for'*, and *'Nothing is decided at the local level; everything comes from Tallinn'*.

Meanwhile, a maximum of 42% of discussion group participants said they were willing to exercise their right to vote. Up to 27% of school students were undecided. This suggests a low level of motivation and insufficient understanding of the role of local authorities in regional affairs. Nevertheless, young participants in all Ida-Viru towns could name local mayors and other prominent political figures during discussions. While this indicates basic awareness of local politics, it does not translate into active civic engagement.

Overall, the results of the discussions demonstrate that political engagement is low among Russian-speaking young people in Ida-Viru. This is due to a combination of factors, including limited media literacy, sociopsychological apathy, distrust of state institutions and decision-makers, and an inability to assess political processes. These findings highlight the need for educational programmes that develop an understanding of democratic processes and the importance of voting and civic responsibility.

CONCLUSIONS

The general conclusions from the evaluation of the series of discussion seminars are based on careful observations and in-depth analysis conducted by experts during moderated discussions, teamwork activities, and individual and group reflections. They are also based on feedback from participants and question-and-answer sessions. The methodology developed by the experts for the discussion workshops proved effective in several respects:

- Raising young people's awareness of the practical aspects of cognitive biases and the threats associated with disinformation.
- Familiarising young participants with the main characteristics of hostile and dangerous narratives.
- Teaching principles and useful tools for verifying information.
- Identifying gaps and strengths in media literacy skills.
- Analysing the most common socio-political misconceptions and misrepresentations;
- Identifying the main characteristics of conspiracy theories and myths.
- Discussing the advantages of using a forward-looking, fact-based approach to governance.
- Expanding the temporal, thematic and semantic horizons of future planning.

According to experts, thematic workshops can encourage young people to think critically and change the way they consume information and take action, thereby strengthening their narrative literacy. Based on project experience, the majority of young participants reported in the feedback session that they had gained a deeper understanding of the causal relationship between uninformed opinions and misjudgements, as well as the negative consequences this can have in life. However, it is important to note that while activities aimed at developing narrative literacy among young people show promise, **their effect may diminish without constant reinforcement**. Research highlights the need for more integrated, repetitive and adaptive approaches

that combine practical tasks and different tools in order to promote long-term engagement with reliable information.[8]

The above thematic areas represent a structured concentration of a multitude of social, cultural and psychological attitudes, which helps to isolate the **areas of narrative risk**. Some of these are:

- problems based on reality, such as feelings of inequality and injustice, language barriers, and regional backwardness;
- reinforced by myths, rumours, fears, and disinformation;
- deliberately spread to polarise society and undermine trust in the state.

Among the opinions expressed, there were references to **conspiracy theories** and **technophobia**. Widespread myths about total control and super-powerful technologies exist alongside fears of science and artificial intelligence (*'AI will take over the world'*, *'the Americans created the Coronavirus to control and chip the population'*, *'global warming is fiction with no evidence'*). These narratives are often accompanied by anti-scientific views and anxiety about new technologies.

There was sometimes a noticeable **distrust of official sources, with a shift towards alternative or marginal information channels**. This is also accompanied by a pronounced generational gap in information behaviour (*'We look for information on the internet rather than asking our parents or teachers'*). Such attitudes undermine the authority of traditional educational institutions and the mainstream media. There is also tension between traditional and modern social norms, particularly regarding gender, identity, and morality — for instance, with regard to the rights of the LGBTQ+ community. Such topics provoke polarised reactions, contributing to generational divisions and reinforcing a sense of cultural instability.

Manipulative interpretations of international politics were commonplace, portraying external actors (most often the United States or the so-called 'collective West') as the source of all local problems (*'The United States profits from world wars'*, *'We donated two billion euros to Ukraine — and now Estonia has no money'*). These narratives are

[8] Nygren, T., & Efimova, E. (2025). Investigating the long-term impact of misinformation interventions in upper secondary education. *PLOS ONE*, 20(7), e0326928. https://doi.org/10.1371/journal.pone.0326928

dangerous because they create a simplified, accusatory view of the world, distracting attention from the internal or complex causes of difficulties.

Many statements reflected **deep scepticism towards political institutions and a sense of powerlessness.** Examples include *'Politicians only care about their own interests'*, *'There is no point in voting in Ida-Viru'*, *'Online voting is rigged in favour of the authorities'*, and *'The secret police arrest those who are disloyal'*. These attitudes can undermine participation in civic life and contribute to societal apathy and a refusal to engage with politics.

A significant proportion of the narratives focused on the **identity, marginalisation, and cultural alienation** of the Russian-speaking minority in Estonia. Examples include *'In Jõhvi, they were expelled from a school for speaking Russian'* and *'The path to the law faculty is closed to Russian speakers'*. It is important to distinguish between genuine issues, such as inadequate language learning support and regional disparities, and psychologically harmful narratives that exploit the perception of systemic discrimination and a 'ban on success'. These narratives often combine the erroneous perception of limited access to quality education and professional development, for example, *'Russian speakers have no opportunities for creativity here'* and *'Sport is the only way to succeed'*.

Young people often expressed **socio-economic concerns** and spoke about inequality. Economic narratives emphasised a lack of prospects, growing social anxiety, and a sense of injustice (*'The future here is only for IT specialists'*, *'Companies in Estonia are laying off workers — people are leaving'*, *'Unemployment in Ida-Viru is growing'*). The perceived injustice of resource redistribution reinforces the feeling that the political centre is distant from the real needs of the regional population (*'Huge aid to Ukraine against the backdrop of poverty in Estonia'*).

The problematic risk narratives described above are **markers of social perception** that may indicate:

- distrust of institutions, public figures and political decisions,
- feelings of vulnerability and isolation,
- a lack of participation and representation of interests in society.

While some attitudes deserve constructive attention as they reflect real imbalances, others need to be refuted and exposed as disinformation or destructive myths in order to develop **cognitive immunity** to such negative influences.

An analysis of the perceptions of Russian-speaking school students in Ida-Viru reveals several important trends that must be considered to **reduce the risk** of this group being subjected to disinformation and psychological manipulation.

Firstly, the prevalence of socio-economic issues in discussions highlights their urgent relevance to the daily lives of young Russian speakers and their families. School students convey negative narratives about rising prices, low wages, a lack of career prospects, and the alleged inefficient use of EU funds.

Secondly, discussions among young people often touch on geopolitics and security issues, despite their general lack of knowledge about contemporary global and regional processes. The distrust of state institutions and political processes evident among young people requires formal and informal educational programmes and curricula to be redesigned, incorporating narrative literacy alongside aspects of cognitive security, social resilience, democracy, and civic initiatives.

Thirdly, Russian-speaking young people tend to view issues relating to language and interethnic relations through a politicised media agenda rather than through their own experiences of intergroup communication. This often proves insufficient for creating sustainable cross-sectoral ties and professional relationships outside their usual monolingual circles.

Fourthly, from a socio-psychological perspective, an unclear sense of identity and the threat of rejection present further challenges for Russian-speaking young people in Ida-Viru as they navigate their way through personal and professional development. The ease with which false information can be disseminated, coupled with the vast quantity of available facts, fosters illusory loyalty towards those who offer straightforward and rapid solutions without asking challenging questions.

RECOMMENDATIONS

It is important to remember that this vulnerability is particularly evident during periods of uncertainty and crisis, such as when there is a lack of belonging or stable support, high levels of stress, traumatic experiences and underdeveloped critical thinking skills. All of these characteristics can be observed to varying degrees among Russian-speaking young people in Ida-Viru. Experts have therefore made several recommendations to remedy the situation in the medium and long term.

1. Improving the information environment

Accessible and engaging educational programmes must be developed to explain key political, economic and socio-psychological processes to young people. This could involve creating social media content, organising public debates, educational trips, interactive seminars, and multimedia projects, all of which would help to foster an objective perception of reality, risks, and opportunities, and create meaningful content.

2. Effective communication about development prospects

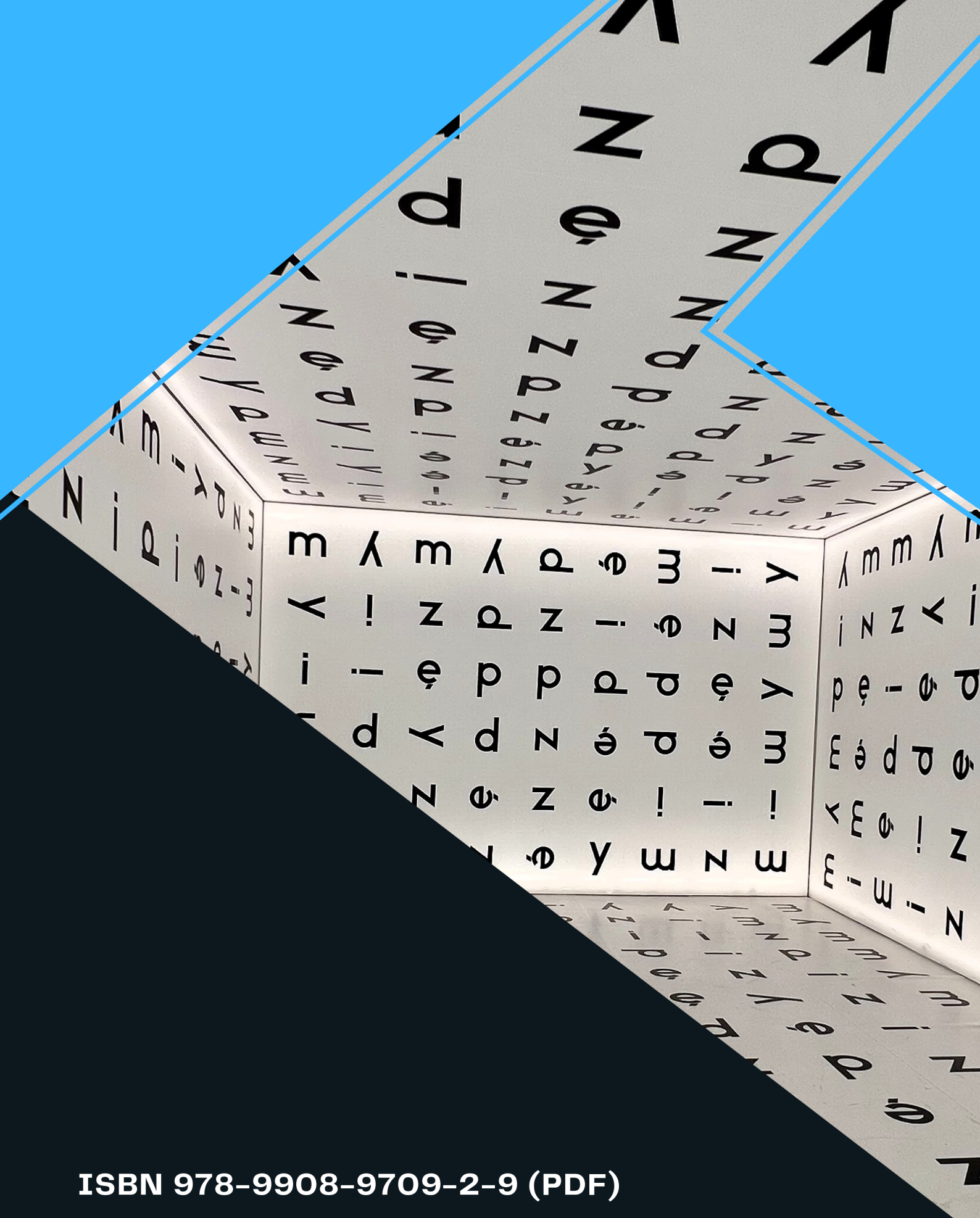
It is important to actively publicise the opportunities offered by new technologies and investments in various sectors to demonstrate to young people how the region and the country as a whole are successfully adapting to new realities. This will also help reduce feelings of hopelessness and strengthen the region's positive image. Activities could include meetings with local and national entrepreneurs, visits to modern businesses, scholarships and mentorship programmes for proactive young people, and internships in innovation hubs.

3. An open platform for discussion and engagement

In turbulent times, it is important to listen to and try to understand people with different points of view. This helps to encourage critical thinking, broadening experience and enabling important topics to be approached in a more nuanced way. It is crucial to actively engage Russian-speaking youth in fostering trust through various collaborative activities centred on cultivating shared socio-economic prosperity in Estonia.

An open public multilogue could help to solve the problem of the younger generation of Russian speakers born in free Estonia feeling psychologically held hostage by outdated categories that prevent them from talking about their identity from a civic standpoint and instead make them rely exclusively on ethnolinguistic characteristics. In other words, their sense of mental belonging to Estonia should encompass not only their place of birth and knowledge of the Estonian language, but also a **commitment to promoting shared national, cultural, and democratic values.** Narrative literacy fosters a deeper understanding of their own values and facilitates communication with like-minded individuals, mitigating social atomisation and cultivating a novel sense of civic belonging. This reduces feelings of fear, anxiety and vulnerability to informational and psychological manipulation.

From a national security and social resilience perspective, **fostering pro-Estonian, pro-European and democratic identities among Russian-speaking young people** will boost their self-confidence and prepare them for successful lives. This will give Estonia an additional layer of **cognitive superiority**, based on awareness of and confidence in its strengths, and a proactive stance on defending shared values.



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