



The Russian-Speaking Minority in Estonia: The Young Generation's Self-Identification and Sense of Belonging

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SASAN, SANM05, Spring 2026

Abstract

This master's thesis explores the ethnic self-identification of young Russian speakers from Estonia, as well as their sense of belonging to Estonia and the Estonian society. The research focuses on an understudied group of younger people who did not experience the life under the Soviet Union, which leads to them not sharing the identification of a "Soviet citizen" that was common for the older generation, as well as a much weaker connection to Russia. As most of the previous research on Russian-speakers in Estonia mostly focuses on their identity, belonging is likewise an understudied aspect when it comes to this demographic. However, belonging to Estonia and the Estonian society is major concern for Russian-speakers in Estonia today, for older and younger generation alike.

Keywords: Social Anthropology, Self-Identification, Belonging, Russian-speaking minority, Estonia

Acknowledgments

I would like to express my deepest gratitude to all of my interlocutors who would take time out of their day to talk about themselves and their experiences, both old friends and new faces - without them, this thesis would not have been possible. I would also like to thank my supervisor, Tova Höjdestrand, for guidance and feedback, as well as my friend, L, for constant moral support.

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1. Introduction

Even though I have lived in Estonia my whole life, I always had difficulty seeing myself as part of the Estonian society. Not only do I have Russian as my mother tongue, but I also do not have any Estonian relatives in my family, with most of my ancestors being from Russia and Belarus. However, I do not see myself as part of the Russian society either on account of not having a strong connection to the country beyond the knowledge that I have relatives there. Throughout my life, I would have discussions with my friends and family about how we are in some ways separated from the broad Estonian society but are also different from people in Russia. Since the Russian speaking population in Tallinn, the capital city of Estonia and my hometown, is about 46% (Küün, E., 2008, p. 184), it is considerably easy to live “separately” from Estonian-speaking population and only have strong connections with other Russian-speakers. And for the young people born after the fall of the Soviet Union, the connections with Russia or other possible Russian-speaking countries are not strong most of the time, and most of them firmly see Estonia as their home country – something that may differ when asking people who lived during the Soviet Union. Despite of this, many such young people feel disconnection from the broad Estonian society.

1.1 Objective and Research Questions

On account of a sizeable population that does not feel like they entirely belong to their own home country, as well as lack of knowledge and understanding of the subject outside of Estonia (and sometimes inside it), I consider the study of the Russian-speaking population in Estonia being extremely relevant, not only for Estonian studies, but also for the Baltic studies and Post-Soviet studies. In this study, I focused on young Russian-speaking people from Estonia who did not have the experience of living in the Soviet Union. The term “Russian-speaking” will be used instead of “Russian” since not all Russian-speaking people from Estonia are ethnically Russian or identify as Russian. The definition of a “Russian-speaking person from Estonia” is someone who lived most of their life in Estonia and has Russian as their mother tongue. The definition of “young” is “born after the fall of the Soviet Union”.

To limit the field further, while having Estonian relatives in the family did not disqualify a person from becoming an interlocutor, people who came from a household that is both Estonian-speaking and Russian-speaking, such as people with one Russian-speaking parent and one Estonian-speaking parent, were not interviewed. However, I do believe that a study of people who grow up in such mixed families is very much worthwhile for future research.

For this research, I wanted to investigate the ethnic self-identification of young Russian-speaking people from Estonia, as well as their sense of belonging to Estonia and the Estonian society. By “Estonia”, I mean the country itself, while by “Estonian society” I mean the dominant ethnic group of Estonia, or in other words, Estonian-speaking Estonians. I chose to research self-identification due to identity being a common subject of study on Russian speakers in Estonia, and to contrast those studies, I wanted to bring attention to a person’s ability to choose and change their ethnic identification. The aspect of belonging was actually discovered during the research process rather than considered from the start, but as it turned out to be of great importance, I decided to include it as one of the main aims of this research. Thus, the research questions are:

- How do young Russian speakers in Estonia identify themselves?
- What makes up the sense of belonging of young Russian speakers to Estonia and the Estonian society?

Additionally, I will also consider the possible reasons that can influence a person’s self-identification.

1.2 The Thesis Structure

I will start this thesis by first giving the reader some background information on the Russian-speaking population in Estonia. Then, I will introduce the theoretical framework and methodology that was used for this research. To start of the presentation of empirical material, I will present the ethnic self-identification of young Russian-speakers from Estonia in comparison to the older generation, as well as discuss possible factors that can influence a person’s self-identification. Next, I will move on to explore the culture, traditions and values of young Russian speakers. After that, I will focus on the separation of Russian speakers from Estonians, as well as the possible reasons for said separation. In the end of the paper, I will turn to the concept of belonging, discuss the “strength” of belonging of young Russian-speakers to

Estonia and the Estonian society, as well as discuss why belonging is important in the first place. Lastly, I will conclude the thesis with a conclusion chapter that will summarise all the main points.

2. Background Information

The majority of young Russian-speakers were born in Estonia due to their ancestors moving into Estonia for work when it was still a part of the USSR. This work migration was part of the Sovietization effort that the Soviet Union started after reclaiming the Baltic states from Nazi Germany in 1944. A great number of Estonians were shot or deported, greatly decreasing their numbers, and Russian replaced Estonian as the official language in the country. Furthermore, Estonians who decided to return home after the war were not allowed to move back to certain areas, such as the city of Narva. Instead, the Soviet government replaced them with workers from other parts of USSR, mostly with those from Russia, Ukraine and Belarus (Hernad, W., 2012, p. 1).

These workers were often settled in urban areas, as well as areas designated for industrial development (Delgrande, A., J., 2019, p. 73). This resulted in the capital city, Tallinn, currently having a roughly 50-50% split between Estonians and Russian speakers, as well as several regions having a primarily Russian-speaking population. Some towns with larger Estonian populations also ended up with several primarily Russian-speaking neighbourhoods, such as the Lasnamäe neighbourhood in Tallinn.

After the fall of the Soviet Union, Estonian became the only official language in the country. Russian speakers make up about 30% of the population, but the Russian language has no official status. However, there are some cultural institutions that operate in Russian, such as the Südalinna Teater (Theater of Südalinn), which was previously known as Vene Teater (Russian Theater) – with the name change happening after the start of war in Ukraine. Basic public services are also often available in Russian, and municipalities with high Russian-speaking populations offer even more services in Russian.

Since Russian-speaking migrants had no reason to learn Estonian before the fall of the Soviet Union, many of them could not speak the official language. In fact, after the fall of the Soviet Union, only 13.1% of Russian speakers could speak Estonian proficiently (Delgrande, A., J., 2019, p. 74). This number has obviously changed with time, and the young Russian speakers in Estonia today have a much better command of the Estonian language compared to their ancestors. This is mainly due to them having to learn Estonian in schools and kindergartens.

If a town in Estonia has a significant number of Russian speakers, then it will have schools and kindergartens with Russian as the main teaching language. While not all, a majority of young Russian-speakers would go to such kindergartens and schools. In the case of my interlocutors, most of them have attended such schools and kindergartens for Russian-speakers, with only a couple of people going to Estonian kindergartens or schools. Even those who went to Estonian schools started out in schools for Russian-speakers and changed to Estonian schools during middle-or high school.

In schools for Russian-speakers, some subjects are still taught in Estonian, with their number increasing with each school year. By high school, 60% of subjects should be taught in Estonian (Hernad, W., 2012, p. 3), but this is often difficult to apply in practise, and the quality of the Estonian language instruction may be poor (Astapova, A., 2022, p. 501). As of recently, the government decided to transition all schools with Russian as a teaching language into schools that teach fully in Estonian. However, all of the interlocutors have finished high school before the reform, so this reform will not be considered in this research.

When it comes to citizenship, most young Russian-speakers would have an Estonian citizenship. However, that was not the case for the older generation. After the fall of the Soviet Union, Estonian citizenship was only granted to those who already were Estonian citizens before Estonia got annexed by the USSR (Maj, D., 2023, p. 32) and to those who were descendants of those residing in Estonia before 1939 (Hammond, A., 2021, p. 2). Those who were not eligible for the citizenship on this basis had to pass a citizenship test, which requires a person to prove their knowledge of the Estonian constitution and the Estonian language at B1 level (Maj, D., 2023, p. 42).

This law still holds true today, and in most cases, unless a person has or had an ancestor with an Estonian citizenship, they would have to pass the test to receive it. From what the young people who did have to pass the test told me, the current version of the test is not very hard. However, it should be considered that younger people in general have a higher level of the Estonian language compared to older people, meaning that they would have a much easier time completing the language part of the citizenship test compared to the older generation.

It is clear that the Estonian government puts much emphasis on having Estonian ancestry to be eligible for the Estonian citizenship, and people who do not have any Estonian ancestry have to put in extra effort to acquire citizenship even if they were born in Estonia. It should be mentioned that it is not always the case – for example, I got Estonian citizenship despite not

having any Estonian ancestry because my father changed his citizenship by passing the test. Getting Estonian citizenship is not a big issue for young Russian-speakers, as they could get it from birth or pass the test quite easily. In fact, all of my interlocutors have Estonian citizenship with the exception of one person, who has a dual Estonian - Russian citizenship.

3. Theory

3.1 Ethnic Self-Identification

As one of the main research questions in this thesis is “how do young Russian speakers in Estonia identify themselves”, I will first explain how I went about asking my interlocutors about that during the interviews. Since the interviews were in Russian, I would usually phrase my question as something along the lines of “what is your self-identified *natsionalnost* (*национальность*)?” *Natsionalnost* is a Russian word that does not really have a good equivalent in English, as it essentially means something in-between of ethnicity and nationality. For the ease of reading, I decided to go with “ethnic” rather than “nationality” when translating from Russian to English, as I consider it to be closer to what both me and the interlocutors had in mind for that question. However, I did use the Russian word “*natsionalnost*” in some places, mostly when quoting my interlocutors, or would write “ethnicity and nationality” when an interlocutor was explicitly talking about them both. So now, I will explain what exactly I mean by “ethnic” and then will move on to define self-identification.

Since the 1960s, “ethnicity” has become a commonly used word in anthropology, though few of those who used the term bothered to define it. This is largely due to there being different approaches to ethnicity, though all of the approaches in anthropology agree that ethnicity has something to do with the classification of people and group relationships. In everyday language, the word “ethnicity” is mostly associated with race - which it can be, but not necessarily - and often goes hand-in-hand with the issues of minorities and race relations. However, in anthropology it specifically refers to aspects of relationships between groups which consider themselves, and are regarded by others, as being culturally different. By this definition, majorities and dominant groups in societies are just as “ethnic” as the minorities (Eriksen, T., H., 2010, p. 5).

In other words, the term ‘ethnicity’ refers to relationships between groups whose members consider themselves distinctive from one-another. For the concept of ethnic distinctions to develop a society, the groups of people must have some sort of contact with each-other and must consider each-other to be somehow culturally different from themselves. Ethnicity is not a property of a group, but rather, an aspect of a relationship between different groups. While it

is often connected to race, it does not have to be – people of the same skin colour can very well be of different ethnicities (Eriksen., T. H., 2010).

As was mentioned in the introduction, not all Russian-speakers in Estonia are ethnically Russian, hence dividing Estonia into two ethnicities – Estonian and Russian – would obviously be incorrect. Hence, it would be better to divide the Estonian society into linguistic groups based on one's mother tongue – Estonian-speaking, Russian-speaking, and bilingual. The terms “ethnic” and “ethnicity” here refers specifically to ethnic groups that a person relates themselves to, which in this case can be determined by their biological connection or by a connection to Estonia as their place of birth. Since I put emphasis on the agency of a person to essentially “select” their ethnicity, I opted to use the term “ethnic self-identification” rather than “ethnic identity”.

I chose to use the term “self-identification” instead of “identity” due to “identification” being a more processual and active term compared to “identity” (Kemppainen, R., P., et al., 2015, p. 339), which goes against the notion of identities being “static”. Identification may be designated by the person themselves or by others (Ibid., p. 339), which would imply that self-identification is purely designated by oneself. However, self-identification still occurs in a dialectical interplay with the identification by other, with such aspects as language, culture, and education influencing how a person will identify (Ibid., p. 340). This is why I will also discuss the possible factors that had influenced the self-identification of my interlocutors.

3.2 Belonging

Belonging is often seen as either a synonym for citizenship (in a broad sense of the term) or a synonym for (mostly ethnic or national) identity (Antonsich, M., 2010, pp. 1-2). However, the concept of belonging is more complicated than that, and while it includes the concepts of citizenship and identity in it, it can also be described as the feeling of being “at home” and the feeling of being “safe” in a place (Ibid., pp. 3-4). Even the concept of “feeling at home” can have multiple meanings, as it can either mean an attachment to a particular place, or a feeling of comfort and security (Ibid., p. 6). While both meanings are, in my opinion, relevant when discussing belonging, in this specific case, the attachment to a place will be more important, as will be demonstrated in a later chapter. But first, I will list the factors that contribute to a person feeling “at home” that are relevant to this thesis.

First would be the auto-biographical factors – the place where a person was born and has grown up often remains as a central place to that person, and the continued presence of family members in the same place, as well as memories of one’s ancestors, influences the feelings of belongingness (Antonsich, M., 2010, p. 8). Second are relational factors, which includes strong ties, such as family and friends, as well as “weaker” ties, such as strangers with whom a person shares the public spaces (Ibid., p. 8), though the strong ties influence the sense of belonging much stronger (Ibid., p. 9).

The third would be language. Language can both mark the “us” and “them” distinction between groups who use different languages, as well as evoke a sense of community between people who not merely understand what you say, but also what you mean (Ibid., p. 9). Lastly, there are also legal factors, such as citizenship, (Ibid., p. 10), as well as societal ones, the relevant one here being the feeling of inclusion or exclusion at a given place (Ibid., 12).

While the aforementioned aspects can also be important to identity and identification, and while there certainly can be an overlap between belonging and identification, these concepts should still be considered separate. The reason for that would be the fact that a person can potentially achieve, or wish to achieve, a sense of belonging to a place without wanting to identify with the dominant ethnicity of that place.

4. Previous Research

A majority of the previous research on Russian speakers in Estonia has to do with the questions of identity and integration. These topics were especially common in the late 90's and early 00's, in other words, not too long after the fall of the Soviet Union, though they are still being talked about today. In this context, a hyper-focus on these two themes is not surprising – a substantial minority of people who often did not speak the official language in the county and many of whom were unable to gain citizenship would undeniably be a cause of concern. Some research would reflect on the flaws of the Estonian integration policies towards Russian speakers, while others dwelled into their sense of identity and self-identification.

The research done on the integration policy would cover the strict naturalisation process and other reasons for why the integration process has “failed”, one of those works being *Together or Apart? The Russian-Speaking Minority in Estonia and Its (Dis)Integration into Society after 1991* by Dorita Maj (2023). The research done on identity and self-identification, then, was noticeably focused on essentially alleviating the fear of the Russian-speaking minority siding with Russia and “rebellious” against Estonia. One example of such research would be a paper called *Identity Dynamics of Russian-speakers of Estonia in the Transition Period* (2003) by Triin Vihalemm & Anu Masso, where the authors argue that Russian speakers “banding together” against the Estonian state due to political exclusion is quite unlikely due to them “distancing themselves from previous identity- references, individualization and fragmentation of identity” (p. 92).

After this fear of “rebellion” went away and the public saw that no separatist movement or anything of the sort was formed, the topic of identity remained, but shifted more towards discussing why Russian-speakers are so different from each-other, but still “separated” from the Estonian society. An example would be *The Ethnic and Linguistic Identity of Russian-Speaking Young People in Estonia* (2008) by Elvira Küün, which investigated how the language environment influenced the self-identification of young Russian-speakers. Of course, the ones who were “young” in 2008 are not the younger generation of Russian-speakers in Estonia today, and my thesis is an attempt to cover a demographic that is usually understudied in the research concerning Russian-speakers in Estonia.

Demographically, the majority of research on Russian-speakers in Estonian covers a generation that has experienced Soviet Union and may have difficulties acquiring Estonian citizenship. Additionally, a great deal of research on Russian-speakers in Estonia happens to be done in

Narva, a city with a very high Russian-speaking population, and on working class and middle-class, middle-aged people. The demographic that I studied, that is, young people who did not experience Soviet Union, have Estonian citizenship, who are currently residing in the capital or grew up in it, and most of whom are currently pursuing university degrees, will surely bring some new perspectives on this topic.

The last paper that I would like to mention is *Of Homogenous 'Freaks' and Heterogenous Members: Cultural Minorities and their Belonging in the Estonian Borderland* (2021) by Alina Jašina-Schäfer. While it is a primary example of research done on the common demographic of older Russian speakers from Narva, this paper stood out to me due to focusing on the concept of belonging, rather than identity. I got inspired by this shift in focus and decided to include belonging as one of the themes for this thesis.

5. Methodology

The main methods that were used for this research are semi-structured one-person interviews and autoethnography. Eleven people have been interviewed, aged 18 to 27. 10 interviews were recorded online on Zoom, and one was recorded in person. All of the interviews were done in Russian, and all the translations from Russian to English were done by me. This research is also technically an insider ethnography, as I myself am a Russian-speaking person from Estonian who was born after the fall of the Soviet Union.

As was mentioned, the majority of the interviews were recorded online due to me being not in Estonia during the fieldwork period. There are certain benefits to doing online interviews, such as cutting the potential travel costs and being able to do interviews with people that otherwise would not be geographically available to me (Kinash, S. & Crichton, S., 2003, p. 3), as well as it being more convenient for my interlocutors as they could do the interviews from home whenever they were free. I imagine that the convenience afforded by online interviews led to me recruiting more interlocutors that I would have otherwise.

However, there was one significant disadvantage to this method. Doing the interviews online resulted in me not having prolonged relationships with most of my interlocutors, which was the main methodological weakness of this research. Due to this, I conducted repeat interviews with 8 people to gather more information that I would have with single interview per person, and some emails or messages were exchanged with some of them after that. However, I was not able to conduct repeat interviews with my 3 remaining interlocutors in time, and 1 to 2 interviews per person are not, in my opinion, enough to constitute a prolonged relationship.

One more point worth mentioning is that while I always turned on my camera during video calls, mostly because I assumed that having the interviewee see who is talking to them would make them feel more at ease, I let my interlocutors decide whether they wanted to turn on their camera or not. I felt like this approach would lead to people who would be otherwise nervous to do interviews feel more comfortable, which is something that would not be possible to do during in-person interviews. This led me to missing the appearance and facial expressions of some of my interlocutors (Kinash, S. & Crichton, S., 2003, p. 3), but I did not feel like it had any significant impact on the quality of the interviews.

Another method that was used was autoethnography. Autoethnography is a method that seeks to describe and systematically analyse personal experience in order to understand cultural experience (Carolyn, E., et al., 2011, p. 273). In other words, autoethnography combines characteristics of autobiography and ethnography. Most often autoethnographies consist of “epiphanies” – remembered moments perceived to have significantly impacted a person’s life (Ibid., p. 275) and that are made possible by being part of a specific culture and/or by possessing a particular cultural identity (Ibid., p. 276). Autoethnography is often criticised for being insufficiently rigorous, theoretical, and analytical, as well as due to people who employ this method doing too little fieldwork, observing too few cultural members, and using biased data based on personal experience (Ibid., p. 283).

I will not debate here the quality of autoethnography as a method, as it was mostly used due to me not being able to travel to Estonia during the fieldwork period. In this thesis, autoethnography was mostly used to “substitute” participant observation and supplement the thesis with additional details, as the main focus remains the experience of my interlocutors. Since I was not writing an actual autoethnography but rather using it as an addition to the interviews, the main challenge was figuring out whether I have put too much or too little of “myself” into the text. I opted to not include my own experience on every topic, but rather, include “myself” only to fill out the gaps that were not covered by the interviews. There were sometimes deviations from this “rule”, but they were very rare.

Regarding reflexivity, two important aspects should be mentioned. The first one is that I, as was already mentioned, belong to the group that I am doing my research on. An ethnographic insider is typically defined as “someone whose biography gives them a lived familiarity with the group being researched” and one who “shares membership in a social group with research participants” (Giazitzoglu, A. & Payne, G., 2018, p. 1151). By these definitions, I would absolutely qualify as an insider ethnographer. However, the insiderness in the field is fluid, as some insider ethnographers can be total insiders who have deep experiences with the researched group, as well as partial insiders, who retain a degree of detachment from the research group (Ibid., p. 1151). Kirin Narayan (2014) also writes about how instead of emphasizing the dichotomy between outsider and insider anthropologist, it is better to consider an anthropologist having “shifting identifications” in the field that are influenced by different factors, such as education, class, race, gender, sexual orientation, or the duration of time spent in the field (pp. 671-672).

While I do belong to the group that I have done my research on, I also had no prolonged relationships with most of my interlocutors, which made me consider myself more of a partial insider due to having some detachment from most of my research group. Nevertheless, I should still consider the advantages and disadvantages of so-called “insider ethnography”, as my status as a young Russian-speaking person from Estonia did have and influence on the research process.

The main advantage of insider ethnography would be an easy access to the field. Outsider ethnographers are more likely to encounter practical problems of gaining physical and social entry to a research site (Giazitzoglu, A. & Payne, G., 2018, p. 1150). Me being a Russian-speaking person from Estonia resulted in me not worrying about a language barrier, as well as in a relatively easy recruitment of interlocutors. I started with interviewing my closest friends and then reached out to an Estonian university where I got my bachelor’s degree, where most of my remaining interlocutors were recruited from. One person was recruited from a friend of my family, and another is an acquaintance of mine. Another advantage of insider ethnography is that insider ethnographers are often more readily accepted by the group being studied (Ibid., p. 1150). I believe that me belonging to the same group as my interlocutors, as well as being the same age as them, did make it easier for us to talk to each-other, as I will talk about later.

The main disadvantage of insider ethnography would be that an insider ethnographer may have less analytical awareness of the implications of cultural meanings they share with members of the group that they study (Giazitzoglu, A. & Payne, G., 2018, p. 1150). This was my main hurdle after not having prolonged relationships with most of my interlocutors, and the one that I was unable to overcome. The little participant observation I tried to do during the periods when I was able to go to Estonia have not led me to learn anything “new” about the group I was studying. Nothing stood up to me, and I was unsure of what to look for in social situation. This is something I would like to work on more if I ever decide to continue this research.

Another disadvantage of insider ethnography is that an insider ethnographer might take their insider status for granted and lead to them thinking that they have clear and accurate knowledge of the culture (Naeke, A., 2012, pp. 5-6). I tried to combat that by not presupposing that my experience is the same as of my interlocutors and would ask questions even if I thought that the answers to them seemed “obvious” to me. In this regard, I believe I have succeeded, as I already went into the research thinking that I will most likely end up with different perspectives due to the Russian-speakers in Estonian being a very heterogeneous group.

The second important aspect that influenced my research is that 3 of my interlocutors are my friends and one of my interlocutors is an acquaintance. All 5 of us went to the same school and two of them were my classmates. Similarly to how I avoided taking my position as a partial insider for granted, I did not presuppose that I already know everything about my friends, even if we have already discussed some of topics of this research before. However, I did not want the interviews to feel too unnatural, with me and my friends acting like we do not know each-other. Therefore, those interviews were conducted in a more informal manner, which I found to be beneficial for the research, as that results in more open and relaxed conversations. As was expected, I found it much easier to talk to the people I know, and the interviews with these four individuals were among the most successful. I would also consider myself a full insider with the 3 interlocutors who were the closest to me, as even if we did not have a prolonged relationship during the fieldwork period, we did have it from all the way back to when we went to school together. Again, the insiderness in the field is fluid.

Additionally, it should be mentioned that 6 of my interlocutors come from the same program from the same university. Together with other interlocutors, the interviewed group that I ended up with consisted mostly of middle-class people pursuing higher education, which could have resulted in me gaining a narrower perspective on the subject. However, it did have the benefit of me being of the same age and class as my interlocutors, which made the communication smoother, especially when it came to age. This could be due to the fact that in the Russian language, there is a linguistic difference when talking to someone who is older than you. As I was around the same age as my interlocutors, we used the language that one would use to talk to their peers, which made the conversation less stiff that it would have been otherwise.

All of the names used in this paper are pseudonyms. The interlocutors were informed about the nature of the research and were told that it will be read by academic staff at Lund university and other students. They were also informed that the interviews will be recorded, and that both the recording and transcriptions will be deleted after the completion of the thesis.

6. Self-Identification

6.1– What am I?

Before the fall of the Soviet Union, the Russian speakers in Estonian and other parts of the USSR shared a collective identity of a Soviet citizen (Vihalemm, T. & Masso, A., 2003, p. 92), and the category of Soviet citizen was the most common self-designation among Estonian Russian-speakers during the Soviet period (Ibid., p. 99). It is not to say that every Russian-speaker in the Soviet Union was the same. For example, the Russian-speakers in the Baltic countries have become “Balticized” in that they have adopted many local behavioural patterns and values (Vihalemm, T. & Masso, A., 2003, p. 93), which would make them culturally different from Russian-speakers in other post-Soviet, non-Baltic countries. The point is that before the collapse of the Soviet Union, the Russian-speakers living in the Soviet Union could all identify as Soviet citizens no matter what their ethnicity is or where exactly in the USSR they live.

In fact, even after the fall of the Soviet Union, the number of Russian speakers in Estonia who identified with USSR in some way was still high. In 1986, this number amounted to 78%. However, by 1991, this number had dropped to 59%, which is much lower compared to the numbers on other post-Soviet states, such as Georgia or Uzbekistan. Even in cities with a high Russian-speaking population, such as Narva or Tallinn, the trend of deidentification with the USSR has continued (Delgrande, A., J., 2019, p. 78).

It is especially true for the younger generations who were born after the fall of the Soviet Union. For example, many of the young Russian-speakers in Estonia do not rely on the Soviet World War II memories as a marker for their Russianness, or do not identify strongly with Russia to begin with. This does not mean that the Soviet past has no influence on their present experience – rather, it means that the process of dwelling in the independent Estonian and Europe as a whole introduces a change to a Russian-speaker’s worldview and daily life (Jasina-Shäfer, A., 2021, p. 35). However, after the fall of the Soviet Union, the basis for this collective identity of Soviet citizen was still destroyed, and the young Russian-speakers in Estonia became a more heterogeneous group.

To demonstrate how heterogeneous a group of young Russian-speakers in Estonia are, I will present the self-identification of my interlocutors. I consider this to be important due to the

Russian-speakers being often represented as one homogeneous group in media (Vihalemm, T. & Masso, A., 2003, p. 109) despite them being highly differentiated according to their ethnic origins, citizenship status, cultural orientations and political ideologies (Vihalemm, T., 1999, p. 19). This depiction of the Russian-speaking minority as homogenous leads to the native Estonians assuming that all Russian-speakers are not loyal to the Estonian state (Hammond, A., 2021, p. 66), which is not the case, especially for younger generation.

The self-identification of young Russian speakers from Estonia is often mixed or indeterminate, and they often do not see themselves as fully Estonian or Russian. Despite all of the interlocutors considering themselves to be Estonian citizens, they would give varied responses when asked about their ethnic self-identification. For example, when asked what he considers his ethnic self-identification to be, an interlocutor named Markus said:

“When I introduce myself to others, be they European or Russian, Russian-speaking, I always say that I am an Estonian, because Estonia is my only homeland and the place where I feel at home, and there are no other places like that. If speaking about inner self-identification, inside yourself, then I probably count myself equally among Estonians as well as Russians, because I have a mixed heritage, I grew up in Estonia, but my mother tongue is Russian, I have an Estonian citizenship. Maybe I am closer to Russian culture than Estonian, (...), but personally, inside myself, I identify equally as both, between the two natsionalnost.”

Markus sees himself equally as both Estonian and Russian because he considers himself to have enough aspects to identify as both. In contrast, another interlocutor's, Lena's answer as to what she considers her ethnic self-identification to be is this:

Lena – “I see myself as an Estonian.”

Me – “Not even a Russian-speaking Estonian? Just as an Estonian?”

Lena – “Well, to be more specific, Russian-speaking Estonian, because I do not have enough social language skills and connection to be fully immersed in Estonian society, that is, I am not a part of it, I am still very separated (from it). I cannot say that I am a full-fledged Estonian, as they (Estonians) like to call it (laughter). But I do not feel a connection to my relatives in Russia, I am very separated from them.”

When answering this question, rather than focusing on what she has, like Markus has done, Lena focused on what she does not have. She does not feel like a “full-fledged Estonian” because she feels separated from the Estonian society, and she does not see herself as Russian either due to feeling separated from her relatives in Russia. Lack of strong connection to either

Estonians or her relatives in Russia made is so that she does not see herself completely as either identification. However, her answer was interesting as she answered that she identifies as Estonian, saying that she identifies as a Russian-speaking Estonian only when I asked her to clarify. While she related her self-identification to her home county, deep inside she cannot fully relate herself to Estonians, adding the “Russian speaking” part to her self-identification as something that separates her from Estonians.

My own view on my own self-identification is similar, which could be because me and Lena have similar backgrounds – I also feel disconnected from Estonians as well as my relatives in Russia and Belarus. However, I usually introduce myself as a “Russian-speaking person from Estonia”, which comes across as me distancing myself from “being Estonian” even more than Lena does, as well as me refusing to identify with both Russianness and Estonianess.

A somewhat similar answer was given by another interlocutor called Alisa, who answered like this:

“I consider myself an Estonian, or Russian Estonian (...). Because, well, it is clear that I am not Russian. I do have relatives in Russia, but I never lived in Russia, and my parents were also born technically on Estonian territory, though it was Soviet Union at the time. That is why I am not Russian in this case. Because of that, I generally consider myself an Estonian.”

Similarly to Lena, Alisa, first and foremost, related her self-identification to her home country. The fact that she leans more towards identifying as an Estonian is based on how she puts more weight on where she and her immediate family were born and lived for most of their lives, rather than her ancestry. This is an important aspect of self-identification, as different people will see different markers as more or less important for it. Nevertheless, she still adds the term “Russian Estonian” to her self-identification rather than seeing herself as a full Estonian.

The fact that different people will see different markers as more or less important for how they see their self-identification can also be seen in Vera’s case. When I asked her how she self-identifies, her answer was this:

“My parents are actually from Ukraine, and ethnically I am Ukrainian, but since I never spoke the Ukrainian language in my life, I am a Russian-speaking Ukrainian.”

I was curious due to the lack of the word “Estonian” anywhere in her self-identification, so I asked her if she had a stronger connection to Ukraine than Estonia, to which she then answered like this:

“No, I would say that (my) connection with Estonia is stronger, considering that I have never been in Ukraine.”

Even though she considers her connection to Estonia to be stronger than to Ukraine, she does not include said connection to Estonia into her self-identification, instead including her ethnicity and mother tongue. This shows that for Vera, ethnic roots and her first language are much more important factors for self-identification compared to what her home-county is, which is a different approach to self-identification compared to Lena’s and Alisa’s case.

I also happened to have two people with Finnish roots in my interlocutor group. These two people would be Emilia and Maria. Before discussing these two further, I will first give some context regarding said Finnish Roots.

The Finnish ancestry shared by these two interlocutors come from the Ingermanland Finns. Before the Russian Revolution in 1917, about one hundred and thirty thousand people of Finnish origin lived on Russian territory from the Narva River in the west to the Neva River in the east, and in the region north of St. Petersburg. Their numbers greatly decreased after the Second World War due to death, movements of people, and deportations (Matley, I. M., 1979, p.1). From the year 1917 to throughout the Soviet period, many of them moved, forcibly or voluntarily, to Estonia due to the close proximity of the country to the Ingria region (Ibid., pp. 5, 9, 11).

The majority of Ingrian Finns currently residing in Russia have assimilated into the Russian language and culture, and the majority of Ingrian Finns residing in Estonia have assimilated into Estonian language and culture, with only a small number of people being able to speak Finnish (Matley, I. M., 1979, p. 16). The Ingrian Finns who assimilated into Russian culture could then also move into Estonia like other Russian speakers for various reasons.

Going back to the interlocutors, Emilia identifies as a Russian-speaking Estonian Finnish person, while Maria feels closer to being an Estonian and Finnish person. What is interesting is that the Finnish part of their identity was important for both of them despite both of their families being assimilated into Russian culture. Emilia’s possible reasons for that will be discussed later, but Maria’s case is particularly interesting as, according to her, only her grandmother is really invested into their connection to Finnish culture and talks about it often. However, as most people in Maria’s family are more culturally Russian, said grandmother also tries to adapt to Russian culture. Despite this, Maria does not include this Russianness into her self-identification at all.

There were also people who struggled to define their self-identification in any way at all. This was highlighted in an answer given by an interlocutor named Vitalis. When asked what he believes his ethnic self-identification to be, he recounted how in the past, he would answer that he does not know. To me, he answered this:

“I cannot give a clear answer. I mostly associate myself with Estonia more than with Russia (...). But Russian culture, is like, closer (to me). Maybe the Estonian mentality is closer; but I am still more immersed in the Russian culture than the Estonian one (...) But I definitely see myself to a greater extent as a European than a person from Russia or Russian.”

After his answer, I pointed out how he avoided using terms related to ethnicity or nationality and used geographical locations instead. To this, he said that he sees ethnicity and nationality as constructs and believes that no one is purely of one ethnicity or nationality. He also added that to him, nationality and ethnicity are not an important factor for his self-identification. Instead, he sees his family’s academic status as the more important part to base his identity on, as many of his ancestors had high education and were engaged in academia.

To better explain Vitalis’s background, I will have to explain where the said ancestors of high education came from, that being the Russian intelligentsia. Intelligentsia is somewhat hard to describe, but it could be defined as a separate social class consisting of well-educated people from different economic classes in pre-Soviet Russian society. This “class” was held together by shared ideals of the importance of human freedom, rather than their economic status. As Nicholas I was nervous about this educated elite betraying the government, they were essentially confined to civil universities, where they came together with students of lower economic classes who held the same ideals. In the same universities, the gentry and the lower-class men both turned into writers, critics and professors. The universities were often subject to continual harassment by the government, often leading to the expulsion or arrest of the protesting students, as well as censorship and suppression of published works. Intelligentsia could be essentially described as a “class of expelled students and censored journalists”, that was always oppositional to the government, whether actively or purely ideologically, and were alienated from the rest of society (Malia, M., 1960).

As Vitalis’s parents are descendants of the intelligentsia, they inherited the same oppositional spirit towards the Russian government, as well as the alienation from the broader Russian society, which was mostly likely passed on onto Vitalis as well. This, in connection with him

being raised in Estonia, which distanced him from Russia even further, made Vitalis find more value in the academic status of his family rather than in his Russianness.

Similarly to Vitalis, an interlocutor named Andrej also had difficulty defining his self-identification. He said that he cannot see himself as Russian due to being too different from “the Russian natsionalnost” (as in Russians from Russia), and equally cannot see himself as an Estonian, which ends up in him seeing himself as a “citizen of the world”. He also heavily emphasized the lack of knowledge of both Russian and Estonian history as the reasons why he cannot connect to either identification. Both of these examples are intriguing, as they lead towards the ideas of the non-ethnicity, pan-European identity, and post-ethnic identity, which will be explored further in a last chapter.

Lastly, there were three people who, while still using the word “maybe”, said that they consider themselves to be more Russian than Estonian. One of these people was Sveta, whose answer could have been influenced by her coming from a town that has larger Russian-speaking population than an Estonian one. Another one was Anastasiya, who by the end added that she is half-Russian, half-Polish. This could be an example of placing more weight on one’s ancestry than place of birth. Additionally, she found out that she has Polish ancestry not too long before the interview, so the Polish part of her identity was not known to her for a long time. She previously thought that she was half-Belarusian since her mother was born in Belarus, but her mother recently revealed that her parents and grandparents were Poles who lived on an ex-Polish territory that later became a territory of Belarus. This revelation made Anastasiya unsure of her self-identification and also serves as an example of self-identification being able to change depending on the situation, in this case, learning a previously unknown information about one’s ethnic roots.

The last person to identify as “more Russian” is Nikita, which I found interesting as he does have Estonian relatives, though he did mention that the “most Estonian” person in his family has passed away. Interestingly, when doing repeat interviews, he referred to himself as Russian Estonian and a Russian Estonian Armenian person. These answers present his self-identification as more mixed compared to his first answer of “more Russian”, but possibly placing the Russian part of his identification higher on the hierarchy, as it was listed first in all of his answers.

In a research paper written in 2003 called *Identity dynamics of Russian-speakers of Estonia in the transition period*, two main scenarios of the possible future developments of Russian-

speakers as a group after the fall of the Soviet Union were proposed: The first one was the rise of political or ethno-cultural particularism, and the second was further fragmentation and individualization of Russian-speakers in Estonia, leading to the previous stable identities being replaced with new and more fragmented identities (Vihalemm, T. & Masso, A., 2003, p. 94). I do not agree with the use of the term “fragmented identity” in the case of Russian-speaking people from Estonia since, even if it acknowledges their identities being multi-faceted, it does not acknowledge their ability to change in different situations, which was mentioned when I discussed Anastasija discovering that she had Polish ancestry. However, as can be observed, from the self-identification of just 11 people being quite different from each other, the first scenario did not come to be, and the Russian-speakers are quite individualized today.

6.2– Family and Self-Identification

What was discovered during the research was that family often plays a big role on how the interlocutors identify. More specifically, the importance that a person’s family place on their own ethnic identity (or identities) greatly influences the self-identification of said person. To showcase this, I will start again with Markus.

As was already mentioned, Markus identifies as 50% Russian and 50% Estonian despite the fact that he is only 25% Estonian biologically. His mother sees a lot of importance in their Russian blood, while his father, who is half-Estonian half-Russian, does not see it as important at all. While his father also does not put a lot of importance into their Estonian ethnicity either, he does find it important for him and Markus to know about the ancestors from his Estonian half, resulting in Markus having a very detailed knowledge about the Estonian part of his family. Additionally, Markus’ mother does not know a lot about her non-Russian blood – she is aware that she has ancestors from Caucasus, Central Asia, and Azerbaijan, but she is unaware of the exact details. This is why she mainly talks about her and Markus belonging to the Russian ethnicity. This all, in Markus’ own words, resulted in him identifying equally as both Russian and Estonian.

Other people whose family put a lot of importance on their ethnic roots were Emilia and Nikita. Despite the fact that Emilia was born and raised in Estonia, she still includes her Finnish roots in her self-identification. According to her, her family often talks about their Finnish ancestry and often travels to Saint Petersburg to visit graves of their Finnish ancestors. Hearing her

family often talk about their Finnish roots could have made her internalize it as part of her identity.

Nikita's family likewise puts a lot of importance on their roots – his Russian side on their Russian Roots, and his Armenian Estonian on their Armenian roots. According to him, the Estonian part of his family does not get mentioned often because they live in Estonia, and his family focuses more on their ancestry outside of the country. Since both sides in his family see a lot of importance in their ancestries, he ended up with a mixed self-identification, and he himself said that it is important for him to be able to identify with all his ethnicities.

Before examining cases in which a person's family did not place much importance of their ethnicity, I will discuss two "in-between" cases that are represented by Vera and Anastasija. Vera said that she does see some importance in their Ukrainian ethnicity, but not too much, adding the fact that they speak Russian, not Ukrainian. While Vera does identify as a Russian-speaking Ukrainian, she does not see much importance in her self-identification, similarly to her family – acknowledging their roots while not placing too much importance on them.

Anastasija's family does not talk about their Russian or Belarusian roots and usually would not talk much about their ancestry. However, after her mother told her about their Polish roots, she asked Anastasija if she could start learning the Polish language at university. Her mother cannot speak Polish herself and wants Anastasia to teach her the language as well, with Anastasija saying that her mother's Polish blood is seemingly important to her. This made Anastasija even more unsure of her self-identification and ended up in her giving a mixed response of "More Russian than Estonian" together with "half-Russian half-Polish".

The two people whose families put the least amount of importance of their ethnicity were Vitalis and Alisa. Vitalis' attitude towards the concept of ethnicity was most likely directly influenced by his family. According to him, his family does not see their Russian blood as important at all. This is directly influenced by their opinion on the Russian government – Vitalis' parents have moved away to Estonia from Russia because they disagreed with the regime. However, they do place a lot of importance on their ancestry – not so much by ethnic factor, but by a lot of their ancestors being professors and teachers. There is also the fact that Vitalis is very ethnically mixed, having Russian, Ukrainian, Estonian, Belarusian, Jewish, and Georgian ancestry. His father has also recently found out that they have Italian and Greek ancestry as well. As his family puts a lot more emphasis on their academic roots rather than ethnic ones, mostly likely due to their intelligentsia roots, as well as the fact that they are already

very ethnically mixed, making it harder to relate to just one ethnicity, Vitalis ended up similarly seeing more value in academic status of his family than his Russian or other ethnicities.

Alisa's family likewise does not consider their ethnic roots to be important and barely talk about them. This is possibly why she relates her self-identification to her home country rather than her ethnic roots, as they were not highlighted by her family in the first place. She also said that since the identities of all Russian speakers in Estonia are so indeterminate, having an ethnic self-identification is not important to her in the first place.

6.3– School Language and Self-Identification

Research that was done by Raija P. Kemppainen, Sterling C. Hilton & Ülle Rannut suggests that for Russian-speakers from Estonia, ethnic identification and school language are strongly related (2015, p. 337). According to their results, the likelihood of a person having an Estonian identification is more than a hundred-fold among Russian speaking children attending Estonian language schools compared to children attending Russian language schools (Ibid., p. 343). Due to this result, I likewise wanted to see whether the teaching language at the schools that my interlocutors have attended influenced their self-identification.

Interestingly enough, the results of my research show that the teaching language at schools does not strongly correlate with how a person identifies. The person who attended an Estonian language school the longest is Anastasija, who switched from a Russian language school in the 7th grade, and whose self-identification did not feature the word “Estonian”. The other two would be Emilia and Vitalis, who both switched to an Estonian language school after the 9th grade. Vitalis does not identify with any ethnicity, which makes Emilia the only person to mention the word “Estonian” when describing her self-identification, which does not make for a strong argument in favour of the school language influencing how one identifies. The person with the “strongest” Estonian identification would be Markus, who went to a Russian language school from the 1st grade until the end.

This difference could be because none of my interlocutors attended Estonian language schools from grade 1 to grade 12, as well as due to the number of my interlocutors being very small compared to the group studied in the other research. Regardless, for my informants in particular, the teaching language at the schools they have attended did not influence their self-identification. On the other side, the fact that none of my interlocutors identified as Estonian

could have been due to all of them staring out in schools for Russian speakers. Perhaps if I had interlocutors who went to Estonian language schools from the start, the correlation between self-identification and teaching language at one's school would be more visible.

6.4 – History and Self-Identification

It is considered that knowledge of one's own history can be an important factor in the creation of a group's ethnic identity (Eriksen, T. H., 2010, p. 85). Due to that, I wanted to examine whether the knowledge of history of a particular country or countries that a person has any personal relation to has any influence on their self-identification. More specifically, I wanted to examine whether the deeper knowledge of, for example, Russia's history over Estonia's history could make the person feel "more Russian". The idea came to me from one of the interlocutors, Andrej, mentioning that his lack of knowledge of Estonian and Russian history made him unable to connect to either identification.

The results show that there is some correlation, but it is hard to say whether the deeper knowledge of the Russian, Estonian, or other histories influence the person's self-identification or if the person's self-identification made them more interested in studying history related to one or several of their identification. On average, people who put the word "Estonian" into their self-identification consider having a good knowledge of the Estonian history. Alisa says that she knows Estonian history better than Russian history and would like to learn more because she was born there. Markus says that he knows both the Russian and the Estonian histories quite well, again corresponding with him equally identifying as an Estonian and Russian. Nikita likewise says that he has a good knowledge of both Russian and Estonian history.

As for people who identify more with being Russian, Anastasija says that she knows Russian history much better than Estonian one. She cites both the personal interest in Russian history, as well as the fact that her Estonian language skills were not very strong when she switched from school for Russian speakers to an Estonian school, which caused her to miss some of the information taught in the history class. However, she does say that she feels proud when she sees Estonia mentioned in history books and considers it important to touch upon the connection between Estonia and Russia. This is an interesting point, which shows signs of

patriotism for Estonia even in those who do not strongly identify with being Estonian. As for others, there were not strong correlations between self-identification and knowledge of history.

6.5 Personal Importance of Ethnic Self-Identification

An aspect of self-identification which should be mentioned is that for some people, ethnic self-identification is not important in the first place. It is considered by some that ethnic identity has an important role in people's self-concept (Küün, E., 2008, p. 183). However, several of my interlocutors answered that they do not see any importance in having an ethnic self-identification.

One factor that could influence whether an ethnic identification is important to a person is, once again, their family's attitude towards the same question. The majority of people for whom ethnic self-identification was not important also came from families for who it was not important. However, there were exceptions, such as Emilia. Even though the importance her family placed on her Finnish ancestry did influence her self-identification, she does not consider having an ethnic identification to be important to her at all.

Anastasija would be a reverse example of that. She said that having an ethnic self-identification is important to her. Her reasons for that were the feeling of being unaccepted in both Russia and Estonia – in Russia due to still being viewed as a foreigner and even speaking a somewhat different version of the Russian language, and in Estonia due to having Russian as the mother tongue in the first place which, in her view, exacerbated even more after the start of war in Ukraine. According to her, the attitude towards Russian speakers and the Russian language has now worsened, which is reflected in people being more openly hostile to Russian speakers and refusing to use the Russian language in public settings, which is something I will touch on in more detail in a later chapter. This has made Anastasiya feel unwelcome in Estonia and lead to her fearing of causing a negative reaction in people by speaking Russian or mentioning Russian culture. This feeling of being unaccepted in both Estonia and Russia made the concepts of ethnicity and nationality a painful topic for her, increasing its importance by thinking about her own self-identification a lot.

Interestingly, no other person I talked to would bring up the war by themselves. However, the topic of war in Ukraine did rise when I talked to Vitalis and Markus. Vitalis said that his self-identification has not been influenced by the war in Ukraine in any way, which he attributes to

not being connected to the Russian regime. Another factor that could have contributed is that he never strongly identified as Russian in the first place. Markus said that he had noticed that he sometimes unconsciously distances himself from his Russian identity after the start of the war but tries to stop himself from doing that.

Despite having no connection to the Russian state, Markus seemingly felt a collective guilt of the anti-war Russian citizens for the war in Ukraine. This collective guilt usually manifests in the form of feeling responsible for the war despite the acknowledgement that they have no real power to influence the Russian authorities (Serebryakov, A., 2022, p, 2). Whether it was really impossible for the Russian citizens to prevent the war one way or another, it is undeniably true that Russian-speakers in Estonian have no way of influencing Russian politics, especially if they do not have a Russian citizenship, which Markus does not have.

Markus was likely able to feel this collective guilt due to potentially identifying more strongly with his Russianness than some other young Russian-speakers, despite also strongly identifying with his Estonianess at the same time. However, this example also shows that for Russian speakers outside Russia, there is an option to distance themselves from association with Russianness to avoid the feeling of collective guilt, which is something that would be potentially harder for a person from Russia.

What Emilia's and Anastasija's examples show is that the importance a person places on their ethnic identification is not always related to how this question is treated in the family and can be influenced by the outside factors. For the last example, I would like to bring up is Markus again. Markus considers having an ethnic identification to be very important. As was already discussed, it could be because it is important to his family. He himself called it valuing his ethnic identification as irrational, but fundamental to him. However, he also brought up the fact that ethnic identity is important for people who come from countries with small populations and do not have a lot of people who can speak their language. Here, he shows a very similar attitude to native Estonians. Estonians often feel threatened by being from a country with a small population and consider that their identity was repressed in the past by foreign occupation, which results in patriotism and pride in being Estonian (Polese, A. & Seliverstova, O., 2019, pp. 8-9). Markus even mentioned that he wants to promote Estonian literature, dramaturgy and music outside of Estonia. Despite coming from a different environment than most native Estonians, Markus appears to have a similar pride of being Estonian and sharing the sentiment of wanting to protect Estonian culture from extinction.

The importance a person places on their self-identification is also often reflected in how they introduce themselves to foreigners. Those who consider their self-identification to be important usually have a more detailed self-introduction than those who not. For example, Anastasija says that she introduces herself as a Russian-speaking person from Estonia, and Nikita as a Russian person from Estonia. As an example of those who did not consider ethnic identification to be important, both Alisa and Vitalis say that they are from Estonia and do not elaborate further. Both of them say that they do not see saying anything else about themselves as important.

One interesting point is that the two people who consider their ethnic self-identification to be important due to seemingly no specific reasons, Markus and Nikita, both have Estonian blood in them. As was mentioned before, while Anastasija is another person who considers her self-identification to be important, she states the exact reasons for that – feeling “not at home” in both Estonia and Russia, as well as the perceived change in attitude towards Russian-speakers in Estonia. However, Markus and Nikita gave no explanation why their self-identification is important to them, with Markus himself calling said importance “irrational”.

It is possible that the feeling of importance of Estonian ethnicity that, as was mentioned before, is shared among Estonians, in their case translated into a broader idea of one’s ethnicity and ethnicity being important as a whole. It could have been just a coincidence that these two interlocutors who feel that way happen to have Estonian ancestry. Additionally, as was mentioned before, these two come from families who consider ethnicity and ethnicity to be important, which could have been the primary factor as to why their self-identification is important to them. However, I still thought that this correlation between them was interesting.

As a side note, there was also an interesting difference between these two despite the fact that they both identify with Russianness and Estonianess. During repeat interviews, I decided to ask my male interlocutors whether they would be interested in serving in the Estonian army – an army service of around 8-11 months is mandatory for men in Estonia, though there is a way to avoid it or do alternative service. Markus answered that he is open to the idea, but he would not want to serve in the army right now due to currently focusing on his career. In stark contrast, Nikita answered negatively to that idea, saying that he “does not want to split himself culturally and serve one half of himself while killing the other half of himself”. Despite their somewhat similar self-identifications, their attitude towards potentially fighting against Russian countrymen is very different.

Regarding ethnic identification being important to a person, it is possible that the people who do not find it important have found their sense of self through other means. Vitalis is an example of that, as he considers the academic status of his family to be the more important factor for his identity. This could also show that the young Russian-speaking population is moving away from the concept of ethnicity all together, which will be discussed in the final chapter.

6.6 - Summary

To sum up, young Russian-speaking youth in Estonia do not see themselves as fully Estonian even though they consider Estonia to be their homeland. However, they do not consider themselves to be Russian or fully Russian as well, and their self-identification is often very mixed between Estonian, Russian and other identifications. Additionally, the self-identification of a person majorly relies on how the question of ethnicity is treated in their family, what a person considers an important factor or factors for their self-identification, as well as how mixed their ancestry is. Furthermore, it should be noted that for some people, ethnic identification is not important in the first place. This is likewise often influenced by how a person's family treats the question of the importance of ethnicity.

7. Culture

7.1 Difference from Russians in Russia

Several of my interlocutors have mentioned that they feel closer to the Russian culture than Estonian or other cultures. However, they are still culturally distinct from people in Russia or somewhere in the world. As was mentioned before, even during the Soviet times, the Russian-speakers living in the Baltic states have become Baltisized by adopting local behavioural patterns and values (Vihalemm, T., & Masso, A., 2003, p. 93). One of the interlocutors, Lena, often had her family visited by their acquaintances from Russia. This is what Lena had to say when I asked her about her experiences of interacting with Russian people:

“When I would go to Petersburg (St. Petersburg), and when my parent’s acquaintances from Russia would come to visit, some older people, people from another generation that are somehow connected to my parents, very often half of your communication is built on (them saying) “oh, you speak differently, oh, you construct your speech differently, oh, how (differently) you live”(…). And there was always a feeling that these are very different people, we are very different from them, in terms of speaking, constructing speech, and in terms of some everyday things.”

When I further asked her about how she felt the Russians perceived her, Lena answered this:

“They definitely did not see me as one of them. According to how I personally see this, they perceive us as some other, strange people (laughter), that are not Russian, but for some reason speak to them in the same language. Although I am sure that there are a lot of people who think that we are the same as them, that we are a part of them and that we are the same people.”

As can be seen from this example, Russian-speaking people from Estonia are not seen as Russian by the other Russians, with the difference being not only cultural, but even linguistic as well. In fact, some Russian people might even say that Russian-speaking people from Estonia have an accent. Some people also consider that even the Russian language used by people in Russia and Estonia is different, though no-one could pin-point any concrete differences besides it “feeling” different. In addition to the perceived linguistic difference, there are also possible behavioural differences. Martin Ehala (2013) mentioned in his research how one of his interlocutors was not perceived as a native Russian because of behaving too politely and saying “thank you” to the bartender too many times when visiting a bar in Russia (p. 103).

Most of the interlocutors who had talked with people from Russia answered in the same way with the exception of Nikita, who stated that people from Russia saw him as a Russian as well. Maria also mentioned being seen as a “Russian from Europe”. Additionally, some people answered that they felt like their ethnicity was a non-factor during communication. However, as a majority have answered that they were either seen differently from Russians or their ethnicity was not considered at all, I would count it towards evidence that there is something different in Russian-speaking people from Estonia when compared to Russians in Russia, which I will demonstrate in this next part of this chapter.

7.2 Values and Traditions

To further understand the difference of Russian speakers from Estonia from Russians in Russia, I would like to remind the readers of this quote by Vitalis:

“But Russian culture, is like, closer (to me). Maybe the Estonian mentality is closer, but I am still more immersed in the Russian culture than the Estonian one” (...) But I definitely see myself to a greater extent as a European than a person from Russia or Russian.”

This quote is a great way to demonstrate why Russian-speaking people from Estonia should be considered a separate group from Russians and in other parts of the world. They feel closer to what they describe as “Russian culture” but also feel closer to the “Estonian or European mentality” (mentality in this case can be understood as values). Having Russian-speaking parents who grew up in the Soviet Union, Russian-speaking youth are more often raised with the Russian traditions, such as the New Year being the holiday you exchange presents on rather than Christmas, and Christmas itself being on the 7th of January rather than on the 25th of December (though a lot of families do celebrate the 25th of December due to it being a national holiday and do not celebrate the 7th of January due to not being religious).

Young Russian speakers are also much more exposed to Russian literature and other media rather than Estonian one. In fact, most of the interlocutors answered that they consume media in Russian and English much more than in Estonian. The same happens if the child goes to a school with Russian as the teaching language, which the majority of Russian-speaking youth have done. Most of the teachers are Russian speakers who grew up in the Soviet Union as well, and those schools have more study hours for Russian literature than Estonian one. However, the schools still teach about Estonian traditions and holidays and celebrate the same holidays

as well. The school program between the two different types of school is also not that different, and follows the current Estonian value system, which might differ from the one held by older Russian-speaking people.

For example, the school program in Estonia includes such topics as sex education and sexual orientation, which are excluded from the school program in Russia. Additionally, the history and social studies textbooks in Estonian schools for Russian speakers are translated directly from Estonian into Russian, thus presenting the Soviet Union and Russia in a negative light, which is not the case for the same textbooks in Russia. While the material taught during history and social studies classes cannot be exactly “skipped” by the teachers who ideologically disagree with how Estonian textbooks present history and political material, topics related to sex education are a different story.

I have a distinct memory of my middle school teacher having no desire to talk about sexual orientation during class and asking us to quickly read those sections by ourselves. However, even if certain teachers disagree with the content, it is still available for the students, making the education they receive, especially concerning history and political matters, different from Russians in Russia, and thus more ideologically aligned with Estonia and Europe as a whole. While it goes without saying that this does not mean that every young person will have the same political opinions because of the education, they are still brought up in the environment where the topics of sexuality and sexual orientation are not taboo and where history is being taught from the Estonian point of view rather than Russia’s. Furthermore, early internet access and knowledge of the English language make it easier for younger people to see perspectives that are different from the ones held by their parents or schoolteachers. This is true for young Russians in Russia today as well, but the difference is that in their case, they would have to develop interest in learning about these topics themselves, while Russian-speaking youth in Estonia is presented with them from the get-go.

As can be seen, the young Russian-speakers get a culturally mixed upbringing already from a young age, as they grow up around Russian, Estonian, and possibly other cultures. Additionally, due to the school curriculum representing Russia in a negative light, they are also brought up without having an imperial complex that is present in Russians from Russia¹. Both of these factors make them significantly different from Russians in Russia.

¹ I want to thank my supervisor, Tova Höjdestrand, for pointing this out to me.

Despite the fact that young Russian-speakers can be characterized by their weak or non-existent connection to the Russian state, several interlocutors answered that they still follow Russian news. While they get their news from mostly or only the sources that are not affiliated with the Russian government, the fact still is that despite their perceived disconnect from the Russian state, some young Russian speakers want to stay up to date with what is happening in Russia. However, this can be quite simply explained with the fact that by speaking the Russian language, Russian speakers can easily access these sources and find them interesting due to their contents. Here is a fragment from a dialogue I had with Vitalis when we talked about his interest in listening to Russian news from speakers who oppose the Russian government:

Vitalis - “Well, maybe there is an interest in the Russian realities, maybe (...) not because it is close to me, but because it is some sort of morbid curiosity (...). That is, they are trying to cut down the education and return the country to the cave age (...). That is why it is kind of scary, but it is impossible not to look at it.”

Me – “There is a feeling of, just because you know Russian, you can see all of this and you are like – “my god, how can this be happening? I should read or listen (to something) about it [laughs]”

Vitalis – “Well yes, that is what I am trying to say, that it is almost like some kind of sci-fi, yeah? Or a dystopian novel that has been happening on YouTube (a lot of Russian public figures who oppose the Russian government operate on YouTube) in real time for several years in a row (...).”

It is worth a brief mention that values and political beliefs of Russian-speaking people from Estonian towns that have low Estonian population, or even just in older people, may differ. Dorita Maj (2023) has found that the Russian-speaking minority cannot be treated as a homogeneous community and there is a division into two factions when it comes to political beliefs – a pro-Estonian and pro-Russian one (p. 48). I consider this categorization to be a simplification, as it implies that a person who does not agree with Russia politically will also automatically be completely politically aligned with Estonia. Perhaps a better way to explain her position would be to call these categories “pro-Russian” and “anti-Russian”, with “Russian” here specifically referring to the Russian government. From my personal experience, while pro-Russian sentiments can be met in young Russian-speakers, they are not common, especially in comparison to the older generation. It should be mentioned that my viewpoint on this topic is only limited to Tallinn, and I do not have a clear understanding of the political views of young Russian-speaking people in other Estonian towns.

However, even the Russian-speakers who live in towns with a larger Russian-speaking population still are very culturally different from Russians in Russia and are likewise “Europeanized”. For example, one of the interlocutors in research done by Alina Jasina-Shäfer (2021) on Narva, an Estonian town with a very high Russian-speaking population, says this:

“When I went to visit my relatives in Bryansk [a city in Russia], I understood how different we are. (...) They don’t buckle up, don’t wear light reflectors, don’t look around before crossing the roads. I think it is my Europeanness that speaks now. Careless, this word describes Russians well. It permeates everything – the driving, their attitude to life, their relationship to family. In Europe we began to appreciate that parents spend time with children and pay attention to teenagers. In Russia, they are far from there. (...) You come back to Narva and think, Lord, where was I ... in some wilderness or something?” (p. 38)

Another cultural difference between Russian speakers in Estonia and Russians in Russia would be that people from Estonia as a whole, regardless of age and mother tongue, are used to the European quality of life. When talking to my friend who moved from Russia to Estonia some years ago, she mentioned how the middle class in Russia and Estonia are two different things and that people in Estonia, regardless of their first language, have higher standards for what qualifies as a “good life”. In her opinion, this is actually the most culturally different aspect between Russian-speakers in Estonia and people from Russia. Even an older generation often express a form of gratitude toward the Estonian state even if they are critical of it, emphasizing that they would not have similar opportunities elsewhere (Polese, A., et al., 2020, p. 1027).

7.3 Summary

In short, the cultural identity of Russian-speaking Estonians can be described as “a mix between Russian culture and European values”. It is, however, an oversimplification, as both the culture and values can be mixed as well, especially culture. In most general terms, the young Russian-speaking people from Estonia are more connected to Russian culture than Estonian one while having Estonian/European values and mentality, which makes them culturally different from both Estonians and Russians in Russia. This result is in line with Elvira Kүүn’s research (2008), which states that Russian identity of Russian speakers from Estonia is complemented by Estonian cultural background and European attitudes towards values (p. 186). She also writes that there is a development of a non-Estonian identity – the Estonian Russian, due to acceptance of Estonian customs and habits, which makes them different from Russians in Russia or

elsewhere in the world (p. 201). As I have discussed before, I would prefer to use the term “Russian speaking” instead of “Russian”, and I would also not use the static term “identity” in this context, as it implies that in the future, every Russian-speaking person from Estonia will always identify as “Estonian Russian” with no possible variation or change. Additionally, she theorizes that the Russian central dimension of identity may withdraw within a few generations, and European identity may assume first position (p. 186). This possibility will be further examined in a later chapter.

8. Separation from Estonians

8.1 – Separate Worlds

It would be not an exaggeration to say that Estonians and Russian speakers are very segregated from each-other. A majority of the interlocutors answered that they mostly socialize with other Russian-speakers and do not have any Estonian friends. This was mostly attributed to attending schools for Russian speakers as well as language barrier, with only some people mentioning cultural differences between themselves and Estonians. Additionally, a lot of clubs and extracurricular activities are also available in Russian. As the number of Russian speakers in Tallinn is about 50%, it is quite easy to remain in a “bubble” with people who speak the same languages you, rather than being forced to seek out Estonian friends.

The most common scenario for a Russian speaker is to go to schools for Russian speakers and attend Russian-speaking groups for extracurricular activities, never having an opportunity to meet other Estonians. However, in case of extracurricular activities, there are instances of Russian speakers attending clubs with other Estonians, which will be explored later in this section. Right now, I would like to discuss the experiences of people who attended schools together with other Estonians.

Some of the interlocutors have attended Estonian schools or met with other Estonians elsewhere. One of these people is Vitalis. While he does have Estonian friends due to studying in an Estonian high school and meeting some Estonians during his studies in the Netherlands, he does not talk to them often, having more Russian-speaking people and international students as his closer friends. Anastasija has likewise studied in school with Estonians but did not connect strongly with any of them. She attributed it to a language barrier when she has just transferred to another school and cultural differences later, referring to Estonians as “closed-off people”. She felt like the Estonians in her class did want to get to know her but did not know how to approach her. She also had an opportunity to hang out with other Russian speakers in the schools she attended.

Another person who attended a school for Estonians is Emilia. Emilia said that she got along well enough with Estonians during her school years, attributing it to the fact that she was never afraid of making mistakes while speaking in Estonian. However, her present social circle

mostly consists of Russian speakers despite the fact that she currently has a good command of the Estonian language, explaining that it is due to Estonians being more closed-off than Russian-speakers. Alisa knew some Estonians from her extracurricular activities but never had a strong connection with any of them despite her good command of the Estonian language. Andrej was the only person to mention having Estonian friends, adding that they mostly communicate in English.

From these discussions, it can be seen that language barrier is a very important factor in the separation between the two groups. While the Russian-speakers have to learn the Estonian language at school, the level of Estonian will differ from person to person. A lot of young Russian-speaker's level of Estonian language allows them to navigate daily life but does not allow for "deep" and "meaningful" conversation. When comparing my interlocutors, it stood out that people with higher level of Estonian have attended Estonian schools, extracurricular activities with Estonians, or went to an Estonian kindergarten. The main obstacle in mastering the Estonian language would be the opportunity to practise the language in a natural way outside of a classroom due the lack of language contact zones and of conversational partnering initiatives (Astapova, A., 2022, p. 499).

An additional factor to the separation between Russian-speakers and Estonians would be the residential segregation of Russian-speakers, as people who grew up in Russian-speaking regions and neighbourhoods may not encounter any Estonian peers (Astapova, A., 2022, p. 501). The one interlocutor who originally came from a Russian-speaking region, Sveta, did in fact say that she had no Estonian friends or many opportunities to talk to Estonian people. Regarding the neighbourhood segregation, I am unfortunately not too confident in my data to be a solid proof of it heavily influencing the separation of Russian speakers from Estonians. I asked my interlocutors about the neighbourhoods they grew up in only during repeat interviews, meaning that I could not ask everyone this question. All interlocutors who had repeat interviews grew up in Russian-speaking or mixed neighbourhoods, meaning that I could not compare them to Russian-speakers who grew up in Estonian neighbourhoods.

As was mentioned before, when it comes to Tallinn and especially cities with larger Russian-speaking populations, it is quite easy to remain in friend groups with other Russian-speakers and get by in a daily life with a low or intermediate level of Estonian. This significantly lowers the motivation to learn Estonian, and some Russian speakers do in fact have no desire to learn Estonian because of that. And even if the person wants to learn the language better, they might

not have the opportunity to do so due to starting out and remaining in a Russian-speaking environment. Additionally, there are also such factors as the free language courses offered by the state for Russian speakers often not having enough available places, as well as the governmental Estonian language exam structure encouraging people to use special strategies to pass it, rather than motivating them to acquire the language skills (Astapova, A., 2022, p. 502). In other words, the exam encourages people to study specifically for the exam rather than study the Estonian language as a whole.

I myself remember how the preparation for the Estonian language exam at my school took mostly a form of preparing us to pass the exam rather than deepening our knowledge of the language. While I likewise received similar preparation for my English language exam, I nevertheless felt like I still acquired a deeper knowledge of the English language during that preparation, unlike with the Estonian language. However, interlocutors that I managed to conduct repeat interviews with expressed an interest in deepening their knowledge of the Estonian language (if they consider their current level to be not good enough), as well as in communicating more with native Estonians.

As was shown, even the Russian-speaking people who spend more time around Estonians and have good Estonian language skills can still end up socialising much more with the other Russian-speakers, if not only with them. As some people have attributed that to potential cultural differences between Russian speakers and Estonians, I will now discuss these differences and whether they really impede the communication between the two groups.

8.2 Cultural Differences

The common consensus between my interlocutors was that there are some cultural differences between Russian speakers and Estonians, but they are very minor. The cultural differences that were brought up amounted to Estonians being more closed-off and less likely to approach other people, while Russian speakers are more “open” and “active” in that regard. On this topic, I myself remember an instance from when my school was sharing a building with an Estonian school for one year during reconstruction. After the bell would ring, all Russian-speaking grade-school children would run out of the classroom screaming, while Estonian children of the same age would walk out calmly. However, none of the interlocutors thought that the existing cultural differences impede the communication between the two groups too much.

Nevertheless, one interesting point on the topic of cultural differences was brought up by Vitalis. He said that while both groups lived under the Soviet regime, their national trauma manifests in very different ways. This is how he put it:

“There is this Soviet background that is probably stronger in the Russian-speaking people. There is some sort of awareness of being a part of the fallen Soviet Union. But Estonians have a different approach, politically speaking. Like, “we were occupied, we held out for 40 years, and now we are free again.”

He summarised his thoughts by saying that while the two groups have different “political approaches”, the way they go about their everyday life is the same. However, I do think that this difference is important, as it means that two groups living in the same country have two different national traumas. According to this view, Estonians do not see themselves as former Soviet citizens, but only as a group that was occupied by the Soviet Union. Russian speakers, however, do see themselves as former Soviet citizens – or, in younger generation’s case, the descendants of the former Soviet citizens. In other words, there is a direct relation of oneself or of one’s ancestors towards the Soviet state – and whether the person’s national trauma will manifest as either sadness due to the fall of the USSR or the feeling of guilt due to being related to those who occupied Estonia depends on a person’s political views.

However, the point remains that while there are cultural differences, they do not appear to be something that massively impedes the communication between the two groups. I would like to end this section with a quote by Nikita regarding this topic:

“I think there are less cultural differences (between Estonians and Russian speakers) that it seems. Both like to drink, both like to get angry at the government and not do anything about it at the same time (...). Both like to spend holidays with the family and honour some of their traditions.”

8.3 – Discrimination

Since cultural differences do not appear to contribute to the separation between Russian-speakers and Estonians too much, I will now turn to the topic of discrimination. The results regarding this subject were different from person to person. Many people either did not encounter any discrimination at all or experienced very minor cases, though it should be mentioned that a person who does not have a lot of contact with Estonians will not be in a position to experience discrimination in the first place. Furthermore, none of the people who

studied together with Estonians said that they experienced any discriminatory attitudes from the Estonian students during school. This is seemingly different from the situation in the 00's, when parents were afraid to send their children to Estonian schools fearing that they might get mistreated by Estonian students and teachers (Hammond, A., 2021, p. 57).

However, Anastasiya did mention a case of door signs with "RÄÄGIME EESTI KEELT" (Let's speak Estonian) appearing on the doors in her high school, encouraging students to not use Russian when talking to each-other in a non-classroom setting. Eventually, the school was told to remove those signs. Even without those signs, her Estonian language teacher would ask the children to use Estonian if she noticed them using Russian in a casual, non-classroom setting. While it can be seen as the teacher encouraging children to practise Estonian, no such comments were made when children were speaking in English.

While I cannot personally speak on schools, my mother apparently decided to relocate me from my first initial Estonian kindergarten to a Russian-speaking one because she witnessed an Estonian kindergarten worker mistreating me, which she directly connected to my "Russianness" due to me being the only Russian-speaking child in the group. Whether said kindergarten worker was mistreating me due to me being a Russian speaker is impossible to confirm, but it does correlate with parents in the 00's being afraid that their children will encounter discrimination in Estonian kindergartens and schools.

There is also a perceived deterioration in attitudes towards Russian-speakers and the Russian language in Estonian after the start of war in Ukraine. Anastasiya offered several examples, such as various signs not being translated into Russian anymore, Estonians refusing to serve Russian-speaking people in Russian even if they know the language, and the banning of Russian language in schools and kindergartens, from both children and teachers. She also criticized the new reform of transitioning Russian-speaking schools into fully Estonian ones for this – not because she does not agree with the idea, but because the change was implemented too fast and too sudden after the start of the war, hurting the children's ability to study in the process. After the same reform, all the teachers were obligated to have either B2 or C1 level in Estonian depending on their position. Many older teachers had difficulties learning Estonian in a short time span that they were given while still working full-time, resulting in many teachers being fired.

Whether all of these instances qualify as discrimination can be debated, but it is clear that the attitude towards the Russian language, and by extension, Russian speakers has changed

significantly. Anastasiya finds it somewhat ironic since after the start of the war, the number of Russian speakers in Estonia has only increased due to the arrival of Ukrainian and Russian refugees. She also finds it ironic that the negative attitude towards the Russian language extends to non-Russians as well, noting that people who are discriminatory towards Russian speakers cannot distinguish between Russians, Ukrainians and Belarusians. However, she does also acknowledge that “well-educated” people are much less likely to be discriminatory of Russian speakers.

Other people who reported experiences of discrimination worked in customer service. The discrimination mostly took form in a condescending attitude if a person first started talking in Russian before switching in Estonian or making a mistake when speaking Estonian. In a non-work-related context, Markus recounted a situation where he was told to “go back to Russia” (despite the fact that he was born in Estonia) for making a grammatical mistake when talking in Estonian. However, he still considers his overall experience in Estonia to be positive.

As a somewhat stand-out case from a group of people mostly consisting of university students, I want to highlight Lena’s experience as someone who works in an Estonian company. While she says that she was never bullied for having Russian as her mother tongue, she often feels a dislike towards her from the Estonian people because of her Russian surname, accent, and instances of saying something incorrectly in Estonian. She also described the attitude of her Estonian coworkers towards her as condescending, as they would usually start talking to her in English in a disparaging tone and then act surprised and happy once she makes it clear that she understands them in Estonian. Her team manager even told her that “she never could have guessed” that Lena can speak Estonian. Lena also was the only interlocutor who mentioned the attitude of Estonians towards her as one of the reasons she wishes to move to another country in the future. Additionally, she also recounted the experiences of her Russian-speaking friends who study in universities with mostly Estonian students. According to them, the Estonian students avoid the Russian-speaking students. Maria also stated that she heard similar stories, though she had no experience of that herself.

While I did get my bachelors in Estonia, I was studying in an English-language program, which did not have many Estonian students. However, I was never treated badly by those that were there and only had pleasant experiences with Estonian students outside my program. This could be due to all of them being humanities or social studies students, who are often more open-minded. However, even though my experience with Estonians during my studies were pleasant,

and the experiences of most interlocutors were mostly positive as well, it does not erase the fact that some level of discrimination exists, as seen in Lena's case. Being not accepted in the first case undoubtedly leads to a more difficult integration into a society and makes it more appealing to stay in a bubble with "your people".

In general, younger Estonian people are much less likely to be discriminatory towards Russian speakers, but that is not always the case. For example, Maria had an opposite experience to most other interlocutors, as she saw younger people being often more discriminatory than older people. In short, discrimination against Russian-speaking minority does exist in Estonia and can be a potential factor for the separation between the two groups, but it is not something that every Russian-speaking person deals with. However, it nonetheless does play a role in the potential segregation between Russian speakers and Estonians. This is how Markus explains his perceived view on Estonians and Russian-speakers "disliking" each-other:

"As a person with both roots (Estonian and Russian-speaking), I can see for sure that these two different groups have prejudices against each-other. It can be noticed when talking to both of them. Both inherently feel like they do not like each other, and that is why they do not like the other group back. It is like some sort of a negative feedback loop, when you think that someone does not like you and you do not like them back, and it becomes reality. (...) But I think that those differences will decrease with our generation (generation Z) and generation Alpha, because I talked with many young people from the Estonian speaking environment and many of them are very adequate, they do not have hidden hatred or open hatred, or some latent prejudices. They really do judge people from scratch".

8.4 Summary

Due to such factors as the language barrier and the lack of opportunity to communicate with Estonians, Russian-speakers tend to move in circles with other Russian-speaking people. While there are cultural differences between the two groups, they are considered to be minor enough to not impede the communication between them. Discrimination does also exist and may have even increased after the start of war in Ukraine, but it is in no way impossible for an Estonian and Russian-speaking person to build strong connections – mixed marriages would be a testament to that. In other words, while not being completely rejected by Estonians, Russian-speaking people often exist in their own bubble.

This result is mostly in line with other research done on ethnic segregation in Estonia, which cites three main factors for said segregation: ideological divisions, two parallel education

systems, and residential insulation of Russian speakers (Astapova, A., 2022, p. 501). As was shown, going to a school for Russian-speakers or living in a Russian-speaking area does lead to a harder acquisition of the Estonian language or Estonian friends. However, the factor that is not at play for young Russian speakers is the ideological division. As was discussed before, young Russian-speakers hold European mentality and values rather than Russian ones. Furthermore, the ideological division for the older generations were mostly based around the state's initial citizenship policy (Ibid., p. 501). As was mentioned in the background section, getting Estonian citizenship is not hard for a young Russian-speaker. As for the insulation aspect, the one person who came from the primarily Russian-speaking region, Sveta, did say that that she had no opportunities to communicate with Estonians. However, I could not adequately compare Russian-speakers who grew up in Russian-speaking neighbourhoods to the ones who grew up in Estonian neighbourhoods, as all of the interlocutors that I talked to regarding this topic grew up in Russian-speaking or mixed neighbourhoods.

9. The Future of Belonging

9.1 Sense of Belonging

Now that I have described the self-identification, culture, and separation from Estonians of Russian-speaking youth, I will now discuss their sense of belonging to Estonia and the Estonian society. After that, I will give my prediction of where their sense of belonging is “heading to”, so to say. But first, I will explain why I consider this concept to be important in the first place.

To explain to why I consider the concept of belonging to be important when discussing the Russian speaking population in Estonia, I want to come back to one of the papers I referenced earlier, namely *The ethnic and linguistic identity of Russian-speaking young people in Estonia* (2008) by Elvira Küün. The author wrote this sentence in the introduction:

“Since ethnic and linguistic identity have an important role in people’s self-concept, it also affects the evaluation given of oneself and of others and one’s psychological well-being.” (p. 183)

However, as was seen from the majority of my interlocutors, ethnic identity turned out to not be that important to their self-conception. Furthermore, claiming that ethnic identity is important to one’s psychological well-being is dubious as well. Perhaps the better way to phrase it would be to say that whether a person feels a sense of belonging in their home country is what would be important to their sense of self and psychological well-being.

While a person might feel comfortable without having a specific label or labels for their ethnic self-identification, everyone will surely feel psychologically unwell if they feel like they do not belong anywhere. Additionally, a person actually having a specific ethnic self-identification might lead to them being excluded from certain social contexts. For a heterogenous group with an often very mixed self-identification that is still somehow “bound together” and that is often separated from the majority of the population, the concept of belonging seems much more important than the concept of ethnic identity. Having said that, I will now analyze the sense of belonging of young Russian speakers to Estonian and the Estonian society by covering all of the relevant aspects of belonging, such as auto-biographical factor, relational factor, linguistic factor, legal factor, and societal factor.

Regarding the auto-biographical factors, the Russian-speaking youth in Estonia would have a strong connection to Estonia on this basis – after all, a majority of them were born in Estonia. As was mentioned before, the same is true for my interlocutors with the exception of Vitalis,

who was born in Russia. However, his family moved to Estonia sometime right after his birth, meaning that he has no memories of Russia. Most of the time, the parents of the Russian-speaking youth would also be born in Estonia, resulting in even deeper attachment to a place. For example, Alisa directly relates the fact that her parents were born on the Estonia territory to her self-identification as a non-Russian person. This is the point where the younger generation shares a common point with the older generation.

Many older Russian speakers from Estonia use their memories of growing up in Estonia, as well as the facts that their parents and children currently reside in Estonia, to help establish their sense of belonging to the Estonian state, even if they lack Estonian citizenship (Jašina-Schäfer, A. & Cheskin, A., 2020, p. 16). Nevertheless, the attachment of Russian speakers to Estonia is certainly weaker than the attachment Estonians have due to the fact that most of them do not have a strong historical connection to the country compared to Estonians, as often times their grandparents, or sometimes even their parents, were not born in Estonia. As memories of one's ancestors are part of the auto-biographical aspect, Russian speakers who have no Estonian ancestry would feel that they belong to Estonia less than those who do have Estonian ancestry.

The second factor is the relation to other people. This factor is interesting in this specific case since, as was discussed previously, the majority of the Russian-speakers are very separated from Estonians. On this basis, their belonging to the Estonian society is very weak, as their stronger ties would be their Russian-speaking family and Russian-speaking friends. This factor would be different from person to person, as some Russian speakers do have Estonian family members or friends. However, most of them have Estonians only as “weaker” ties, ultimately resulting in a weak belonging to the Estonian majority.

The language factor might be the most important one on the list due to the Estonian government placing a high priority on the use of the Estonian language as a tool for integration (Delgrande, A., J., 2019, p. 79). The language barrier is one of the main reasons for the separation of Russian speakers from Estonians, leading to the Russian speakers preferring the company of other Russian speakers. This feeds into the previous relational aspect, as it results in Russian speakers having no strong ties to other Estonians. Again, this aspect may differ from person to person but would be true for the majority. Different languages lead to the “othering” between Russian speakers and Estonians, as well as creates the sense of solidarity between Russian-speakers –

the one thing connecting an otherwise heterogenous group, but which ultimately decreases their sense of belonging to the Estonian society.

The legal aspect is the one where the young Russian-speakers would definitely feel a sense of belonging to Estonia, as most of them would have Estonian citizenship or would have no significant trouble acquiring it. This is also the main point of difference between younger and older generation. However, the societal aspect is another story. Even if a political belonging in a form of citizenship is granted to the minorities, it does not guarantee equal rights and equal treatment for them (Antonsich, M., 2010, p. 14). There is also the fact that any dominant ethnic group tends to fill the notion of belonging with a rhetoric of sameness, preventing the recognition of difference (Ibid., p. 15). This is especially true for post-Soviet countries like Estonia, where conception of belonging to the ethno-nation represents a primary criterion for social membership (Jašina-Schäfer, A. & Cheskin, A., 2020, p. 6). As was discussed previously, some Russian speakers do experience discrimination, especially if they often come in contact with older Estonians. While not everyone might experience discrimination, those who do would definitely feel a weaker sense of belonging to the Estonian society.

As can be seen, while Russian speakers can a sense of belonging to Estonia as a country based on their citizenship status and the fact that they and their parents were born and/or grew up in Estonia, they feel a weak sense of belonging to the Estonian society based on weak relation to Estonians, language barrier and possible exclusion by Estonians. Similarly to different people considering different factors to be important to self-identification, different people might likewise consider different aspects of belonging to have a stronger or weaker influence on their own sense of belonging.

When I asked my interlocutors whether they felt like they were a part to the Estonian society, as well as whether they want to better “integrate” into it, the answers were quite different, mostly due to people interpreting the terms “being a part of” and “integration” differently. For example, Markus interpreted “integration into Estonian society” as getting more Estonian friends and getting more immersed in the Estonian culture while not necessarily living on Estonian soil:

“Yes. Even if I decide to live abroad and create a family in some other county, I would still like to know the (Estonian) language a bit better, to have some more Estonian friends, know the literature a bit better, the history, culture, and so on. Yes, I want to be a bigger part of it (Estonian society).”

In contrast, Vitalis saw integration going hand-in-hand with actually being physically present in Estonia:

“Yes, I do want (to integrate more). One of my possible future plans is to return to Estonia (...). But, on the other hand, this possibility becomes more difficult due to the danger from the East. If Russia completely loses its mind and will invade the EU, Estonia will be one of the first destinations, after all. And I would not want to live in Russia, well, in Tallinn under Russia.”

Then there was Nikita, who interpreted integration in a broad sense of essentially “taking part in society”:

“Integration is a very wide term. On a personal level, I would say that I want to know the (Estonian) language better. To better find common language with Estonian speakers. But to integrate culturally (...), no. There is no further place to integrate.”

The same wide variation was present for how people interpreted “being a part of Estonian society”. For example, people like Anastasija interpret it as having frequent communication with its members, and well as sharing a common language. Here is her answer for my question regarding if she felt being a part of the Estonian society:

“As a person who lives in Estonia, yes. But as whole, no. (...) because I was brought up in and grew up in a Russian-speaking environment, not the one Russia, but the one in Estonia, something in-between Estonia and Russia.”

In contrast, people like Alisa and Nikita interpreted “being a part of the Estonian society” as essentially being a citizen in Estonia, as can be seen in their answers:

Alisa – “Well, it is hard (to say) because I left (Estonia) a long time ago (...) but it is my homeland, my home-county. Because of that, I then (before she left Estonia) considered myself a part of the Estonian society because I have lived there for all of my life, I grew up there.”

Nikita – “Well, more yes than no. That is, whether you like it or not, you are a part of it, but I would like to feel more like a part of it. I do not want to feel alienated due to the language, for example.”

Due to the difference of interpretation of these terms, it is a bit hard to gauge an overall level of these people’s belonging to the Estonian state, but most people essentially expressed an “in-between” sense of belonging, feeling like they “somewhat” belong. However, the reason I included these quotes on different interpretations of “integration” and “being a part of Estonian society”, is because they show a common theme of the drive to learn the Estonian language

better and communicate more with Estonians. Here are some more examples of people directly stating that:

Andrej: "I like the Estonian language, I want to be more immersed into Estonian culture, I want to make friends here and generally bring Russian-speaking Estonians and Estonian-speaking Estonians together, make them friends with each-other..."

Nikita: "I would like a closer co-existence (between Estonians and Russian speakers), more frequent informal contacts. As in, more Estonian friends."

Vera: "I think that it is possible (to integrate better), but it would be hard right now compared to when I will get C1 (The Estonian language level test)."

As linguistic and relational aspects of belonging turned out to be very important in the case of young Russian speakers in Estonia, a case can be made that they do not feel a strong sense of belonging to the Estonian society due to these aspects, and want to acquire a "stronger" sense of belonging through learning the Estonian language and communicating more with Estonians, regardless of their ethnic self-identification. This, again, shows that belonging is a more important aspect in the lives of Russian-speaking youth in Estonia, compared to their ethnic identity. Even the people who said that they consider their ethnic self-identification to be important to them were still concerned with their belonging. In Anastasija's case specifically it can be argued that the reason she is currently concerned with her ethnic self-identification is because she relates it to being one of the reasons she does not feel a strong sense of belonging to the Estonian society.

Whether the Russian speakers in Estonia will have a stronger sense of belonging to the Estonian society after mastering the Estonian language and communicating more with Estonians remains to be seen. However, I do want to now turn to the idea that one's belonging may be found beyond one's nationality and ethnicity by discussing the concept of pan-European identity and post-ethnic identity, as well as their relation to how the sense of belonging of young Russian speakers might develop in the future.

9.2 Going Beyond Ethnicity

The nations of Western Europe have been moving towards a closer economic, political and possibly cultural integration within the framework of the European Union since the early 2000s (Eriksen, T., H., 2010, p.3). While many Europeans fear that this will lead to a cultural

standardisation inside the European Union, resulting in the loss of their national or ethnic identity, others have a more positive view of this process and believe that it is possible for a pan-European identity to replace ethnic and national identities. (Ibid., p.3). Before continuing, I will first explain the idea of a pan-European identity in more details.

There are two “options” for the hypothetical process of establishing a pan-European identity: the traditionalist option and the modernist option. The traditionalist option is an intangible and ancestral “European culture” based on a common Judeo Christian and humanist experience (Martiniello, M., 2005, p. 16), while the modernist option is the creation of a common European cultural and identificational space (Ibid., p. 17). These two options are not mutually exclusive and do result in the exclusion of European citizens who come from non-Judeo-Christian civilizations (Ibid., p. 18), meaning that a pan-European identity is not all-inclusive.

I will not debate here whether the alleged cultural standardisation and the concept of a pan-European-identity is good or bad. Rather, I will discuss why the acceptance of pan-European identity is impossible in most contexts inside Europe, including Estonians in Estonia, but is seemingly possible for the young Russian-speakers from Estonia, and perhaps, other countries.

I consider a pan-European identity replacing ethnic and national identities inside the EU to be quite unrealistic. Even with the perceived cultural integration, national and ethnic identities have become important issues in Europe, as can be seen in the growth of right-wing national parties at the European elections (Eriksen, T., H., 2010, p. 3). But why do these two contradictory developments unravel at the same time?

According to Eriksen (2010, p. 198), people in contemporary world become more similar and more different at the same time due to globalisation and forces of modernity. He explains that globalisation both shrinks the world by making the contact across former boundaries possible and expands the world by creating an awareness of difference (Ibid., p. 200). Ethnicity, then, is a primary expression of this difference by making cultural differences comparable (Ibid., p. 198). So, while globalisation creates the possibilities for a universalist cosmopolitanism possible in political thought, it also leads to global integration being seen as a threat to ethnic identities and political sovereignty (Ibid., p. 200).

Additionally, the process of European enlargement will only increase the diversity of national identities within the European union, making it even more multicultural and less susceptible to becoming monocultural (Martiniello, M., 2005, p. 13). There is also the fact that, while some

European youth is open to the world, diversity and attracted by cosmopolitan identities, it can also be very strict and exclusive when it comes to ethno-national identities (Ibid., p. 18).

This fear of global integration is especially noticeable in the Eastern Europe. The Soviet Union was split into several states, with most of them being based on ethnic and linguistic identities, making the issues of nationhood most important (Eriksen, T., H., 2010, p. 3). It is certainly true for Estonia, as Estonians often feel threatened by the potential loss of their identity (Polese, A. & Seliverstova, O., 2019, pp. 8-9). Because of that, it is hard to imagine Estonians wholly embracing the pan-European identity, due to the cultural standardization and the blur of ethnic lines that it implies. However, that might not be the case for Russian-speakers inside Estonia, and especially the younger generation.

As was already discussed, a majority of the Russian-speaking youth in Estonia feels no particular attachment to Russia as a nation, thus showing no signs of patriotism towards Russia. If anything, while not everyone would call themselves an Estonian patriot, they still show at least some level of allegiance towards Estonia, even if the majority struggles to call themselves Estonian. This means that, while they are not completely integrated and may experience discrimination, they ultimately do not see the Estonian state as an “enemy”. Furthermore, the Russian-speaking youth is increasingly westward-thinking (Delgrande, A., J., 2019, p. 78), with people like Vitalis outright describing himself as a “European” rather than Russian or Estonian, and as was discussed in one of the chapters, young Russian-speakers have mostly European mentality and values. And finally, as was showcased in previous chapter, the majority of the interlocutors did not consider having an ethnic or national identification to be important and have mixed or indeterminate self-identification. While one cannot say that Russian-speakers in Estonia are “without culture”, they are much more likely to be accepting of the idea of a “pan-European” identity.

Since only a relatively small percentage of people inside Europe are potentially open to the “pan-European” identity, the term itself is not very accurate. This is why I believe the term “post-ethnic identity” better describes the possible future development of identities of young Russian-speakers in Estonia – it carries the same idea of “going beyond” nationality and ethnicity while being “culturally European” to some extent, but does not involve this identity developing in every person who lives in Europe. Additionally, it is less restrictive as the pan-European identity, as it does not presuppose the cultural background of a person, and can even potentially coexists with a person’s other identifications.

It should be noted that as of now, not every Russian speaker is going to be accepting of this identification – for example, people like Markus consider their national and ethnic identification to be important. However, I believe that it is something that is already developing in the majority of the younger population and will potentially increase with each generation as well. While they will still carry a mix of Estonian, Russian and/or other cultures, they will forgo strong attachments to their ethnicities and nationalities and will find their belonging through other means. One of the interlocutors, Andrej, put this idea into words quite nicely:

“The mystery of the Russian-speaking population in Estonia, especially the youth, is still unsolved to me, but they are certainly different from everyone else. And they certainly, even in their own small inner circle, are very different by their hobbies, by their appearance, by the way they think (...). It seems like when a person does not have a certain understanding of their (national/ethnic) belonging, they start to ignore the concept of (national/ethnic) belonging and try to find themselves in everything else. If they like it, they put it on.”

I would like to stress that I do not consider this possible future development as inherently positive or inherently negative – rather, it is just something that might happen. It would be interesting to see if this possible future development will affect the societal and political position of Russian speakers in Estonia, as well as their relationship with Estonians. Will they be fully accepted as members of Estonian society despite not fully identifying as Estonians? Will the state and the Estonian population consider this “not good enough” and ask the Russian speakers to integrate fully? Or will they be perpetually stuck somewhere between acceptance and rejection? Only time will tell.

9.3 Summary

While young-Russian speakers do feel a sense of belonging to Estonia due to having Estonian citizenship and having been raised in Estonia, their sense of belonging to the Estonian society is often quite low due to the language barrier, having no strong connection with Estonians, and possible discrimination. The “strength” of belonging may vary from person to person, but young Russian speakers often want to improve their Estonian skills and connect more with Estonians as a way to “strengthen” their belonging to Estonia. However, they also show signs of developing a pan-European or a post-ethnic identity, often finding meaning and sense of belonging in other aspects of their life unrelated to ethnicity and nationality. This shows a

willingness to be a more active members of Estonian society while not becoming Estonian or any other specific ethnicity.

10. Conclusion

This research has investigated the self-identification of young Russian-speakers in Estonia, why they identify a certain way, as well as how self-identification relates to their sense of belonging to the Estonian state and the Estonian society. Previous research done on Russian speakers in Estonia has been focused on the issues of identity, while this research sees belonging as the main issue that young Russian-speakers in Estonia have to deal with today, with self-identification being only a part of a bigger issue. To further investigate belonging, such aspects as culture, values, separation from Estonians and discrimination were examined as well.

This research showed that the self-identification of young Russian speakers in Estonia is often mixed, as no one person could confidently and fully identify as either Russian or Estonian, their self-identification being often mixed between Estonian, Russian and other identifications. In some cases, a person might struggle to have a self-identification in the first place. Nevertheless, all of them still considered Estonia to be their homeland. The factors that can influence a person's self-identification are how the question of ethnicity is treated in their family, what they consider to be an important factor or factors for their self-identification, as well as how mixed their ancestry is. However, for many people, their ethnic self-identification turned out to be not important in the first place. There were also signs of people with Estonian roots being more likely to consider their ethnic self-identification to be important outside of it influencing their feeling of belonging. Whether that really is the case can be worth investigating in the future.

When examining the culture, values, and traditions of young Russian speakers from Estonia, the results showed that the cultural identity of Russian-speaking Estonians is essentially a mix between Russian culture and European values, though both the culture and values can be mixed between Estonian and Russian as well. Mostly speaking, the young Russian-speaking people from Estonia are more connected to Russian culture than Estonian one while having European values and mentality.

When it comes to Russian speakers being often very separated from the Estonian-speaking population, such factors like the language barrier and the lack of opportunity to communicate with Estonians were the main reasons for that. On the other hand, cultural differences between

Russian speakers and Estonians turned out to not be major. Discrimination is very much a possible factor for the separation, but not every person encounters it. However, discrimination has seemingly increased after the start of war in Ukraine.

The sense of belonging of young-Russian speakers to the Estonian society is often quite low due to the language barrier, having no strong connection with Estonians, and possible discrimination. However, they do have a seemingly higher sense of belonging to Estonia compared to the older generation due to being in possession of Estonian citizenship and having been raised in Estonia. Belonging was also shown to be a more important concern for the young Russian speakers in Estonia compared to their ethnic self-identification. This common theme of not placing too much importance into one's ethnic self-identification show the signs of acceptance a pan-European or a post-ethnic identity, as young Russian speakers often finding meaning and sense of belonging in other aspects of their life unrelated to ethnicity and nationality. However, they still have a wish to belong more to the Estonian society and want to achieve that by better learning the Estonian language and developing stronger relationships with Estonians.

The conclusion that I have reached is that, while not entirely worthless to investigate, the questions of identity and identification are not as central to the Russian-speaking population as they perhaps were in the past. While self-identification is still worth studying as part of a bigger picture, belonging is really a primary concern of young-Russian speakers in Estonia today. For any further research on Russian-speakers in Estonia, I would consider belonging to be of most interest to investigate further.

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