

ZOIS

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ZOIS REPORT

**ESTONIA'S FRACTURED
SOCIAL LANDSCAPE:
VIEWS ON SECURITY,
POLITICS AND HISTORY**

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Summary

In a tangible legacy of the Soviet era, more than one-quarter of Estonia's population is Russian-speaking. This social make-up makes political debates on questions of security and societal resilience particularly contentious in Estonia. The situation has not been helped by Russia's persistent interference in the country's domestic affairs.

Financed by the European Research Council, the ZOiS research project MoveMeRU has collected new quantitative and qualitative data on critical aspects of Estonian society. In this report, we compare attitudes on national security, the war in Ukraine, and Estonian politics and history among individuals with and without a Russian background. In so doing, we pay particular attention to the dynamics between the younger (18–34) and older (35–65) generations. Rather than self-reported ethnicity or native language, our analysis centres on family background, i. e. the country in which a person's family was raised. This choice is deliberate since in the current climate self-reported ethnicity and native language are often bound up with a person's political identity and therefore potentially biased. Family background does justice to the fact that Estonians who speak Russian as their first language or view themselves as ethnically Russian are a diverse group with family roots in Russia but also elsewhere.

The key findings are:

- Across Estonian society, Russia is seen as the greatest threat to national security. Yet people with a Russian background are far less definite in that regard. They also differ markedly from Estonians without a Russian background in their attitudes to Russia's war against Ukraine. More than 50 per cent of those without Russian background strongly agree that Russia is solely to blame for the war. In contrast, among those with a Russian background, only one-quarter of younger respondents and less than one-fifth of respondents aged 35 to 65 share this view.
- Our data reveal further significant differences in attitudes between Estonians with and without a Russian background, particularly in relation to security and history. While family background matters here, the degree of identification with other people living in Estonia is also important. In general, individuals who identify strongly with Russian speakers in Estonia diverge more sharply in their views on security and history from other Estonians.
- Democracy has come under pressure across the globe, and Estonia is no exception. Regardless of their family background, the younger generation tends to be more committed to the principle of democracy. When asked about their views on the idea of democracy, roughly one-third of Estonians without a Russian background believe it is a very good form of government, with approval rates even higher among younger people. Significantly fewer individuals with a Russian background share this very positive assessment.
- Strong divisions emerge on the presence of Ukrainian refugees in Estonia, their long-term prospects, and the question of whether Estonia should welcome Russians fleeing their country. Younger respondents are generally more supportive of welcoming both Russian and Ukrainian refugees. Overall, respondents with a Russian background tend to support the idea of welcoming Russians fleeing their country, while those without a Russian background reject this proposal but remain more in favour of welcoming Ukrainians.
- Interpretations of historical events are often divisive and align with present-day security perceptions. We find that most younger respondents with a Russian background express prevailing Estonian interpretations of twentieth-century history. While older respondents with a Russian background still tend to view 9 May through the lens of the Soviet-era Victory Day, the younger generation's interpretation of this commemorative day is more victim centred.
- Compared to other Estonians, respondents with a Russian background rarely engage in political discussions with their family members. There is also greater political polarisation between the generations in these families. In their work environment, respondents with a Russian background, in particular the younger generation, report that they frequently disagree on politics with their colleagues or avoid the subject altogether.

The Context: Estonia's Minority Situation

The social integration and political representation of Estonia's Russian-speaking minority became an even more pressing issue of national security after Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine in February 2022.¹ Today, the Estonian government approaches its Russian-speaking population primarily through a securitisation framework that positions the minority as a potential threat to the national core and justifies increasingly restrictive minority policies. This securitisation is the culmination of population shifts during the Soviet era and nearly two decades of Russian interference in Estonian domestic politics.²

In response to this perceived threat, the Estonian government has further expanded assimilation policies, which are currently focused on Estonian language proficiency. Aimed at integrating this community into Estonian society, such policies can nevertheless increase a feeling of alienation among a group that already feels besieged. This shows how policies with potential security benefits may have trade-offs for social cohesion (Schulze & Pupcenoks 2025).

Russian background: a demographic and terminological clarification

The Russian-speaking minority in Estonia is diverse and reflects the country's complex migration and settlement history. In this report we emphasise the multilayered nature of identity and avoid categorising respondents based solely on their self-identification as 'ethnic Russian' or 'Russian native speaker'. In the current political climate, a self-identification as 'Russian' in Estonia is a socio-political statement and we want to move beyond the constraints that such labels impose.

In emphasising a respondent's family background, we focus on the country where they, their parents and grandparents were socialised, thereby working with a more nuanced understanding of an individual's origins. Within this framework, two specifications capture different levels of detail. Our first specification establishes the study's main distinction between Estonians with and without a Russian background. The Russian-background category includes respondents who were themselves socialised in the Russian Soviet Federative Socialist Republic (hereafter RSFSR), as well as those with at least one parent or two grandparents who underwent their socialisation there. All other respondents are classified as having an Estonian background. Our second specification allows us to explore the nuances of mixed family backgrounds in

order to distinguish between respondents whose parents were born in the RSFSR but socialised in Estonia, respondents whose parents were both socialised in Russia, and those whose links with Russia stem only from the grandparental generation. Finally, we also explore separately the attitudes of individuals whose family roots can be traced back to other former Soviet republics.

Today's demographic situation is vastly different from the situation that prevailed in Estonia when it declared independence from the Russian Empire in the aftermath of World War I. At that time, ethnic Estonians accounted for the overwhelming majority of the population, with many others scattered across the Russian Empire and the later Soviet Union (Katus 1990, p. 55). The share of ethnic Estonians in Estonia remained high until the end of World War II, when they still made up more than 95 per cent of the population. In the post-war decades this share shrank rapidly, falling to below two-thirds by 1989 (ibid. p. 57). This was the result of Soviet settlement policies and was a far more dramatic demographic shift than most other European countries experienced in the post-war years. This shift coincided with waves of industrialisation, when foreign workers, administrative personnel but also

1 The authors are grateful for the very helpful comments provided on earlier drafts by Alina Jašina-Schäfer, Gwendolyn Sasse and Vello Pettai.

2 Examples of such interference include the 2007 controversy over the removal of the Bronze Soldier, a Soviet-era war monument, tensions over the status of the Estonian Orthodox Church of the Moscow Patriarchate, or more recently, the incursion of Russian fighter jets into Estonian airspace.

military staff arrived in the country from other parts of the Soviet Union. After Stalin's death in 1953, the survivors of the two major waves of deportations of ethnic Estonians from Estonia in 1941 and 1949 started returning to Estonia along with their descendants.

After 1991, Estonia's citizenship and language policies were explicitly designed to safeguard the majority culture. Citizenship was granted automatically to those individuals and their descendants who had held Estonian citizenship prior to 16 June 1940. This excluded most of the Soviet-era migrants. Others had to undergo a complex process of naturalisation, leaving more than 100,000 people without any citizenship in the early post-independence years (Jašina-Schäfer & Cheskin 2020). In the run-up to EU accession in 2004, many Russian speakers eventually opted for Estonian citizenship, largely motivated by mobility benefits, yet overall acceptance of Estonian citizenship among this group remained low (Sasse 2008, p. 853).

There has been a notable decline in the share of individuals who self-identify as ethnic Russians over the last four years. The 2021 census registered 919,693 self-identified Estonians and 315,242 self-identified

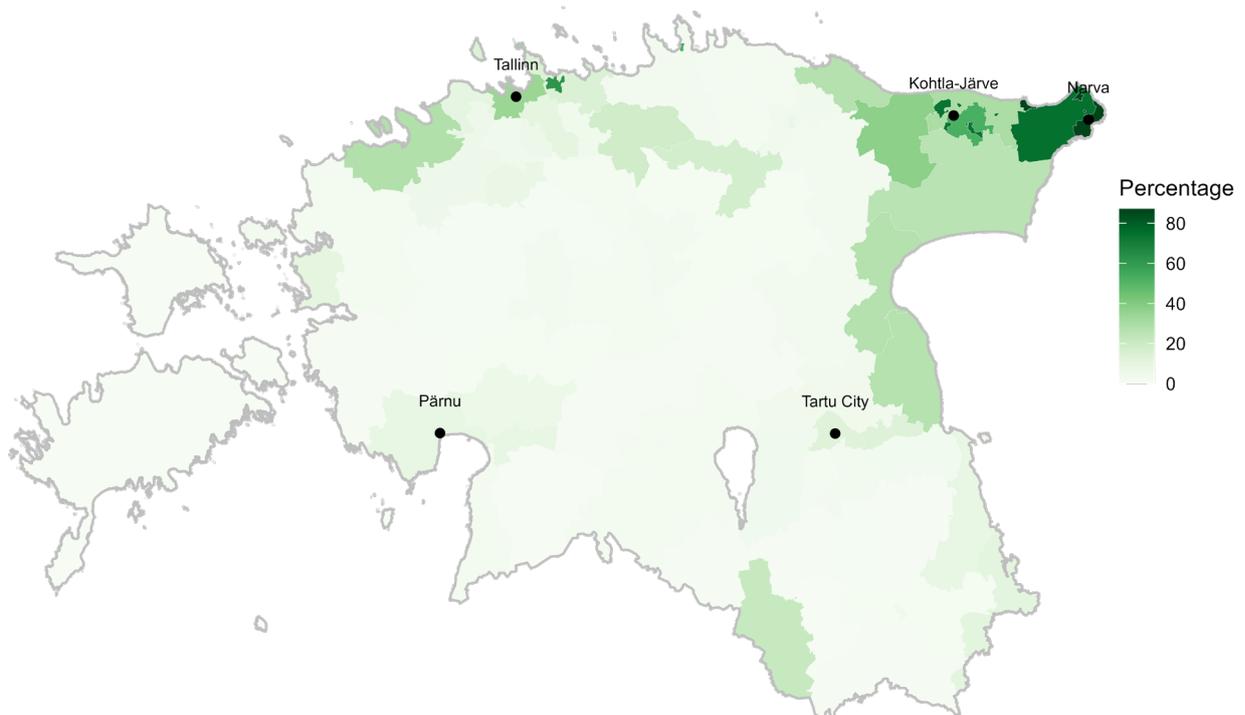
Russians. Yet as of 2025, Estonia's population includes 934,725 Estonians and 285,819 Russians, alongside 143,295 other ethnicities (Statistics Estonia 2025). This shift highlights the extent to which the label 'Russian' is shaped by contemporary political dynamics rather than demographic realities. The last population census from 2021 also identified 374,038 Russian speakers in Estonia, accounting for 27.4 per cent of the overall population and including ethnic Russians (22.5 per cent), Ukrainians (4.1 per cent) and Belarusians (0.8 per cent).

According to the census, individuals who self-identify as ethnic Russians are concentrated in the northeast of the country, notably in Lääne Viru County and Ida-Viru County, where the city of Narva is located, and in parts of Harju County, where the capital Tallinn is located. Cities like Tartu and Pärnu also have high shares of people who identify as Russian. ► **FIGURE 1** The Russian-speaking population falls primarily into three citizenship categories: citizens of Estonia, citizens of Russia and stateless people. The latter are issued an Estonian Alien's Passport, commonly referred to as a 'grey' passport. As of 31 December 2021, 66,592 individuals held undetermined citizenship, while another 81,695 were citizens of Russia (Statistics Estonia 2022).

FIGURE 1

Self-identified Russian Ethnicity

Share of persons who said they felt the strongest ethnic and cultural connection to the Russian nationality



Source: <https://www.stat.ee/en>, Table RL21429: POPULATION BY ETHNIC NATIONALITY, SEX, AGE GROUP AND PLACE OF RESIDENCE (ADMINISTRATIVE UNIT), 31 DECEMBER 2021 by Year, Age group, Place of residence, Sex and Ethnic nationality, 31 December 2021

Research Design

Over the last two years, we conducted two surveys in Estonia. In autumn 2025, we fielded an online survey with Norstat with a total of 2,062 respondents. Respondents had the option of completing the survey in Estonian or Russian, which took on average 30 minutes. The sample comprised the general population and an oversampled share of individuals with a Russian background. ► [TABLE 1](#)

TABLE 1
Sample description

Sample units	Number of interviews
General population 35 – 65	513
General population 18 – 34	530
Russian background 35 – 65	518
Russian background 18 – 34	501

Source: ZOIS survey, autumn 2025

For data collection, we combined online (CAWI) and telephone interviews (CATI). In total, 1,846 respondents were recruited through Norstat's online panel, 74 through social media and snowball sampling, and 142 through CATI interviews. To reach 18- to 34-year-old respondents with a Russian background in Estonia we also ran a targeted recruitment campaign on TikTok and Meta.³

The general population sample in the two age brackets is representative with respect to gender and place of residence. The sample of respondents with a Russian background reflects the country's gender distribution but there were no additional quotas (Krawatzek & Matevosyan 2026).

In autumn 2024, we conducted a first survey in collaboration with the Institute of Baltic Studies. Designed as an intergenerational study, it included both a parent and a corresponding child aged 18 to 34. The purpose of this study was to understand the degree to which generations in the same family agree in their political and social views. Respondents were recruited using contact information from the Population Register. This is the data we refer to when emphasising generational dynamics.

In addition to the surveys, we carried out qualitative fieldwork. Between June and December 2024, 20 focus groups were conducted, also in collaboration with Norstat. Following the general research design, separate discussion sessions were held with participants with and without a Russian background. The initial discussions were among members of either the parental or the young adult generation, while the follow-up discussions brought both generations together.

³ As an additional incentive, all participants were entered into a raffle for a € 50 Wolt credit voucher.

Findings

International security and external threats

Threats to global security

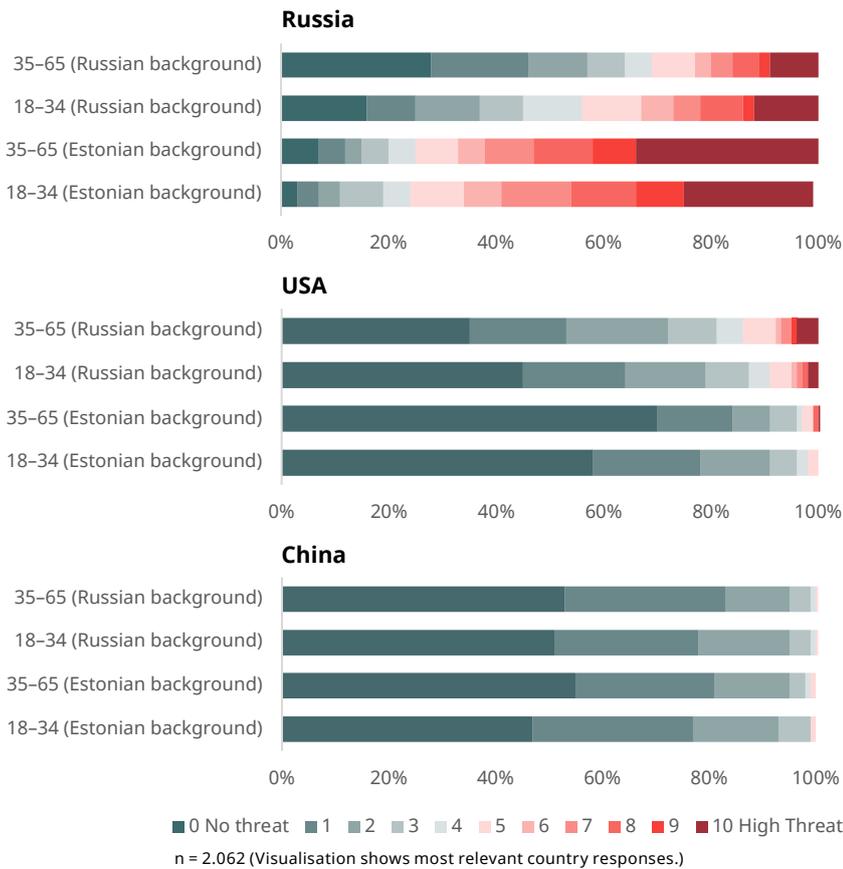
Across Estonian society, Russia is considered the biggest threat to global and national security. Estonian politicians are among the most vocal critics of Russia and committed supporters of Ukraine.⁴ They have emphasised European values and drawn on Estonian history and identity for their assessment (Kutnarová 2025). In our survey, we asked respondents to allocate a total of ten points to a set of countries in accordance with the level of threat each poses to Estonia. ► **FIGURE 2** Just under one-third of the respondents with an Estonian background allocated all 10 of their points to Russia, while only 5 per cent gave no points at all to Russia. The remaining points were allocated to China or the USA, while 80 per cent of these respondents gave zero

Almost one-third of the respondents with an Estonian background allocated all threat points to Russia.

FIGURE 2

Threat perception

Global security is threatened by different countries. Please distribute 10 points among the countries Russia, USA, China, Israel, Ukraine, North Korea or other to show how much of a threat each poses to Estonia.



Source: ZOIS survey, autumn 2025

4 According to data from the Kiel Institute's 'Ukraine Support Tracker', Estonia's bilateral financial aid to Ukraine between January 2022 and December 2025 amounted to 3 per cent of 2021 GDP, the second highest allocation worldwide (Antezza et al. 2025).

points to Ukraine (not shown), indicating no threat at all. Respondents with a Russian background distributed their points differently: Only around 10 per cent of them allocated all 10 of their points to Russia. Nearly 30 per cent of the older generation allocated zero points to Russia, as did over 15 per cent of the younger generation. Overall, this group of respondents gave more points to the USA and Ukraine than their Estonian counterparts.⁵

Identification matters for how respondents assess the threats emanating from different countries. Those who identify strongly with ethnic Estonians are more likely to consider Russia the most significant threat, whereas those who identify more with Russian-speaking people in Estonia are less likely to do so. The latter also tend to view the USA as a threat. Across the two groups, better-off individuals are more likely to perceive Russia as a threat and less likely to cast America in that role. This speaks to the significance of economic inequalities for the country's social fragmentation.

Russia's war against Ukraine

Estonia's population is divided on Russia's war against Ukraine (ERR News 2025). On the question of responsibility for the outbreak of the war, our survey shows that more than 50 per cent of those with an Estonian background, particularly older respondents, strongly agree with the view that Russia is solely to blame for the escalation. ► **FIGURE 3** In contrast, among those with a Russian background, younger respondents are more likely to share this view, albeit in far fewer numbers than their Estonian age peers. Of the 20 per cent of respondents who did not respond to this question, most had a Russian background—this speaks more to self-censorship or avoidance than a lack of opinion given how widely debated such questions have been in Estonia.

Irrespective of one's family background, the group with whom one identifies most strongly within Estonia also matters here. Those who identify more strongly with ethnic Estonians are more critical of the Kremlin's narrative.⁶ The language in which the survey was taken matters too—those who took the survey in Estonian are significantly less likely to approve of the narrative espoused by the Kremlin. Individuals with a lower income are generally less critical of the Kremlin's position on the war in Ukraine, irrespective of their background. And those who took the survey in Russian, as well as women, are more likely to choose the option 'don't know' in response to this question.

The focus group discussions helped to tease out some of these differences, and participants frequently expressed an abstract notion of who or what is responsible for the war. Instead of singling out Russian or Ukraine, they attributed blame to big capital and anonymous forces that move politics without being interested in the fate of ordinary people. In Tallinn, a 59-year-old man whose parents were socialised in Russia claimed:

5 Alternative recodings of the Russian background that take the diversity of parental and grandparental socialisation into account confirm these differences. Russia is less likely to be considered the major threat within that group.

6 The differences are robust to using the alternative specifications for the Russian background. Any kind of (Soviet) Russian socialisation experience in the family accounts for a significant difference in assessments of responsibility for the war.

Those who identify more strongly with ethnic Estonians are more critical of the Kremlin's narrative.

‘This issue [of responsibility for the war] is more profound than ‘Ukrainians are good, Russians are bad’. It is a large geopolitical process, which is very complex. [...] It is often business that profits here. Big global business. Huge amounts of money are being made, and people are being pitted against each other and exploited.

The war in Ukraine has resulted in mass displacement. According to recent UNHCR data, more than 40,000 Ukrainian refugees have arrived in Estonia since February 2022 (UNHCR 2026). Although Estonian society has on the whole been welcoming towards the refugees, as in other European countries, the issue of how to deal with them has become more divisive in societal discourse. In 2023, 73 per cent of Estonians were in favour of taking in Ukrainians fleeing their country.⁷ Nevertheless, some of the immediate solidarity with those fleeing a brutal war has been lost in the context of the rising cost of living and shifting assessments of the global political situation.

When asked in our survey at the end of 2025 whether Estonia has a special responsibility to welcome Ukrainian refugees, around half of respondents with an Estonian background disagreed, compared to nearly 60 per cent of

FIGURE 3
How much do you agree with the following?



Source: ZOIS survey, autumn 2025

⁷ Support among 'ethnic Estonians' was 82 per cent; among 'other nationalities' it was 56 per cent. See ERR News 2023.

respondents with a Russian background. ► **FIGURE 4** Those who identify more strongly with ethnic Estonians are more likely to answer yes to this question. While the influence of gender was negligible in this regard, we found that people with higher incomes were more likely to express support for welcoming Ukrainian refugees.

Opinions also diverge on the question of whether Ukrainian refugees should be allowed to stay in Estonia in the long term. This polarisation in Estonian society is illustrated by attitudes expressed on a ten-point scale, where 10 indicates strong agreement with the proposal. Among the younger respondents with an Estonian background, the average is nearly 6. Older Russian-background respondents have the lowest average (4.5), while the younger generation with a Russian background converges on this issue with the older Estonian-background respondents with an average of just below 5. Furthermore, the older Estonian-background respondents have the most dispersed views on this question, indicating a high degree of polarisation. How respondents view the prospect of Ukrainian refugees staying in the country long-term is closely linked to their own socio-economic situation. People with higher education and well-paid jobs are more likely to support the long-term integration of Ukrainians. This became clear in focus groups in the mainly Russian-speaking Ida-Viru County, where unemployment

FIGURE 4
Do you agree that there is a special responsibility for Estonia to welcome Ukrainian refugees?

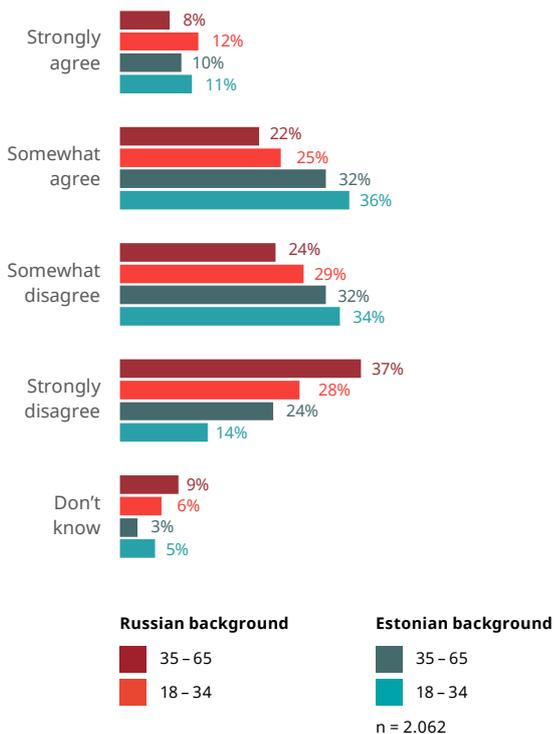
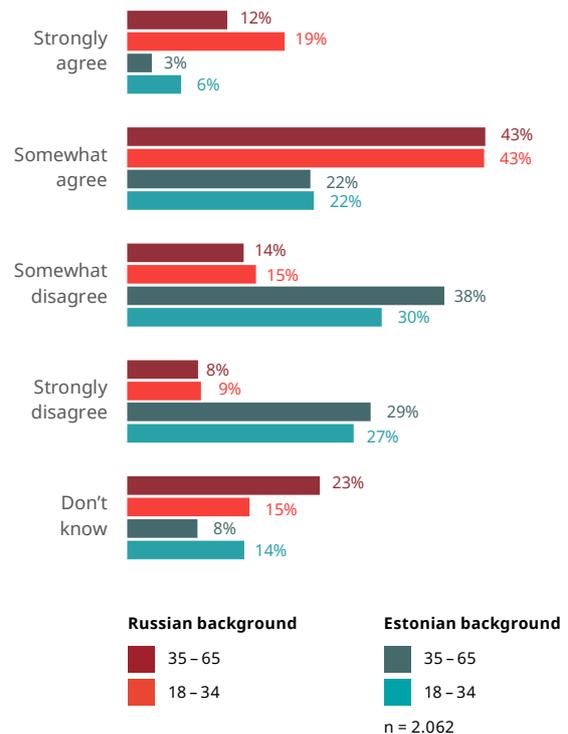


FIGURE 5
Do you think Estonia should welcome Russians fleeing their country?



Source: ZOIS survey, autumn 2025

Source: ZOIS survey, autumn 2025

rates are double the national average. While admitting that their Russian-language skills would be an advantage, participants voiced concerns about the lack of job prospects for the newcomers.

The question of whether Estonia or other Baltic states should welcome Russians fleeing their country remains controversial. The Estonian government has banned Russians who fought in Ukraine from entering the country and called for a Europe-wide visa ban on Russian veterans of the war in Ukraine. Approval for welcoming Russians to Estonia is highest among the younger respondents with a Russian background: Nearly 60 per cent agree somewhat or strongly that Estonia should take in Russians fleeing their country. ► **FIGURE 5** Approval is slightly lower among the older generation with a Russian background, possibly reflecting their specific economic concerns. Meanwhile most Estonian-background respondents, irrespective of age, are against this proposal, with more than two-thirds somewhat or strongly disagreeing with it. We found that women are generally more likely to express support for welcoming Russians, whereas income did not make a difference.⁸

Nearly 60% of younger respondents with a Russian background agree that Estonia should take in Russians fleeing their country.

Political and social attitudes

Democracy and society

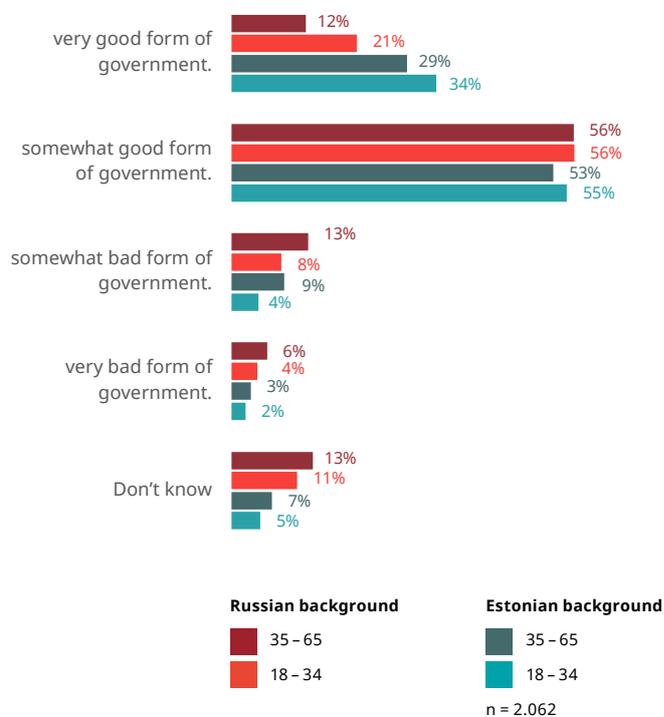
As in other parts of the world, democracy has come under pressure in Estonia. Estonian politics has recently become more polarised, but the country still understands itself as a stronghold of democracy, partially with reference to high levels of digitalisation (Freedom House 2024). When asked how they feel about the principle of democracy, roughly one-third of respondents with an Estonian background believe it is a very good form of government, with higher rates of approval among young people.⁹ ► **FIGURE 6** This positive attitude is less common among the respondents with a Russian background, particularly in the older generation. And only one in five of those aged 18 to 34 consider it to be a very good form of government. Strikingly, more than 10 per cent of the Russian-background respondents avoid answering this question. A higher degree of identification with ethnic Estonians correlates with a more positive view of democracy—the opposite applies to those who identify more with Russian speakers in Estonia. As the focus groups reveal, disenchantment with democracy often stems from a feeling of being disenfranchised. In a discussion in the mainly Russian-speaking Ida-Viru County, nearly all of the participants (aged 35–65) had a jaundiced view of democracy. In the words of a 57-year-old real-estate specialist:

‘It’s probably pointless to talk about democracy as such, because I believe that it doesn’t exist, not just in Estonia, but throughout the world. This is because countries act in accordance with their immediate short-term and long-term interests. Just pretty words to shut the crowd up, and so on and so forth. Democracy is a fiction in the end.’

⁸ The difference on this question persists across different ways of controlling for demographic or other background factors. Moreover, those with roots in other former Soviet countries are also more likely to approve of welcoming Russians who flee their country.

⁹ For comparison, in Germany, 37 per cent considered representative democracy to be a very good system of governance, see Pew Research Center 2024.

FIGURE 6
Leaving aside how well democracy functions in Estonia,
in your mind, democracy is a ...



Source: ZOIS survey, autumn 2025

Her statement was supported by others in the group, who even claimed that democracy was ‘really like communism, probably an unattainable ideal’. In another group discussion in Ida-Viru County, a 48-year-old participant was also sceptical:

‘Where do we have it in the world, democracy? We probably don’t have it anywhere. That’s how it seems to me. This is democracy, our civilisation has gone down this path, we have invented democracy, which is being imposed on us here.’

When asked about how well they believe Estonia’s main political institutions and processes work, respondents are generally positive despite widespread criticism of the current government under Prime Minister Kristen Michal. Led by the centre-right liberal Estonian Reform Party with Estonia 200 as a junior partner, it has been in power since 2024. Older Russian-background respondents are especially critical of the government, with more than half indicating that it functions very badly. One-third of the Estonian-background respondents aged 35 to 65 and a similar proportion of the younger Russian-background respondents share this view. In the focus groups with the older generation in Ida-Viru County, many respondents suspected that their government was ‘tapping phones’ and were concerned that they would be held accountable if they articulate views that their government does not approve of.

Older Russian-background respondents are especially critical of the Estonian government.

Individuals with and without a Russian background also differ in their assessments of how well the electoral system functions. More than two-thirds of Estonian-background individuals are satisfied with it. Approval is slightly lower among younger respondents with a Russian background (60 per cent) and much lower among those aged 35 to 65 (44 per cent). A similar pattern emerges in opinions on the judiciary: Nearly 70 per cent of younger Estonians have a positive view of it, compared to less than 50 per cent of older Russian-background respondents. The police are highly regarded across both groups: Irrespective of their family background, nearly 80 per cent of respondents have a positive view of them.

We found a strong correlation between positive assessments of the different Estonian political institutions and processes and certain socio-economic characteristics. Younger respondents tend to approve of them, as do those with higher incomes and levels of education. One's sense of identity also matters: Individuals who identify with the ethnic Estonian population are more likely to hold positive views, and those who identify with Russian speakers in Estonia are more likely to be negative. Here, political assessments and identity are mutually reinforcing.

Looking at electoral participation, a very fragmented social landscape emerges. Among the respondents with an Estonian background, over 90 per cent of the older generation and 80 per cent of the younger generation say that they turn out for national elections. The level of electoral participation is much lower among those with a Russian background: 70 per cent of those aged 35 to 65 and just above 50 per cent of those in the younger age bracket indicate that they vote. A striking one-third of younger Russian-background respondents usually do not vote at all. And nearly 20 per cent of the older generation say that they are not eligible to participate in national elections.¹⁰

The level of electoral participation is much lower among those with a Russian background.

Economic grievances and social conservatism

Estonia has a market-based economy characterised by a business-friendly environment and a strong overall macroeconomic performance (Bertelsmann Stiftung 2024). There is a social benefit system including free access to education and childcare. According to the Estonian Central Bank, income inequality aligns with the average in the eurozone, while wealth inequality is among the highest (Meriküll & Rõõm 2023). The European Commission has, moreover, criticised an inadequate level of social protection, including against unemployment, which contributes to income inequality and the risk of poverty (Directorate-General for Economic and Financial Affairs 2023). When asked about their views on income differences, a high level of frustration among the older generation with and without a Russian background becomes clear.

One-third of respondents with an Estonian background and over 40 per cent of respondents with a Russian background strongly agree with the statement that income and wealth inequalities in Estonia are too high. The younger generation across the whole sample is far less likely to hold that view. Characteristics such as gender, age or income play a stronger role here than differences in socio-cultural background. Women are significantly more likely to be

¹⁰ Up until 2025, Russian and stateless citizens could vote in local elections but not in national elections.

Across the entire sample, women have more progressive views.

frustrated by income and wealth inequalities, as are older respondents, people with lower incomes, and those who identify with Russian speakers in Estonia.

Very definite dividing lines emerge between Estonian- and Russian-background respondents on social questions, in particular in the realm of gender norms. That said, younger respondents tend to be more progressive across the two groups. In response to a question about whether men should have the freedom to wear nail polish and dresses, the average value among the younger Estonians was over 6 on a 10-point scale, while the value for their Russian-background peers was below 5. For the older generation, it was slightly over 4 (Estonian background) and slightly over 3 (Russian background). However, opinions are hugely dispersed on this and other questions related to sexuality and gender. Across the entire sample, women have more progressive views, speaking to the global gender divide in values that characterises Gen Z (Burn-Murdoch 2024). Better-off respondents and those with higher levels of education also tend to articulate more progressive views.

Views on history

Debates about history are particularly fierce in the Baltic states. In Latvia, for instance, divergent memories of the Soviet past among 'Russian speakers' and 'ethnic Latvians' translate into differing perceptions of external threats and willingness to fight (Schulte et al. 2025, p. 12). This persistence of contrasting historical frames shows how the region grapples with the challenge of integrating divergent memories into a shared democratic space. While Estonians primarily regard the Soviet period as occupation, Russian-background families are more ambivalent. Their interpretations centre on family history and may also be affected by Russia's instrumentalisation of history. Such struggles over the past unfold in what is often considered a distant NATO lake, but Oliver Moody rightly underlines that the Baltic sea region is instead one of NATO's most exposed frontiers where historical interpretations are inseparable from questions of security, sovereignty and Russian geopolitical pressure (Moody 2025, p. 275).

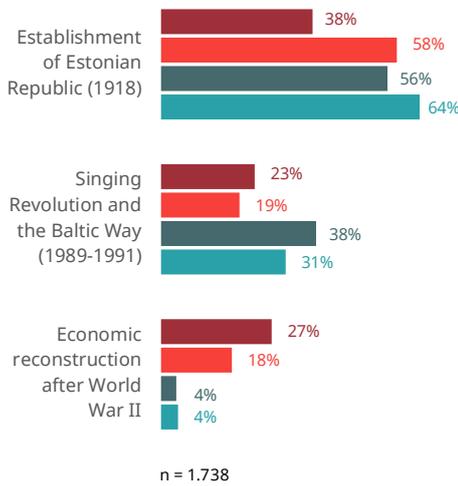
History and belonging to Estonia

When asked which historical events underpin their sense of being Estonian, the majority of respondents without a Russian background point to milestones of national independence. More than 50 per cent of both older and younger respondents mention the establishment of the Estonian Republic (1918) and around one-third the Singing Revolution (from 1988–91). Younger respondents with a Russian background also mention the 1918 declaration of independence most frequently, pointing to the successful transmission of a shared outlook on national history through education. However, older respondents with a Russian background are significantly less likely to select such nation-building events: Only one-third of them view 1918 as a milestone, and another third mention the post-war economic reconstruction of Estonia after World War II.¹¹ ► FIGURE 7A

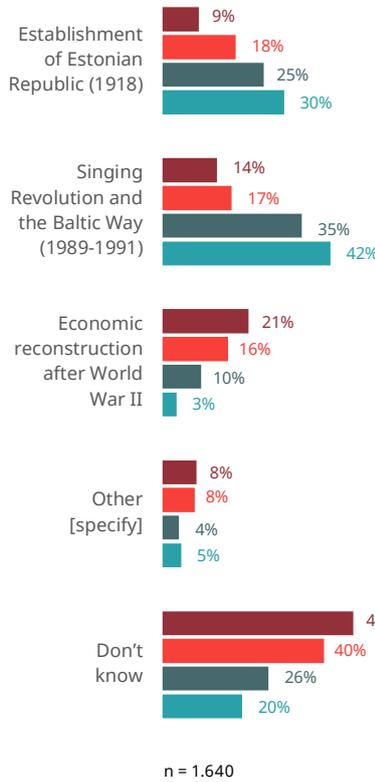
11 Respondents with any kind of Russian family background are noticeably less likely than those without to select the Singing Revolution or the establishment of the Estonian Republic in 1918.

FIGURE 7
Significant historical events

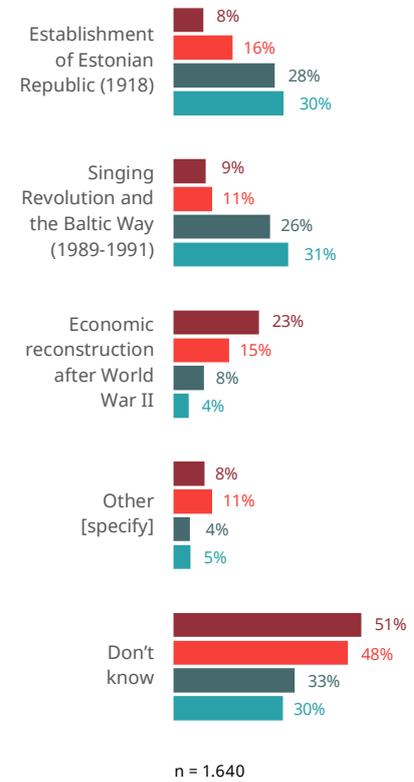
A. What are the most significant historical events for **your** self-understanding as Estonian? (first choice)



B. And what do you think **your mother** would pick as the most important event for her self-understanding as Estonian?



C. And what do you think **your father** would pick as the most important event for her self-understanding as Estonian?



Russian background **Estonian background**
■ 35-65 ■ 35-65
■ 18-34 ■ 18-34

Source: ZOIS survey, autumn 2025

We also asked respondents to indicate what they believe are the most important historical events for their parents. Again, most young Estonians emphasise the two key markers of Estonian independence and suggest that the Singing Revolution is particularly important for their parents. Yet, young respondents with a Russian background seem to have no equivalent historical anchor. Less than 20 per cent of them mention the postwar reconstruction, the 1918 declaration of independence or the Singing Revolution respectively, while a share of over 40 per cent cannot identify any defining event for their parents. This difference underscores how reliably history is transmitted from one generation to another among Estonians without a Russian background. For Russian-background families, this transmission is far less seamless. The memories circulating in this segment of the population are more diffuse and unsettled and therefore potentially harder to manage for the state. ► FIGURES 7B AND C

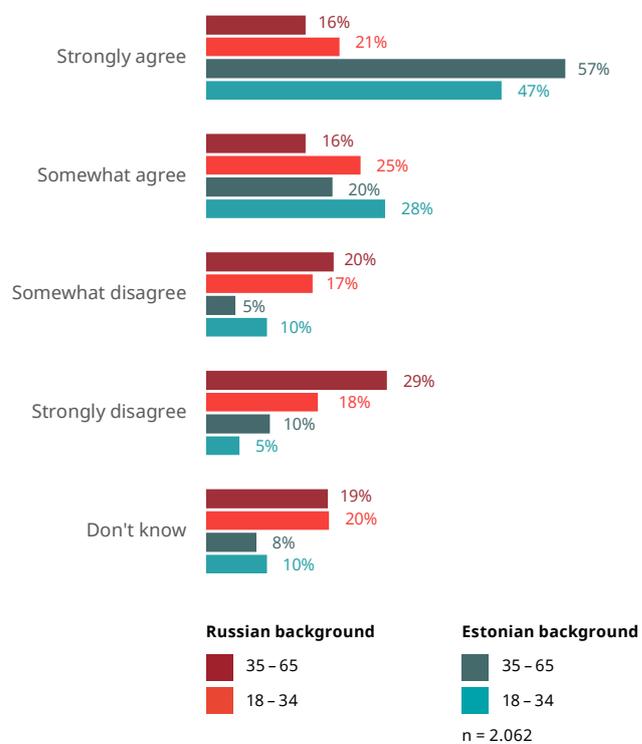
The Soviet-era occupation and forced incorporation of Estonia into the Soviet Union is a cornerstone of Estonia's collective memory. The official Estonian narrative is diametrically opposed to Russia's view of the same period, a tension that continues to resurface publicly, for example in history textbooks.¹² This line of division also separates some of our respondents with and without a Russian background. Among those with an Estonian background, more than three-quarters agree that Estonia was incorporated into the USSR against its will. Among Russian-background respondents, however, we find a much wider range of opinions. In the older generation, only around one-third agree with the view that Estonia was forcibly incorporated into the Soviet Union, while almost half disagree and one-fifth remains unsure. Nearly half of the younger respondents with a Russian background articulate the mainstream Estonian view, while one-third disagree. Here too, we find a high degree of uncertainty.

► **FIGURE 8** While there is evidence of generational change—most likely reflecting the effects of history teaching in school—Estonian history continues to be divisive in a context where Moscow still sees Estonia as a 'lost sheep' of the former Soviet realm and keeps the Soviet legacy alive for political purposes.

To explore how individuals relate emotionally to the past, we asked our respondents how they felt about different historical episodes, offering them a

FIGURE 8

To what extent do you agree that the following items are important for being part of Estonian society? Accept that Estonia was forced into the Soviet Union.



Source: ZOIS survey, autumn 2025

12 Katrin Kello's analysis of 21 Estonian history textbooks (1989 – 2016) shows that Soviet-era narratives, including on the deportations, sustain an ethnocentric canon marked by narrative othering and consistently negative portrayals of Soviet rule, aligning with broader findings on the centrality of Stalinist-era repression in Estonia's memory regime. See Kello 2017.

choice between positive (pride or hope) and negative emotions (fear or shame), as well as indifference. The emotional landscape that emerges shows clear differences by family background. For Estonian-background respondents of all ages, the events of 1918 and 1988–1991 elicit overwhelmingly positive emotions. Younger respondents with a Russian background converge with their Estonian peers here: 65 per cent feel positive about the 1918 declaration of independence and 54 per cent feel positive about the Singing Revolution. Yet, less than half of the older Russian-background respondents have positive associations with these events.

Associations with the Soviet Union

During the Soviet era, 9 May was the central commemorative day for honouring the heroes and victims of World War II. In recent times, the EU has been attempting to establish the day as Europe Day, an occasion to recall the signing of the Schuman Declaration in 1950. Among Estonian-background respondents, nearly 40 per cent associate the date with Europe Day, reflecting a certain cross-generational consensus.¹³ In our sample, older and younger respondents without a Russian background tend to agree on the framing of suffering and victimisation, also speaking to the global norm of remembering the victims of World War II.

A very different pattern emerges among respondents with a Russian background. For the older generation, victory over Nazi Germany is the dominant association (55 per cent), mirroring both the Soviet-era and the contemporary Russian commemorative script. Among younger Russian-background respondents, roughly one-third continue to have this association. Across both age groups, about 40 per cent of respondents emphasise war victims, converging with their Estonian peers. This alignment and divergence reflect the wider clash between a Europeanised memory culture in the Baltic region and Russia's use of the Victory Day narrative beyond its own borders (Matevosyan 2025).

Younger Russian-background respondents differ from both the older Russian-background generation and their age peers with an Estonian background when they link 9 May to 'remembering the value and the price of freedom'. This association, chosen by one-third of them, may also speak to the global development towards victim-centred remembrance in relation to World War II, where the war is framed primarily through its human costs rather than its geopolitical outcomes.

Focus group discussions underscore these divergent commemorative frameworks. Participants with a Russian background commonly frame 9 May as a day of remembrance rooted in family accounts of wartime suffering and sacrifice. For a 45-year-old with mixed Russian-Ukrainian heritage, whose grandfather had been stationed in Narva, the day is about honouring those who fought:

‘We commemorate those people who defended us from fascism ... It's a holiday of remembrance. It's not about the Red Army being the strongest.

The results reflect the wider clash between memory culture in the Baltic region and Russia's use of the Victory Day narrative beyond its own borders.

¹³ Incidentally, it is an interpretation that is marginal in many other EU member states, but salient in the Baltic region. In Latvia, for example, support for the celebration of Europe Day is 53.8 per cent. See LSM English 2024.

Younger participants emphasised victims rather than victory. A 25-year-old IT specialist with parents from the Moscow region called it ‘a day of remembrance for all the victims’. Another participant, born in Estonia to a Russian father and an Estonian mother, similarly insisted that it should be understood ‘as a day of remembrance for all those who died, all the victims of this war ... philosophically speaking’.

These interpretations contrast sharply with those voiced by Estonian-background participants, for whom the date has little or no significance. A 53-year-old father of two put it bluntly:

‘I don’t think it’s a holiday for Estonians.

Similarly, a mother of three argued that ‘it shouldn’t be celebrated at all’ and expressed her dismay that Europe Day is overshadowed by it.

For many Estonians without a Russian background, the Soviet period from Stalin’s death in 1953 to Gorbachev is remembered above all as a time of political oppression and curtailed freedoms. Older Estonians are especially critical. When offered a choice of eight things they might associate with that period of history, roughly two-thirds of the older generation choose political repression, restricted mobility, and economic constraints. Among younger Estonians without a Russian background, every second respondent selects only negative associations. Respondents with a Russian background are more inclined to choose only positive associations. This is the case for 40 per cent of the older generation and 20 per cent of the younger generation. ► **FIGURE 9** Our intergenerational survey highlights that in 50 per cent of families with a Russian-background, parents and children diverge in their assessment of Soviet times. In the remaining families that agree on this matter, a small share of 10 per cent have exclusively positive associations and 40 per cent have exclusively negative associations with this period of history.

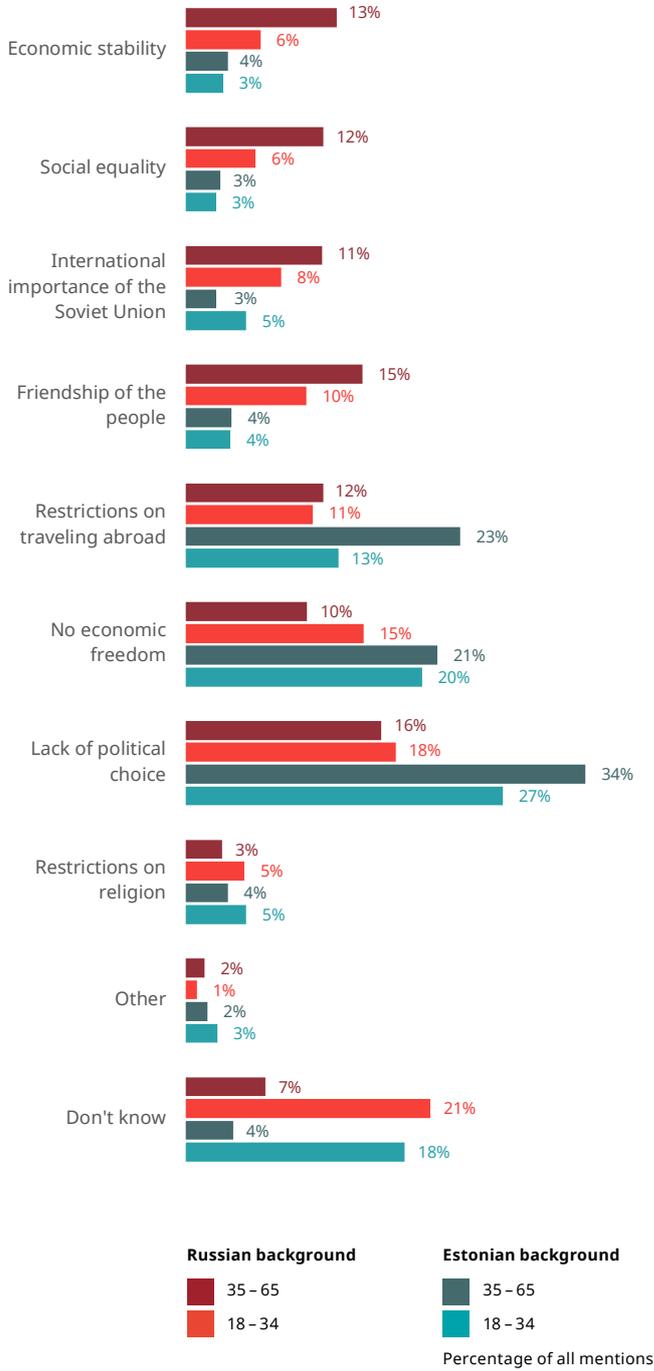
A more positive assessment comes across in the focus group discussions with members of the older generation in Narva. A 48-year-old father of two mentions:

‘I think if the Soviet Union hadn’t collapsed, I wouldn’t have wanted to flee to America, I would have lived, well, just as I have lived here. ... Maybe it was harder to find work. But I think everyone who wanted to leave could do so.

Nevertheless, roughly one-third of the whole sample of Russian-background respondents selected exclusively negative associations, indicating that critical perspectives can be found in both age groups. When it comes to everyday life in the Soviet era, transmission to the younger generation seems to be more difficult. Tellingly, one-third of younger respondents, irrespective of their family background, select ‘don’t know’.

In 50% of families with a Russian-background, parents and children diverge in their assessment of Soviet times.

FIGURE 9
What do you associate with the period between 1953, Stalin's death, to 1985, when Gorbachev came to power? Up to two options.



Source: ZOIS survey, autumn 2025

Intergenerational transmission

Discussions with parents about family life during the Soviet era were rare across all groups. Around one-third of the Russian-background respondents recall occasional and around 10 per cent frequent discussions. Around 20 per cent mention that the topic was never discussed in their families. The story is not much different among respondents with an Estonian background. When asked whether discussions of the Soviet era happened in their families, around one-third recall that they took place occasionally, and less than 10 per cent report 'frequent' discussions on that subject. Younger respondents without a Russian background were more likely than their parents to report no discussions at all (28 per cent vs. 20 per cent).

The focus group discussions corroborate the patterns identified in the surveys. Older participants with a Russian background frequently emphasised that younger people simply do not care about the Soviet past. As one of them put it,

‘You know, the children don’t give a damn about these problems you’re talking about. [...] Why would they care about Stalin, Lenin, democracy?’

Such comments illustrate the perceived generational gap between parents and their adult children when it comes to the significance of memories of the Soviet era.

Discussing politics within family

Turning to the intergenerational data, we find that the frequency of political discussions in the family at age 14 reveals clear differences across groups. On a ten-point scale (where 1 equals no political discussions and 10 very frequent political discussions), respondents with an Estonian background indicate an average of slightly over 4. The average among Russian-background respondents is 3, suggesting that they grew up in significantly less politicised households. There is a high level of disengagement in that group: One-third of the older generation and over a quarter of the younger generation state that they 'never' discussed politics at home. Respondents with higher levels of education, irrespective of their background, report discussing politics more frequently during adolescence, confirming a broader pattern found across groups in Estonia.

The focus groups illustrate how this political silence is experienced and interpreted. Russian-background parents describe their children as fundamentally uninterested in politics. As one of them explained, a 'normal person' does not need political discussion because 'if a person lives a good life, why would they need Stalin's times? Why do they need democracy?' In families without a Russian background, convergence with the older generation on Russian politics is high. But in Russian-background families, the picture looks very different: The proportion of children and parents who always agree on such matters is very small, while around a quarter of respondents claim to disagree on politics with their parents/children, and many younger respondents state that they avoid discussing Russian politics with both parents.

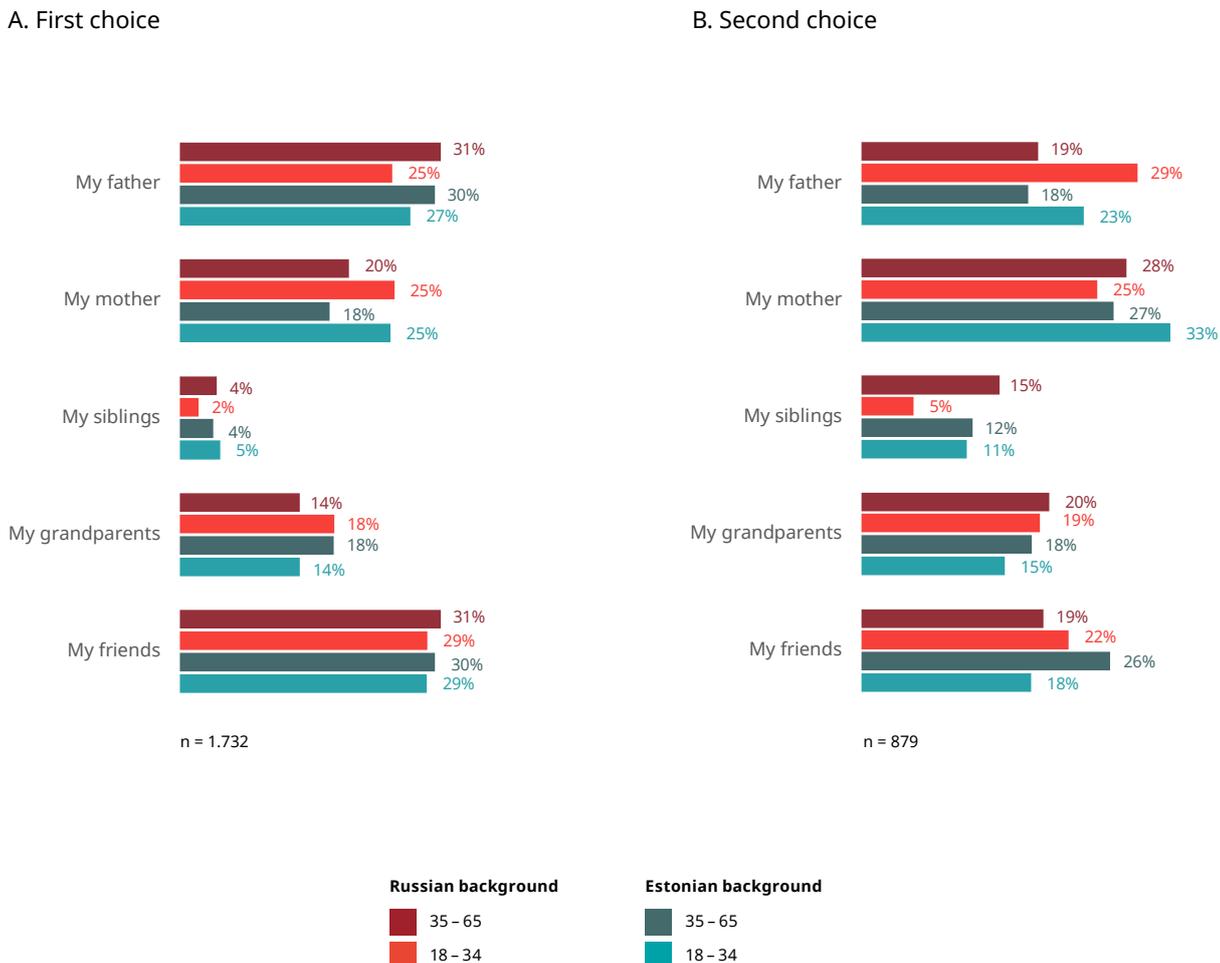
The share of the younger generation who converge with their mothers on Russian politics is broadly similar in both groups. In contrast, younger

Older participants with a Russian background frequently emphasised that younger people simply do not care about the Soviet past.

respondents with a Russian background are much more likely to report agreement with their fathers rather than with their mothers. Although there are fewer political discussions in these families, there is a continuity in political views which is far less pronounced among their peers with an Estonian background.

When asked about the people who had the greatest influence on their political views in adolescence, a gender divide emerges. Across all groups, fathers and friends emerge as the primary interlocutors in political conversations around the age of fourteen, while mothers, grandparents and siblings play a secondary, though still meaningful, role. The structure of early political communication is thus broadly shared, even if the content of these discussions later diverges. ► **FIGURE 10**

FIGURE 10
And with whom were you first most likely to talk about politics when you were about 14?



Source: ZOIS survey, autumn 2025

Beyond family dynamics

Across Estonian society, respondents generally recall growing up in broadly harmonious family environments. Here, the generational divide is more pronounced than the ethnic one: younger Estonian- and Russian-background respondents recall less harmonious childhoods than the older generation. Furthermore, higher income predicts more harmonious environments, whereas women recall more conflicts. Importantly, greater identification with Estonians or Russians in Estonia is associated with more positive views on the family atmosphere. A broader sense of belonging thus informs how family life is retrospectively interpreted.

In discussions on politics and society, older respondents generally agree more with their friends than with their children. Over 70 per cent of respondents with an Estonian background mostly agree with their friends. Russian-background respondents also lean towards agreement with their friends, but the value is, at 60 per cent, somewhat lower.

The same level of political agreement does not extend to the workplace, where respondents are much less likely to see eye to eye with their colleagues. Among those without a Russian background, more than half in both age groups report agreement, with disagreement and avoidance more common among the young. Among younger Russian-background respondents, slightly more than 40 per cent claim to agree on politics with their colleagues, whereas a quarter said they never talk about politics at work. Slightly more than half of the older respondents with a Russian background tend to agree with their colleagues and do not avoid the subject to the same extent as the younger generation.

Conclusions

Estonia has to strike a delicate balance between firm responses to the external threats to its domestic security and efforts to strengthen internal social cohesion. This report shows the extent to which societal divisions are rooted in the different family backgrounds and socialisation experiences of the country's population. Yet, different attitudes and values do not neatly map onto these categories. Indeed, across the survey questions factors like income and age consistently help to explain such differences. Most strikingly, younger respondents with a Russian family background are similar across many domains to the older respondents without such a family background. This convergence illustrates the impact of these young people's socialisation in independent Estonia, with its distinct education system and political discourse. That said, differences among the young can partly be explained by the enduring influence of the family.

Across the fields examined in this report—national security, the war in Ukraine, and Estonian politics and history—a fragmented societal landscape emerges. Irrespective of their backgrounds, younger respondents show greater support for democratic norms, and they are also more in tune with the views on the war espoused by most Estonian politicians. The extent to which our respondents identify with either ethnic Estonians or Russian speakers in Estonia has a huge bearing on their views on international politics. With regard to attitudes on history, generational dynamics suggest

Younger respondents show greater support for democratic norms, and are more in tune with the views on the war espoused by most Estonian politicians.

that some level of convergence is under way. Younger Russian-background respondents align more closely with prevailing Estonian historical interpretations and their age peers. However, such a broadly shared historical outlook does not automatically translate into shared political views or security assessments.

Estonia's emphasis on the securitisation framework in dealing with its Russian-speaking minority—which predates the 2022 escalation of the war in Ukraine—risks reinforcing the very divisions it aims to manage. In particular the gradual transition to Estonian-only education has cemented a feeling of exclusion and non-belonging in sections of the population (Krawatzek 2025). This policy is supposed to facilitate the social and economic integration of Russian speakers, but it remains a source of discord in a highly polarised environment. Social cohesion in this context requires spaces in which different attitudes within families can be articulated and critically engaged with in order to raise awareness of ideas that potentially threaten social stability.

The global pressures created by Russia's aggression will shape Estonian domestic politics in the years to come. Russia's covert attacks on Estonia pose not only a conventional security challenge, but a threat to social cohesion. Dismissing Russian narratives as propaganda is not enough. Citizens need to be educated to decipher political news in a polarised environment. Given that some of the disinformation Russia spreads within Estonia touches on real domestic grievances, dismissing it outright would be short-sighted. Such a reaction runs the risk of exacerbating the vulnerabilities that the Kremlin seeks to exploit.

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Tallinn building juxtaposing Soviet-era architecture with a mural inspired by Estonian and Nordic symbolism
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