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Estonia: People with family background in Russia have differing views on security and history

Respondents to a ZOIS study in Estonia with a family background in Russia view Russia's war in Ukraine differently from other Estonians and perceive Russia as less of a geopolitical threat. At the same time, the younger generation converges with the views of the Estonian population without a Russian background.

A new ZOIS report examines how the Estonian population – with and without a Russian background – perceives national security, the war in Ukraine, and key aspects of domestic and international politics and historical memory. To this end, 2,062 people in Estonia were surveyed in 2025. A further survey in 2024, supplemented by focus group discussions, provides insights into the relationship between the older and younger generations. In a tangible legacy of the Soviet era, more than a quarter of Estonia's population is Russian speaking, a social make-up that repeatedly causes tensions.

Russia and the war against Ukraine

Among all respondents, Russia is viewed by a majority as the greatest threat to global and national security. However, respondents with a Russian family background are less definite on this point. Among them, almost 30 per cent of the older generation and 15 per cent of the younger generation saw no threat at all to Estonia from Russia. (Figure 1)

A marked difference emerges regarding the war against Ukraine. Over 50 per cent of Estonian respondents without a Russian background fully agree with the statement that Russia alone is responsible for the war. In contrast, only a quarter of the younger respondents and 20 per cent of the older respondents with a Russian background shared this view. (Figure 2)

'In the focus groups with people with Russian background it became evident that an abstract notion of responsibility for the war has now emerged. Participants did not blame Russia, but rather the global economy or anonymous powers for having united against the interests of ordinary people,' report Félix Krawatzek and Hakob Matevosyan, who conducted the research.

Convergence among the younger generation

In Estonia, historical narratives are closely linked to questions of security and Estonian sovereignty. In their interpretation of history, assessments of democracy and views on social issues, younger respondents with a Russian family background are moving closer to the rest of Estonian society. Most of them adopt historical positions that align with the Estonian interpretation of the 20th century, whereas older respondents with a Russian background tend to have a more Soviet-influenced view of events such as 9 May or Estonia's Soviet past. 'There are signs of a generational shift, which can certainly

be explained to some extent by the Estonian school system. At the same time, there remains a high degree of uncertainty, with many ‘don’t know’ responses – an indication that history remains a socially controversial topic,’ the authors explain.

About the study

The study is part of the MoveMeRU project, funded by the European Research Council. Using a combination of quantitative and qualitative methods in three countries (Germany, Canada and Estonia), the researchers are attempting to find out how perceptions of history are passed down within families. This is particularly politically relevant for people with family roots in Russia, not least because Russia specifically targets this group with disinformation campaigns and attempts to exploit historical narratives for its own purposes.

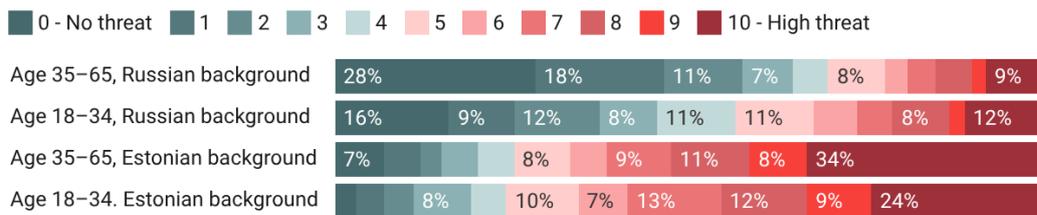
Publication:

[Félix Krawatzek and Hakob Matevosyan: Estonia’s Fractured Social Landscape: Views on Security, Politics and History, ZOIS Report 2/2026.](#)

Figure 1

Threat perception: Russia

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.



n = 2.062

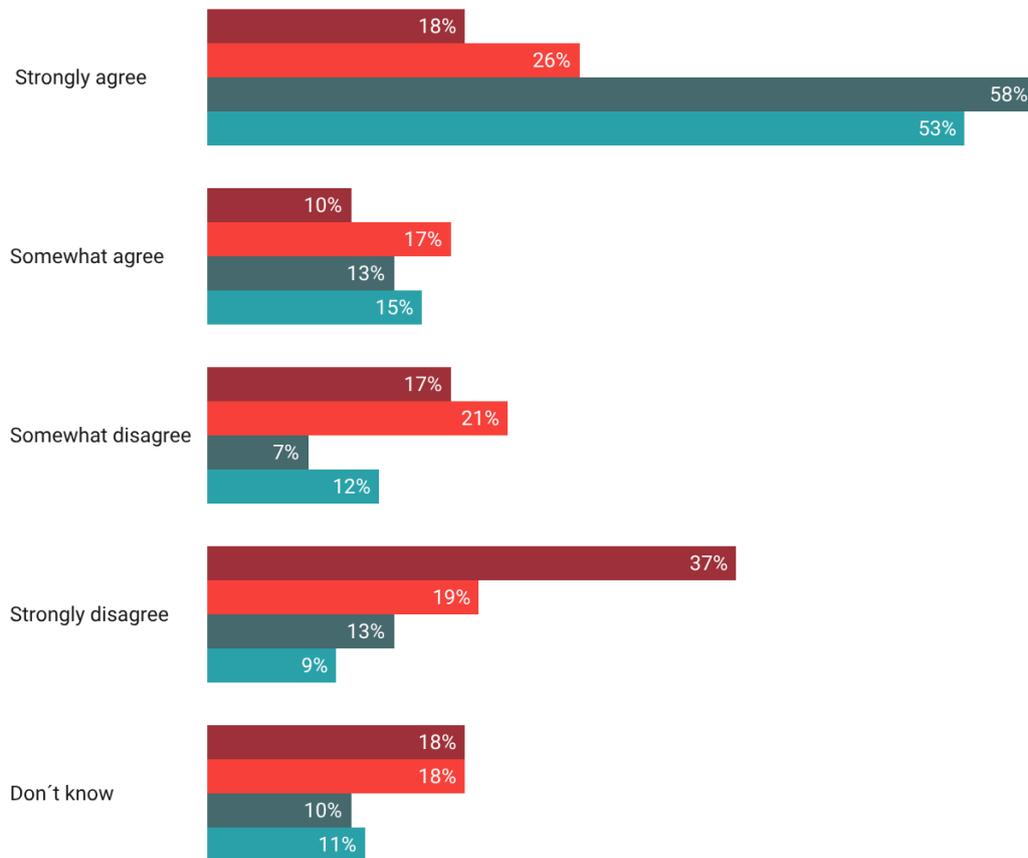
Source: ZOIS survey among 2.062 participants, autumn 2025 • Created with Datawrapper

Figure 2

Responsibility for the war

How much do you agree with the following: "Only Russia is responsible for the escalation of war in Ukraine"?

- Age 35–65, Russian background
- Age 18–34, Russian background
- Age 35–65, Estonian background
- Age 18–34, Estonian background



Source: ZOIS survey among 2.062 participants in Estonia, autumn 2025 • Created with Datawrapper

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