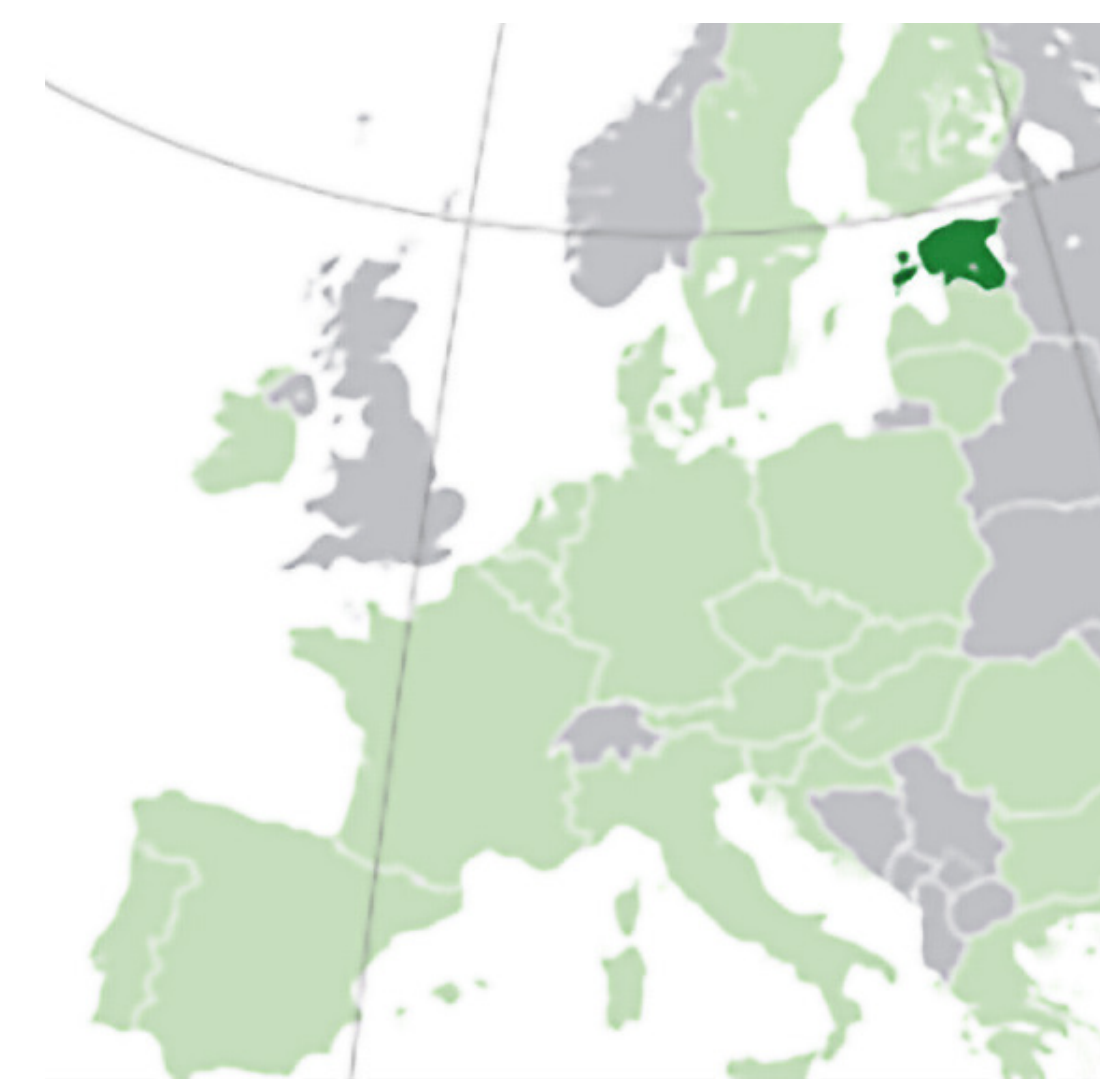


# Social representations of the transition to Estonian-medium education

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Poster presentation at the CIRS 2025 –XVII International Conference on Social Representations, Brest France, 7-12 July 2025



## BACKGROUND

The influences of the cultural spaces of Central, Eastern and Northern Europe intersect in Estonia.

### Estonian population 1934–2025, thousands.

|  | 1934     | 1989     | 2025     |
|--|----------|----------|----------|
| Population                               | 1126,413 | 1565,662 | 1369,995 |
| Estonians                                | 992,520  | 963,281  | 934,725  |
| Russians                                 | 92,656   | 474,846  | 285,819  |
| Germans                                  | 16,343   | 3,466    | 2,954    |
| Percentage of Russians in the population | 8,23     | 30,33    | 20,86    |

### The Estonian-speaking and Russian-speaking Populations in the North-East of Estonia and in Tallinn, thousands

| Location                          | Estonian speakers | Russian speakers |
|-----------------------------------|-------------------|------------------|
| North-East of Estonia             | 25,845            | 92,090           |
| Tallinn on the whole              | 237,832           | 139,835          |
| Tallinn in Lasnamäe neighbourhood | 32,567            | 66,090           |
| Tallinn in Nõmme neighbourhood    | 29,405            | 3,657            |

Russians moved within the USSR and did not perceive themselves as migrants.

## PROBLEM

Although the two communities' live side by side, they have different historical backgrounds, languages (Fino-Ugric, Indo-European) and often cultural orientations.

For Estonians, language is a central part of identity, as they have historically had to preserve their culture under pressure from dominant groups.

The Russian community often has a stronger connection to Russian culture and media space.

Estonians tend to value efficiency and following rules.

Russian speakers tend to prefer direct human relationships to formal processes.

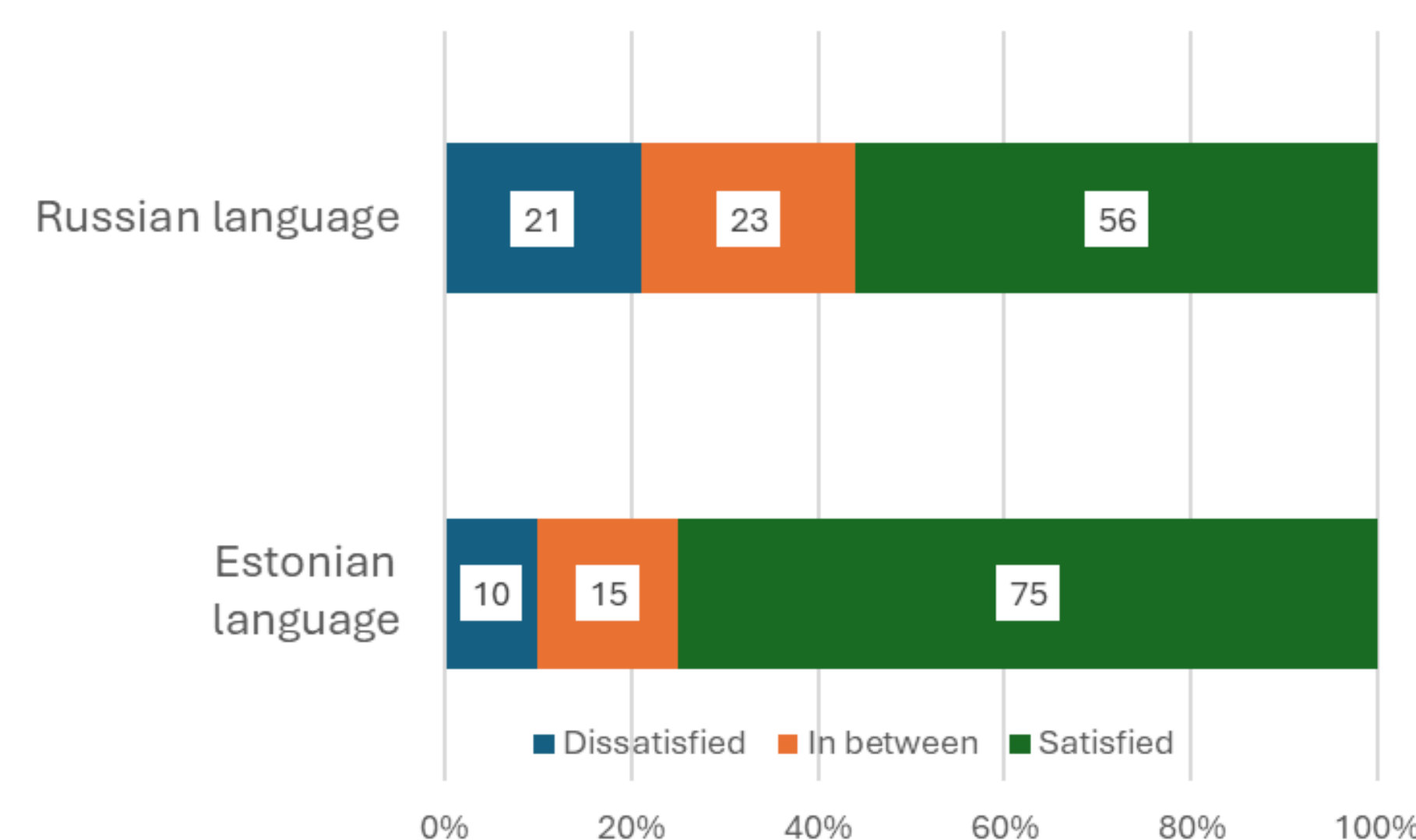
After Estonia's incorporation to Soviet Union, a Russian-language school network was introduced parallelly to Estonian-language education, the curricula of which did not consider the local context.

Therefore, Estonian and Russian schoolchildren grew up in largely separate cultural and linguistic environments. After restoration of Estonia's independence became clear that many graduates of Russian-language schools did not speak Estonian well enough to work in an Estonian-speaking society.

Estonians used a separation strategy for cultural adaptation during the Soviet era preserving their culture and identity while avoiding close contact with the Russian-speaking population. After restoration of independence many, especially older Russian speakers, follow a separation strategy.

The quality of education in Russian-language schools is often lower than in Estonian-language schools. This is due to the language skills and qualifications of teachers, the quality of textbooks, and deficiencies in Estonian language skills.

### Satisfaction with the quality of education in Estonian-language and Russian-language schools (N=1200)\*, FES 2021.



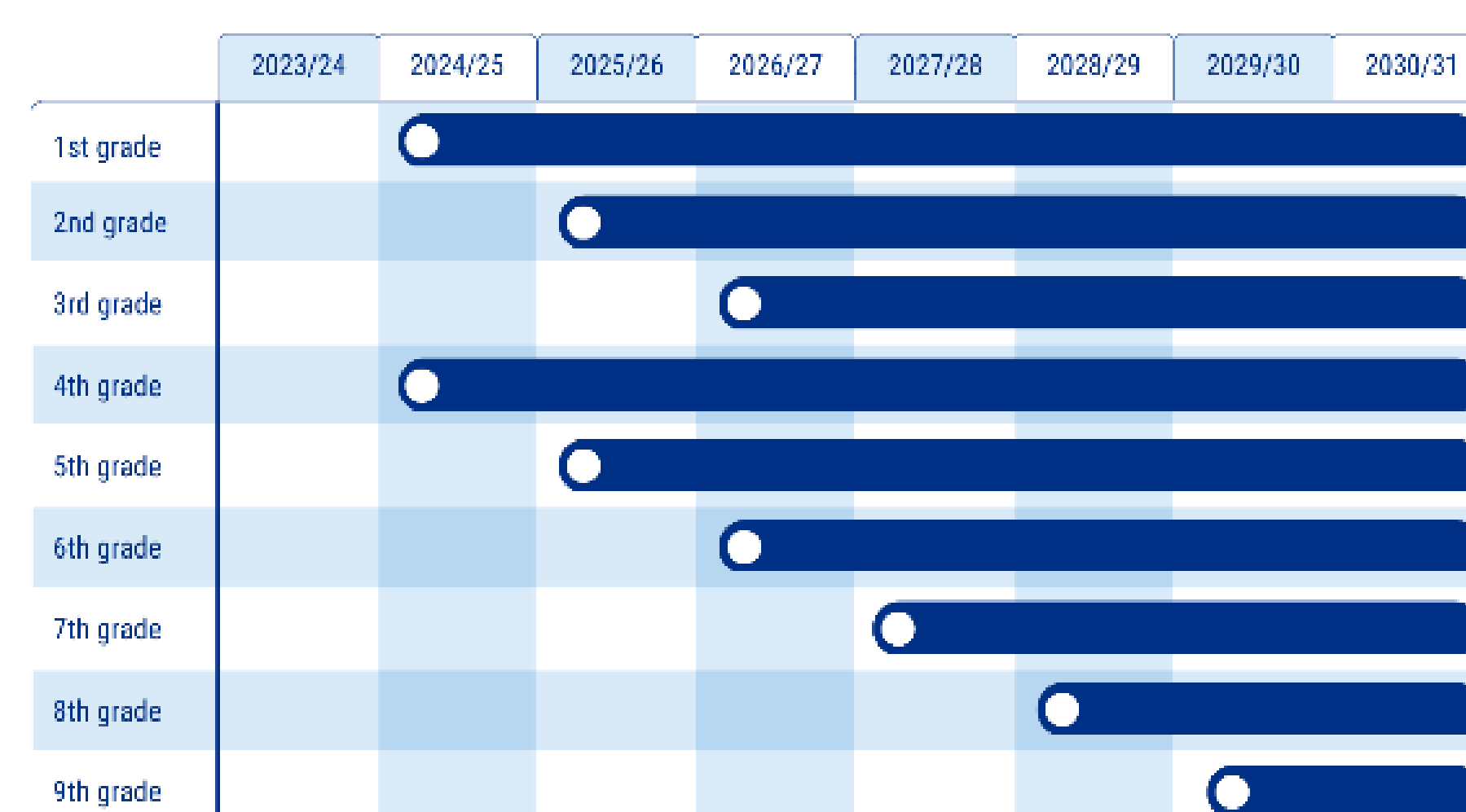
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## TRANSITION TO ESTONIAN-LANGUAGE EDUCATION

Since the early 2000s, the 60-40 language immersion model has been implemented, according to which 60% of subjects had to be taught in Estonian and 40% in Russian.

At the moment there are requirements to the Estonian language proficiency of students studying in the former schools with Russian as the language of instruction. The proficiency levels comply with the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages and are as follows: A1 in Year 4; A2 in Year 7; B1 in Year 9, which is the end of compulsory education, and B2 in Year 12 which is the end of the upper-secondary education.

### The transition to Estonian-language education is set to begin in kindergartens and 1st and 4th grades in 2024, with the aim of completing the process by 2030.



The transition began in a hurry and without thorough preparation (no suitable teaching materials have been created), teachers are overloaded with work responsibilities.

The shortage of Estonian-speaking teachers in Russian-medium schools is being alleviated with higher salaries, especially in the North-East of Estonia.

## METHOD

Media analysis of Russian-language and Estonian-language Estonian newspapers.

Interviews with Russian-speaking students, their parents and teachers.

## RESULTS

Estonian-language newspapers: According to the state's position, the transition is inevitable.

Critics say that the transition to Estonian-language instruction in schools with mixed classes could lead to the

Russification of Estonian children.

Russian-language newspapers: Estonian-language education is a bridge to better opportunities and self-fulfilment

The success of the transition depends on the ability of the school environment to support students Teachers lack the experience and methodology to teach subject and language simultaneously A unified Estonian-language education system is necessary to ensure the cohesion of Estonian society

Students' perceptions and concerns:

Insufficient language skills Home is unable to provide language support, hires tutors

The transition is too fast

Ambiguity of norms in another cultural space Perceptions and concerns of Russian-speaking parents: Education should be provided only in the mother tongue Estonian-language education opens new opportunities The transition should have started earlier, both in time and age (in kindergarten).

Russian-language teachers' perceptions and concerns: Teaching in a foreign language is difficult.

Teaching in Estonian should be done in small groups. Subject teaching in Estonian should be done in small groups.

Adaptation to the Estonian cultural space is difficult for students.

## CONCLUSIONS

Different groups interpret education reform through distinct social representations, shaped by their values, language, and cultural context:

- Estonian-language media presents the transition as inevitable and linked to national unity, while some critics frame it as risking Russification of Estonian children.
- Russian-language media emphasizes opportunity and integration but also highlights practical challenges for schools and teachers.
- Russophone students express concerns about language barriers and cultural disorientation.
- Russian-speaking parents are divided: some support mother-tongue education, others see Estonian as a pathway to success.
- Teachers view the reform as methodologically difficult, especially in large or mixed groups.

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