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THE EFFECTS OF THE WAR IN UKRAINE ON THE RUSSOPHONE MINORITY'S  
IDENTITY IN ESTONIA

MA thesis

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### *Authorship Declaration*

I have prepared this thesis independently. All the views of other authors, as well as data from literary sources and elsewhere, have been cited.

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*Aigerim Nurseitova, 09/01/2023*

## **Abstract**

In this thesis, I study the Estonian Russian-speaking population's identity. After the dissolution of the Soviet Union postcolonial studies primarily focused on nationalizing discourses within a country and experiences of linguistic and ethnic minorities were overlooked. In the 2010-2020s as the war in Ukraine added social significance to this topic, researchers still question the relationship between the minorities and the "homeland" Russia as it took on a neo imperialist route. The objective of this thesis is to understand the relationship between Estonian Russophones and Russia as a Significant Other and monitor whether there has been any change in Estonian Russophones' identity discourse in reaction to Russia's war in Ukraine. I narrow down the research scope to Russian (*rossiyskaya*) popular culture representations in the Estonian Russophones' discourse. I conduct a discourse analysis of a Russian-language Estonian news outlet articles, Delfi, throughout 2010, 2014, 2020, and 2022. The main findings of this thesis are the following. First, the Estonian Russophones are not a homogenous group, and therefore their relationship with and attachment to Russia and its popular culture differs. Second, after the war in Ukraine began in 2014 the "othering" between Russophone citizens of Estonia and Russian citizens living in Estonia, as well as the "othering" of the Russophones in Estonia as a collective and Estonians, have increased due to differing views on the Russian invasion of Ukrainian territories and the Soviet past. The fact that parts of Russian popular culture began equating the victory in the Great Patriotic War, which Estonian Russophones attach positive sentiment to, to the war in Ukraine and using Soviet symbols as also symbols of the war in Ukraine, caused a high level of contestation in the Estonian Russophones' identity.

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## 1. Introduction

Following the fall of the Soviet Union, Russophones' identity in newly independent countries interested many researchers. Sidelined by both Russia and Estonia at the early stages of the post-communist transition period, the local Russophone community's identity began to slowly shape into its own collective identity. Some researchers claimed that it was an Estonian Russophone identity with a premise of political identity interrelated with Estonia and a cultural one connected with Russia (Jakobson, 2002; Vihalemm & Masso, 2003; Brubaker, 1996; Ryazanova-Clarke, 2014; Cheskin, 2013; Kallas, 2016). Other studies also emphasized a separate Estonian Russian-speaking identity but without an attachment to either Estonia or Russia, but rather one with a view to the past, nostalgic about the Soviet era (Kirch et al., 1997; Vihalemm, 2007; Kirch, 1997). Although I do not disagree with either of the ideas, I see the main shortcoming of previous research in the methods they used (e.g., surveys, interviews). These methods often pre-theorize the data, generalized findings as if Estonian Russophones were a homogenous group, and lacked either validity or reliability. Besides, the relationship between Estonian Russophones and Russia has been studied considerably less than the relationship with the Estonian hegemonic identity. Previous studies on the Russophone population in Estonia were mostly focused on the effectiveness of integration programs launched after Estonia regained independence. Although I do not look at integration programs and Estonian Russophones' relations with Estonia(ns), I build on previous research on Russian speakers' identity in Estonia (see literature review below) and contribute by studying their relations with another important Significant Other, Russia.

Research on Russophones in Estonia gained in social importance since Russia's aggression in Ukraine began in 2014, where Russian government justified its actions partly by the need to protect compatriots abroad. Because of Russia's neo-imperialist foreign policies allegedly directed at protecting compatriots abroad and its stark deviation from European (Western) values, Estonian Russophones found themselves torn between the West and Russia, their conflicting values and identities. Russia's soft power influence seems to have rather distanced Estonians from the local Estonian Russophones. This "othering" became more noticeable and Russian speakers in Estonia got turned into a major security concern after the annexation of Crimea in 2014 and full-scale invasion of Ukraine in 2022 since Estonians feared an annexation of Estonian territory. The annexation of Crimea in 2014 and the full-scale invasion of Ukraine in 2022 were and, at times still are, supported by some Estonian Russophones, primarily because they relied on Kremlin-aligned information sources. However, not all Russian speakers

support, or identify with, Russia. Due to how recent the war in Ukraine is at the time of writing, and the fact that identity constantly evolves, there have not been many studies on the identity of Russian speakers in independent Estonia after the war in Ukraine started in 2014. Little attention has also been given to how Russia influences the local Russophone community and its identity development with either its actions or policies directed at them. I aim at helping to fill that gap, discover the effect of the war in Ukraine on the Estonian Russophones' identity development and extrapolate the Estonian Russophones' identity development based on the trends in the collected data.

The objective of this thesis is to study Estonian Russophones' identity through their interaction with the Significant Other, i.e., Russia, and monitor whether there has been any change as a result of the high level of contestation of the Estonian Russophones' identity caused by an exogenous shock, i.e., the war in Ukraine. Subsequently the research question is formulated as follows: *How have the Russian popular culture representations changed in Russian-language Estonian media as a result of the crisis in Russia-West relations starting from 2014?* To fulfill the objective and answer the research question, I rely on Ted Hopf's social cognitive theory of identity, which suggests an inductive method and theory in studying identity, where identity is not pre-defined but re-collected from existing discursive formations. I use discourse analysis, as suggested by Ted Hopf and Bentley Allan (2016) in their Making Identity Count framework. Using discourse analysis, I reconstruct Estonian Russophones' identity from an intersubjective reality. The intersubjective reality I find in Estonian Russophones' discourses in media, where they exchange meanings on who they are, what they stand for, their values, how they see Others and how Others see them. Although media channels can choose to not accommodate all discourses present in Estonian Russophones' community, its opinion-makers are likely to be present as speakers and help to identify at least the dominating identity discourses. I conduct a discourse analysis of the most popular Russian-language Estonian news outlet Delfi to study the Estonian Russian-speaking population's relationship with Russia during the war in Ukraine. Russian-language Estonian media is looked at as a source where Estonian Russophones exchange identity discourses, including views on Significant Others. In particular, a discourse analysis of Delfi articles from 2010, 2014, 2020, and 2022 is conducted. The discourses are identified by an individual analyst, who is instructed to find how Estonian Russophones see themselves and Significant Others day-to-day, when such question is not asked directly. The data collected for this thesis is also part of a research project called "National identity and

Estonian-Russian relations: a longitudinal study of elite and mass discourses”, funded by the Estonian Research Council and led by the thesis’ supervisor Viacheslav Morozov.

To narrow down the scope of the research I take Russian popular culture representations in Estonian Russophones’ discourses because this area is widely accessible to and discussed among Estonian Russophones and it shows the identity relationship between Estonian Russophones and Russia. In other words, the Russian popular culture representations in Estonian Russian-language media are used as an indicator of the Estonian Russophones’ relationship with and to Russia as a Significant Other. Changes in identity are believed to consist of changes in representations, and discourses that habitually made up Russian speakers’ social reality, and Russian popular culture is part of their social reality. This fact is highly visible in the Estonian Russophones media sphere, where consumption patterns include Russian popular culture. Based on previous research on identity, the theoretical expectation of this thesis is that the change in the relationship with a Significant Other that can be seen through a change in representations will result in a change of one’s identity because identity exists as a certain set of representations. In this case, a change in how Estonian Russophones interact with Russian popular culture is affecting their relations with Russia as a Significant Other, which, in turn, can cause contestation or changes in some aspects of Estonian Russophones’ identity.

This thesis consists of three parts: theoretical framework, methods and data collection strategies, and analysis and discussion of the results. The theoretical framework starts with a literature review and a discussion of why and how can the Estonian Russophones’ identity be studied. This is followed by a theoretical background, where the theory selection is described and justified, and a conceptual framework, where concepts of identity and popular culture are defined. The section ends by giving research expectations and the research question. The methods chapter informs the reader about the method used, why it has been used and outlines the data collection instructions. This chapter is followed by the analysis and discussion of results, where data processing is overviewed, and results are presented and discussed. The thesis then concludes with the main findings, limitations of this thesis, and suggestions for further research.

## 2. Constructivist views on studying Estonian Russophones' identity

### 2.1. Russian speakers in Estonia throughout history

What is considered to be the first wave of ethnically Russian immigration to Estonia were the Old Believers in the 17<sup>th</sup> century. Many Old Believers faced persecution for Old Rite worshipping after the Russian Orthodox Church was reformed by Patriarch Nikon of Moscow. In Estonia, most settled on the western shore of lake Peipus. As the persecution continued up until the 20th century, more ethnic Russians moved to Estonia or other nearby countries during the later period of the Russian Empire. The overall number of Old Believers has decreased as a result of persecutions in the Russian Empire, anti-religion campaigns in the Soviet Union (the USSR), and as younger generations moved away to cities from their original settlements changing lifestyles. "Religion has served as a basis for Lake Peipsi Old Believers' identity for centuries, for a long time overshadowing the ethnic and linguistic identities" (Plaat, 2005: 7). The Old Believers have, by and large, become integrated into Estonian society (Plaat, 2005). This difference in identity development is what differentiated the Old Believers from the later waves of migrants.

After Estonia became part of the Soviet bloc as a result of an occupation by the Red Army during and following the end of the Second World War (WWII), the Soviet government pursued nation-building policies in all occupied territories in hope of establishing a Soviet national identity. In many cases these policies suppressed the ethnic and religious traditions of non-Russians. Implementation of these policies is considered by some researchers as the point when "[i]n Latvia, Lithuania, and Estonia, after World War II, the Soviet *occupation* developed into a *colonial* situation" (Annus, 2018: 101; original emphasis). Colonization then entailed "permanent relations [between the colonist and] the preexisting local population" (Annus, 2018: 99). Soviet government's nation-building policies involved the relocation of Russian speakers from parts of the USSR into other Soviet republics, including Estonia, where industrial jobs were (re-)emerging (Jašina-Schäfer, 2021; Kirch et al., 1997; Jakobson, 2002). "Thus, by the end of 1980s, the post-war reconstruction and industrialization turned the region into a largely 'Russian-speaking working-class environment'" (Jašina-Schäfer, 2021: 26). In numeric terms, "[i]n 1989, Eastern Slavic groups (most importantly Russians, but also Belarusians and Ukrainians) made up 35 percent of the Estonian [population]" (Bohle & Greskovits, 2012: 98). The number of Russian speakers in Estonia grew steadily until the Soviet Union collapsed.

As state borders were redrawn after the collapse of the USSR, once a majority group, ethnic Russians became a diaspora in newly independent states outside of Russia (Brubaker, 1996; Jašina-Schäfer, 2021). Estonia was one of the successor states that inherited a share of the formerly Soviet Russophone population, especially in cities like Narva, where still to this day over 90 percent of residents are Russian-speaking (Jašina-Schäfer & Cheskin, 2020). In 1989 they composed over 30 percent of the total population of Estonia (Statistics Estonia, 2022b). In the 1990s the non-Estonian Russophones' identity development began to concern researchers and policymakers precisely because a large share of Russian-speaking non-Estonians had to go through a major change in their life facing adaptation to the “new” societies, where former ethnic minorities constituted a majority. “[A]longside the process of integration, the question of political loyalty and stability within society has also been a concern of official Estonian policy” (Kirch et al., 1997: 47).

Since Estonia regained independence, researchers paid particular attention to how its national identity developed after a period of exposure to Soviet/Russian policies aimed at either repressing existing national identities or creating new ones. Post-Soviet Estonia sharply deviated from its former Eastern bloc affiliation with hopes of resettling within the Western world. Experts concluded that Estonian and Russian identities are incompatible and antagonistic; “this antagonism has increased, rather than eroded over time, reflecting certain content shifts in national identity constructions, as well as the consolidation and institutionalization of these constructions as the ideational basis of state- and nationhood” (Ehin & Berg, 2009: 1-2). Transitioning from the communist system involved radical political and economic reforms. After Estonia regained its independence in 1991, the new government's agenda of rebuilding Estonian national identity did not take into account the Russian-speaking residents of non-Estonian ethnic origin, most of whom were considered remnants of Soviet occupation. Re-adopted in 1992, The 1938 Citizenship Act was based on the first period of Estonian independence. The act only granted citizenship to residents and the descendants of people who lived in Estonia prior to the Soviet occupation. Non-Estonians who did not meet the criteria were expected to leave to historic homelands and obtain citizenship of a different country (in most cases, Russian), or to get Estonian citizenship through naturalization (Järve & Poleshchuk, 2019; Kirch et al., 1993). The fourth option, chosen by many Russophones, was to initially remain stateless and obtain an Estonian alien's passport (gray passport) which gave them access to both Estonia and Russia (Cole, 2022). Over time, however, many non-Estonians seized the opportunity to naturalize and got Estonian citizenship (Järve & Poleshchuk, 2019).

The Russian-speaking minority that stayed after the fall of the Soviet Union interested many scholars, some of whom also studied various aspects of what it is like to be a Russophone of non-Estonian ethnic origin in Estonia, however, most studies focused on the effectiveness of integration programs established by the state (Bohle & Greskovits, 2012; Jašina-Schäfer, 2021; Järve & Poleshchuk, 2019; Kirch et al., 1993; Jakobson, 2002; Suslov, 2018; Kallas, 2016). Since being sidelined by both Russia and Estonia at the early stages of the transition period, the local Russophone community's identity was claimed to have begun to slowly shape into its own group/collective identity with a premise of political identity interrelated with Estonia and a cultural one connected to Russia (Jakobson, 2002; Vihalemm & Masso, 2003). Other studies also emphasized a separate Estonian Russian-speaking identity but without an attachment to either Estonia or Russia, but rather with a view to the past, nostalgic about the Soviet times (Kirch et al., 1997; Vihalemm, 2007; Kirch, 1997). In the transition period, studies have also indicated that very few local Russian speakers identified themselves with Estonians. Aune Valk's (1997: 44) interviews with local Russian minority representatives showed that the "majority (with one exception) of Estonian Russians referred to the events and persons from the Russian history when talking about their "own" history". Henry Brady and Cynthia Kaplan (2009) conducted surveys and content analysis of local Estonian- and Russian-language newspapers around the 1990s to understand Estonian Slavs' ethnic identity based on indicators like media consumption, personal and parental ethnicity, language spoken at home and knowledge of a second language. They concluded that Estonians and local Russophones grew apart at the time due to limited inter-group interactions and consumption of different (Estonian- and Russian-language) media that "provided different information to their readers who came from different ethnic groups" (Brady & Kaplan, 2009:48). "Estonians focused on life within Estonia and the European world to which they felt historically linked, whereas Slavs viewed their metropole as Moscow and the Soviet Union" (Brady & Kaplan, 2009: 48–49).

The fact that Estonian Russophones' identity grew apart from the Estonian identity following the collapse of the USSR caused some separatist sentiment among Russian speakers. In 1993, Narva and Sillamäe city councils attempted to conduct referendums on the autonomy of their respective regions, which were overruled by the Estonian government as unconstitutional. While fears of Russian speakers' separatism were, and still are, present in many countries of the former Soviet Union, researchers in Estonia also reassured that no political mobilization is expected, because "Russian speakers living in Estonia do not form a single unitary category which has a uniform value system and attitudes" (Ehala & Zabrodskaja, 2014: 183). Some

researchers, however, suggest closer identity ties to Russia than one might think (Tammppuu, 2002; Valk, 1997).

In the early 2000s Estonian-Russian relations were expected to improve after Estonia joined the European Union, and as a result, have a positive effect on the Russophone minority's identity development:

the construction patterns of ethno-cultural identity are quite responsive to the patterns of inter-group communication—if interethnic communication becomes more active and mutual linguistic tolerance increases (e.g. accepting English as a third local language) in the course of generation replacement the ethnic identity of Estonian Russians may become more hybrid, more open to different cultures. If the current, rather separated, Estonian and Russian language communication spaces remain, the defensive minority identity construction pattern will probably dominate. (Vihalemm, 2007)

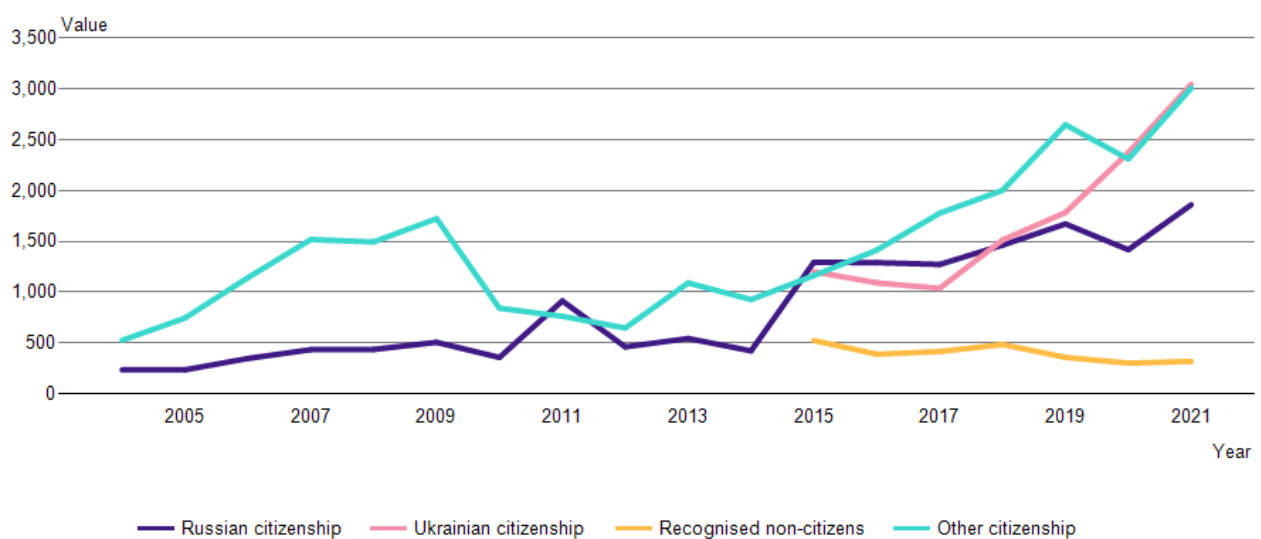
Vihalemm's expectation on the relations and identity of Estonians and Russians did not fully realize after Estonia joined the European Union (EU): “[o]ld issues, such as the status of the Russian-speaking minorities, have not disappeared from the agenda and, contrary to what was expected, EU membership appears to have added new conflict dimensions and expanded the arenas of contestation” (Ehin & Berg, 2009: 1).

The integration program's successes were also questioned, when in 2007 violent protests broke out in Tallinn due to the relocation of the Bronze Soldier monument. The Bronze Soldier, located in central Tallinn, served as a reminder for the Russophone community of their parents' and grandparents' sacrifices during the Second World War. Contrary to earlier assumptions that only poorly integrated elders, due to their stronger attachment to the Soviet past, would object to the relocation, the younger generation came out to protect the Soviet statue (Vihalemm & Kalmus, 2009). Triin Vihalemm and Veronika Kalmus (2009: 98) argue that “the reasons for tensions between the third-generation immigrant youngsters and the host society are weaknesses in education and training, high unemployment, and objective and subjective social exclusion”. Some Russophones understood the monument relocation as discrimination against what is considered their ancestors' history. The Second World War is a sensitive topic for both Estonians and Estonian Russophones who view the events of this period differently: if Estonians look at the Red Army and the Soviet Union as occupants and colonizers (Annus, 2018), Russophones have an opposite view of the Soviet Union – they praise the Red Army (in which their parents and grandparents might have served) as liberators. To this day,

interpretations of WWII divide Estonian society. Alexander Astrov (2009) calls this dispute of history a “clash of commemorations”. Among Russophones in Estonia, Dmitri Gorelov (2020) highlights three different types of commemorators differentiated according to how much meaning they attach to the symbols associated with WWII, but all three groups engage with symbols, such as St. George’s ribbon and Soviet monuments which are claimed to resemble Russophones’ identity. *Georgievskiye lentochki* (St. George’s ribbons) became more widespread among Russian speakers in Estonia following the 2007 crisis (Delfi, 2012). The black and orange ribbons were initially the collective military unit decoration in the Russian Empire and in Soviet times a symbol of the Soviet Union’s victory over Nazi Germany in the Great Patriotic War in 1945. The ribbon was reintroduced by the RIA *Novosti* media channel and the Russian government in 2005 in memory of the Great Patriotic War (BBC News, 2022; Gorelov, 2020). The Ribbon’s usage began in Estonia after the Bronze Soldier relocation as a symbol of the Soviet victory in WWII, but also in protest to the Estonian government’s decisions to relocate and remove the Soviet monuments and prohibit the 9<sup>th</sup> of May celebrations. These government decisions were seen to be threatening to erase what some Estonian Russophones believe to be their identity and history (Krechetnikov, 2014). Over time, St. George’s ribbons began symbolizing Russianness for Estonian Russophones (Gorelov, 2020). Since the Russo-Ukrainian war began, St. George’s ribbons gained a new connotation – praising the 2014 annexation of Crimea and a non-declared war in the eastern regions of Ukraine. The St. George’s ribbons also appeared on posters and billboards after pro-Russia separatists and Russian military took over Ukrainian territories (Kolstø, 2016). Some in Europe see the ribbon as a representation of support for Putin’s government and the war in Ukraine and, thus, prohibit or condemn its usage. Estonia, among other states, prohibits its usage also in celebrations commemorating WWII (Cole, 2022). Following Russia’s 2022 invasion of Ukraine, the Estonian government suggested removing other Soviet symbols and monuments (Zybina & Kachan, 2022), which included a relocation of a T-34 tank monument in Narva. Although some people, mostly Narvians, gathered around the tank and voiced dissatisfaction about its removal from the pedestal, no violent clashes occurred as in 2007. The relocation, however, brought up memories of the Bronze night of 2007 and was taken as an affront (Trop, 2022; Kireeva, 2022).

Russophones migrated to Estonia after the fall of the Soviet Union as well, for employment, studies, or to reunite with family members. Many of them hold residence permits, but some have naturalized. Based on data from the Estonian Police and Border Guard Board, Priit Järve

and Vadim Poleshchuk (2019) report that from 1992 until September 2019 a total of 162,824 individuals naturalized in Estonia. The conflicts in the post-Soviet space, such as the war in Ukraine, added to the number of migrants that came to Estonia as political refugees and asylum seekers. Statistics Estonia (2022c) notes a steady increase in the number of holders of Russian citizenship in Estonia after 2014 (see Figure 1). For instance, some Russophone cultural figures, such as Evgenii Fedorov, migrated to Estonia also in 2022 due to the persecution of anti-war activists in Russia (Männart, 2022). At the same time, because the number of non-Russian citizens have also increase, the war in Ukraine can also be not the only reason for increase in incoming migration.



**Figure 1.** Immigration to Estonia by Citizenship and Year. Source: Statistics Estonia.

In summary, the number of Russophones living on the Estonian territory increased until the Soviet Union collapsed. When Estonia regained its independence in 1991, Russophones largely were expected to leave for their historic homelands. Although the number of Russian speakers decreased compared to the Soviet times, many of them decided to stay, obtaining either gray or Estonian passports. There are also, however, citizens of other countries living in Estonia, predominantly Russian passport holders. These include people who lived in Soviet Estonia but decided to get a foreign passport after the collapse of the USSR or people who migrated to the newly independent Estonia. Studies on the Russophone population were mostly focused on the effectiveness of integration programs that were launched following the independence. Studies that researched identity hinted at a separate Estonian Russian identity development, at times affected by either Estonia and Russia or nostalgia toward the Soviet Union. The topic of the influence of Estonia, Russia, and other entities (like the EU) on Estonian Russian identity

gained new colors when the war in Ukraine started. The next section outlines how the Russophone minority found itself at the border of two dominant (national) identities, Estonian and Russian, which have conflicting interests and messages directed at the Estonian Russophones. Previous research on the effect of the war in Ukraine on Estonian Russophones is also touched upon.

### *2.1.1. The Russian minority as an object of conflicting interests*

The Estonian Russophones' identity is an interesting case to study because of their cultural and family ties with Russia. Although “[t]hey constitute a heterogeneous group in terms of citizenship status, language knowledge, immigration generation and degree of ethno-linguistic concentration [...] Russian-speaking populations share a common, potentially unifying, communicative base: the Russian language and mass media” (Vihalemm et al., 2019). Language and culture, as well as at times one-sided information exposure have made them objects of interest for policymakers in Russia, who have imperialist claims on now-independent regions of the former Russian Empire and territories of the Soviet Union and security concern for the Estonian government, which pursues integration and wants to decrease the socio-cultural gap between Estonians and local Russophones.

Since the early 1990s, many Russian speakers who decided to stay in Estonia or permanently migrated in the later years fell under the umbrella term “compatriots abroad” coined by Russian President Boris Yeltsin and then-foreign minister Andrei Kozyrev.

The term refers to individuals who live outside the borders of the Russian Federation itself yet feel that they have a historical, cultural, and linguistic linkage with Russia. These people want to preserve these ties no matter the present status of their citizenship. (Zevelev, 2016)

Compatriots can include “Russian speakers, ethnic Russians, and those with cultural ties to their ‘homeland’ and a wider ‘Russian World’” (Pieper, 2020). This thesis also refers to potential “compatriots” as Russophones or Russian speakers. Using the term ‘compatriots’, Russia has criticized the Estonian and Latvian governments for “discrimination” against Russian-speaking minorities. Although the policy on ‘the compatriots’ was designed during Boris Yeltsin’s tenure, more attention has been given to ‘compatriots’ by Vladimir Putin (Kallas, 2016). In 1999, as summarized by Mikhail Suslov (2021), the Law on the on State Policy of the Russian Federation in Respect of Compatriots Abroad defined them as “Russian

citizens permanently living abroad, emigrants from the Soviet Union and their posterity, and everyone who lives outside Russia but who was a citizen of the Soviet Union”. In 2010, an amendment to the law narrowed down the definition to “representatives of the nations traditionally living on the territory of the Russian Federation who maintain cultural, spiritual and legal connections with Russia” (Suslov, 2021). The 2020 amendments, lastly, hinted at a broader concept again with all-Russian (*obshcherossiiskii*) cultural identity at its core. Earlier mentioned in the 1990s, 2008 and 2013 foreign policy concepts (Kallas, 2021), in 2016 the Russian government continued the use of ‘compatriots’ in its foreign policy strategy. Thus, for instance, in its General Provisions, the Foreign Policy Concept (2016) sets a goal: “[3] h. to ensure comprehensive, effective protection of the rights and legitimate interests of Russian citizens and compatriots residing abroad”. Compatriots are often tied to the concept of the ‘Russian World’. This concept sees a civilization tied to the Russian culture, simply put “an image of ‘Russia writ large’” (Suslov, 2018). It has been repeatedly ideologically redefined since its first usage in the 1990s and used by the Russian government to oppose the West and spread its soft power (Suslov, 2018; 2021). Some of the studies on the Russian World focus on the Russian diasporas and compatriots, their identity and rights (Suslov, 2018; Zakem et al., 2015; Newcity, 2014), economic grievances (Rose, 1997), and Russia’s policies oriented at them (Pieper, 2020) after the dissolution of the Soviet Union, as well as the effect of globalization on the Russian language overall (Ryazanova-Clarke, 2014).

Following the dissolution of the USSR, Russia both presented itself and took on the legal obligations as the main successor to the Soviet Union, the “continuer-state” of what was a great power in a bipolar international order (Ehin & Berg, 2009; Fofanova & Morozov, 2009). According to Russian politicians’ speeches, including Vladimir Putin, Russia still considers itself a great power, although in a multipolar world (Putin, 2007). Some argue that it is the lack of recognition in the international system as such that has led Russia to violate international law and intervene in Georgia and Ukraine (Strycharz, 2020; Forsberg & Pursiainen, 2017). Others, like Dmitry Suslov (*Russia, Quo Vadis?*, 2021; see also Oskanian, 2018), assert that precisely the status of great power, “the continuer-state identity” (Fofanova & Morozov, 2009), and neo-imperialist thinking led Russia to keep its immediate neighborhood under close watch and impose its foreign policy acts, even if these include annexation of lands. This, in turn, has resulted in its self- and group exclusion from the European domain and the deterioration of Russia’s relations with the West and parts of the post-Soviet space (Fofanova & Morozov, 2009; Prozorov, 2009). Estonia was one of the states which experienced worsening of the

relations with Russia, since it pursued reconnection with the West, the European domain, as opposed to Russia. The clash between Russia and the West affected the Russophone minority's identity that lives right between the dominant identities in conflict, Russian and Estonian, and gets influenced by or interacts with both sides.

Such aspects of Russia's foreign policy as its soft power projection onto the "compatriots abroad" through channels like Rossotrudnichestvo (Russia's Federal Agency for the Commonwealth of Independent States), Russkiy Mir Foundation, and the Russian Orthodox Church (Laruelle, 2021; Ryazanova-Clarke, 2014) make the neighboring states, like Estonia, perceive local Russophone diasporas as a security concern (Ehin & Berg, 2009; Vihalemm et al., 2019; Kirch et al., 1997; Haabsaar & Kirch, 1997; Kirch & Kirch, 1997; Bohle & Greskovits, 2012). The perception of Russophones (especially those with pro-Russian sentiments) as potentially dangerous for the Estonian language, culture, and national security has been common among ethnic Estonians since the 1990s (Kirch & Kirch, 1997; Cole, 2022), in part because of the exposure to media channels from Russia, which Russian speakers for long have used as their information sources. Marika Kirch (1997), for instance, conducted a content analysis of *Molodyozh Estonii*, a popular Russian daily newspaper, in 1995 and 1996. She found that "49 percent of all the non-original articles were republished from Russian Federation newspapers (*Izvestija*, *Komsomolskaya Pravda*, *Argumenti i Fakti* etc.)" (Kirch, 1997: 103). These newspapers are still very popular in Russia (Mediascope, 2022) and are considered "state-owned" media often transmitting state propaganda to its audiences.

The perception of threat expanded into territorial concerns after Russia began its offensive in Georgia in 2008 and Ukraine in 2014 and proceeded with a full-scale invasion of Ukraine in 2022. Already in 2014 journalists and academics began questioning "Is Narva next?" as some local Russian speakers supported the annexation of Crimea (Kallas, 2016; Gardner, 2016; Vihalemm et al., 2019; Cole, 2022). Since the war in Ukraine began Russian language media channels, consumed by the Russophone minority in Estonia, that are believed to spread the Kremlin's propaganda and/or share the pro-Russia sentiment, such as Sputnik, Russia Today and, as of recently, Dozhd, are also considered threatening to national security and, thus, were gradually shut down in Estonia (Mikhaylov, 2022; EUvsDisinfo, 2021; European Council, 2022). Russian speakers did not (some still do not), however, share the feeling that Russia is a threat. This difference in threat perceptions, as well as different interpretations of history and symbols, contributed to a mutual "othering" between Estonians and the local Russian-speaking minority. Younger generations, however, are believed to be closer to ethnic Estonians than

their parents due to integration programs, the fact that they cannot relate to the Soviet symbols and have only lived in independent Estonia, and have developed their own streams of popular culture accommodating rather than dividing both sides (Cole, 2022; Torop, 2022).

In summary, due to Russia's neo-imperialist foreign policies directed at protecting compatriots abroad and its stark deviation from European (Western) values, Estonian Russophones found themselves torn at the conflictual border between the West and Russia. Russia's soft power influence attempts rather distanced Estonians from local Russophones. The "othering" became more noticeable and turned into a major security issue after the annexation of Crimea since Estonians feared an annexation of Estonian territory. The annexation of Crimea was supported by some Russophones, primarily because they relied on Kremlin-aligned information sources. However, not all Russian speakers support or identify with Russia: this group includes largely the younger generation that has not lived in the Soviet Union or Russia and was exposed to the Estonian language and information through educational programs more than their parents. The reasons and effects of the war in Ukraine on Estonian Russophones is discussed in the following section.

## **2.2. Why should we study the Russophone minority amid the war in Ukraine?**

Since Russia intervened in Ukraine and annexation of the eastern and southern regions of Ukraine in 2014 and 2022, where Russia partially justified its deeds as protection of Russian citizens and compatriots abroad, the topic of Russianness in countries like Estonia has been brought up by policymakers, academics, and other groups even more often than before. Largely because, to this day, ethnic Russians make up 24 percent of the Estonian population, Russophones – 33 percent of the Estonian population, and 6 percent of Estonian residents hold Russian passports (Statistics Estonia, 2022a; Vihalemm et al., 2019; Statistics Estonia, 2022c). The topic of Estonian Russophones' identity and loyalty gained a new level of social significance after the war in Ukraine began in 2014, especially considering that "identities can affect conceptions of legitimacy, shared interests, and policy choices, as well as preferences for political leaders and parties" (Abdelal et al., 2009: 26). Following the surge of Soviet symbols appraisal in Russia in the mid-2000, its effect on the local Russophones, and violent protests in 2007 due to the Bronze Soldier relocation, Estonian Russophones ties to the Soviet and Russian identities were further contested when other Soviet monuments and graves were removed or relocated, including the famous tank in Narva.

At the earlier stages of the Russian aggression against Ukraine Triin Vihalemm, Jānis Juzefovičs, and Marianne Leppik (2019: 52) shared alarming survey results:

The survey evidence in Estonia shows that self-identification with the general category of ‘Russians’ (without any specification of country of habitation) increased from 56% in 2003 to 75% in 2014. The sense of togetherness with the local ethnic minority group ‘Estonian Russians’ remained the same (52% in both years). At the same time, solidarity with the broader civic category ‘all inhabitants of Estonia’ became less widespread (42% in 2003, and 41% in 2014). A cosmopolitan self-identification with Europeans increased from 18% in 2003 to 28% in 2014.

This trend is yet to be checked in 2022. But it can already be said that since 2014, the war in Ukraine has increased pressure on Russian speakers in Estonia as right-wing politicians demand total assimilation (Kulikov, 2022). Some Russophones tried to avoid the integration or assimilation instead preserving their culture and values and developing a separate Estonian Russophones’ identity that does not directly align with Estonians’ identity (Cole, 2022). The fear among Estonians, however, that Estonian Russophones’ identity can further develop pro-Russia sentiments remains.

Reasons for the rise in concerns over the Russophone minority in Estonia also include polarizing media representations. Some Russian speakers, often due to not knowing the Estonian language, were opting for Kremlin-aligned media channels as their information source before Estonia established Russian language media channels in the country (Jakobson, 2002; Brady & Kaplan, 2009; Vihalemm et al., 2019). Vihalemm, Juzefovičs, and Leppik’s surveys (2019) showed that Russian speakers became more active in using news media because of the war in Ukraine. They predict, however, that chances for Russophone groups’ homogenous political, including separatist, activities or the Ukrainian war influence on the Russian minority’s identity in Estonia are low, but suggest that further media monitoring research be conducted to confirm these expectations as Russian speakers are constantly exposed to conflicting messages coming from inside and outside of Estonia. The recent data shows that

92% of the Russian-speaking population in Estonia claims to follow at least one media channel originating in Russia every day, 89% of Russian speakers in Estonia claim to use at least one local media channel either in the Estonian or Russian language on a

regular basis, and 49% report regularly following at least one non-Russian foreign channel. (Vihalemm et al., 2019: 53)

Russian media is considered to have “a negative effect on [Russian speakers in Estonia and] their identity-construction processes—that is, weakening their local civic loyalty and consolidating their identities around Russia” (Vihalemm et al., 2019).

In summary, the war in Ukraine gave a new layer of social significance to the research on Estonian Russophones. Meanwhile, their identity development in independent Estonia has yet to be studied from the bottom-up approach; focusing on the most recent developments is needed, *inter alia*, to address the state’s security concerns. Due to how recent the war is and the fact that identity constantly evolves, there have not been many studies on the identity of Russian speakers in independent Estonia. Most of these studies had focused on integration program results. Little attention has also been given to how Russia influences the local Russophone community and its identity development with either its actions or policies directed at them. This thesis aims at helping to resolve that gap.

### **2.3. How can we study Russian-speaking minorities?**

It has been rightly pointed out by Vihalemm, Juzefovičs, and Leppik (2019) that the majority of academic papers about Estonian Russian speakers’ identity and integration progress have adopted a nation-centric perspective (e.g. *EIM 2020*, 2022). This is not surprising because the Russian minority makes up an important part of national identity-building and state security strategies. In the early 2000s, Vihalemm and Masso speculated that Russian speakers will be more susceptible to Moscow’s propaganda if no pro-Estonian cultural and political identity emerges (Vihalemm & Masso, 2003). This created additional incentives for Estonia to develop minorities’ integration programs, which included education system reforms, more inclusive local media, and Estonian language learning opportunities (*EIM 2020*, 2022). Recent studies, however, started to pay attention to the Estonian Russian-speaking population as a unit of analysis, as subjects of a separate collective identity that interacts with that of Estonian and Russian, rather than belonging to either one. Ammon Cheskin, for example, looked at the Latvian (2013; Cheskin & Kachuyevski, 2019) and Estonian (Jašina-Schäfer & Cheskin, 2020) Russophones’ identity construction. Alina Jašina-Schäfer (2021; Jašina-Schäfer & Cheskin, 2020) and Kristina Kallas (2016) also studied what it is like to be a Russian speaker in Estonia. Besides the already mentioned literature on the Russian-speaking minority in Estonia, the existence of such a group with influences from Russia and Estonia is reflected in Rogers

Brubaker's research. While researching post-Soviet Eurasia, Brubaker (1996: 44) developed the concept of triadic nexus. This concept defined the contested relationship between "(1) incipient national – and nationalizing – states; (2) the national minorities in the new states; and (3) the external "homeland" states to which the minorities "belong" by ethnonational affiliation but not legal citizenship". His triadic nexus was also implemented in later research on Russian speakers in Estonia conducted by Lara Ryazanova-Clarke (2014), Ammon Cheskin (2013), Kristina Kallas (2016), and others, where Estonia served as the "host" state and Russia as a perceived "homeland" state. Kallas (2016) also added a fourth dimension to this relationship – the international community.

The methodology used in many of the previous studies is being questioned today by social constructivists. Scholars have often studied the Russian-speaking minority in Estonia and elsewhere through surveys (Kirch et al., 1997; *EIM 2020*, 2022; Vihalemm et al., 2020; Kõuts, 2002). Content analysis of Estonian- and Russian-language newspapers has also been used (Jakobson, 2002; Kirch 1997; Valk, 1997). These methods were used well for understanding attitudes on certain issues or to monitor the progress of integration programs. Thus, for instance, a survey conducted by Marika Kirch, Aksel Kirch, Ilvi Rimm, and Tarmo Tuisk (1997) in 1996 addressed the topic of citizenship preferences and loyalty to Estonia or the Russian Federation by Russians living in Estonia. Kõuts (2002) looked through the Estonian- and Russian-language press to grasp the identity and integration levels of Russian speakers in Estonia. Although there is nothing wrong with the surveys or content analysis used before, these quantitative methods should be used following, or in combination with, the interpretivist methods for studying identity (Hopf, 2009). Quantitative methods pre-theorize data, meaning that researchers set the list of identity markers in advance leaving no space for (inter-)subjectivity (Hopf & Allan, 2016) and in-depth understanding of respondents' choices. One can recall Frederic Charles Schaffer's (2000) study on the meaning of democracy in Senegal, where he explained well that data is infused with individual and/or collective meanings that differ according to the context and social group and cannot be predefined. Those methods, however, can represent a large share of a group more effectively than qualitative research can and make the data easily comparable over time.

In addition, there are studies based either only on interviews (Jašina-Schäfer, 2021) or interviews combined with one of the earlier mentioned methods (Ehala & Zabrodskaia, 2014; Kallas, 2016; Vihalemm & Kalmus, 2009; Vihalemm et al., 2019; Brady & Kaplan, 2009). Interviews, as opposed to surveys, collect subjective data, but respondents may withhold

certain information from the interviewer if they do not feel comfortable or the interviewer might miss a certain aspect due to broad questions and/or responses.

When it comes to topics such as identity, a method that has very rarely been used in studies of Russian-speaking minority in Estonia is discourse analysis. This method, used in this thesis, is expected to be a valuable addition to earlier research. Discourse analysis, as opposed to the earlier mentioned positivist and interpretivist methods, provides intersubjective data that is closest to the real perceptions and interpretations as it views “how people express their beliefs when no one is listening or asking,” similarly to ethnography (Hopf & Allan, 2016). Ethnography works best when “investigating the naturalized daily practices of identity construction” at an exact point in time (Hopf, 2009: 284). Discourse analysis of texts and similar sources representing the shared meaning from certain periods in the past is a great substitute to ethnographic studies of collective identities “because they are more likely to produce a picture of identity that the persons under study would understand and agree with” (Hopf & Allan, 2016; Hopf, 2009). Further, as will be seen in the next sections, discourse analysis does not only provide data from a certain point in time but also helps to compare it to see whether people’s expressions and beliefs have changed. This way, Brednikova and Nikiforova (2019), for instance, analyzed *Nezavisimaya Gazeta* over the course of 1992-2017 to see how Russia’s newspaper discourse and Russians’ reception of Finland and Estonia and their common borders changed.

In this thesis, I use discourse analysis of a Russian-language Estonian news outlet to study the Estonian Russian-speaking population’s identity and monitor whether there has been any change in identity discourse in reaction to Russia’s war in Ukraine. Due to fact that the crisis and war in Ukraine is recent and ongoing, there has not been enough research done on the effects of the war in Ukraine on the local Estonian Russophone minority (Vihalemm et al., 2019). At the same time, previous research during such events as NATO attacks against Serbia (Tammpuu, 2002) and the Chechen war (Jakobson, 2002) shows that the local Russian minority is prone to be influenced by discourses in Russia in forming its attitudes and identity.

The study of minority groups’ identity through media is not new. “Media-use strategies are considered to play a crucial role in the formation of transnational identities” (Vihalemm et al., 2019). Jakobson (2002), for instance, used a case of the Chechen war to compare the sentiments expressed in the Estonian- and Russian-language media, specifically *Estonia* and *Molodezh Estonii*. She concluded that Russian-language media used more sources of information from

Russia's media channels like ITAR-TASS, directly copying some of the articles. By these means, she claims that “the press constructed the civic identity of Estonian Russians, in some spheres, in connection with Russians from the Russian Federation” (Jakobson, 2002: 102). The analyzed articles, however, also mentioned the Estonian official position but avoided making any independent evaluations and tried to stay out of covering the conflict.

The information brought to the Russian-speaking audience was contradictory. As people could not rely [on] other sources of information except the media, the audience could not consider itself to be informed. Forming attitude towards the problem becomes problematic, the audience becomes estranged from the discussion. This estrangement reveals itself in silence, absence of any reaction. (Jakobson, 2002)

Other researchers also studied Russia’s television programs as a soft power tool through interviews (Hutchings, 2020; Vihalemm et al., 2020; Ryazanova-Clarke, 2020). As has been mentioned before, Henry Brady and Cynthia Kaplan (2009) looked at local Estonian- and Russian-language newspapers around the 1990s to understand Estonian Slavs’ ethnic identity based on indicators like media consumption, personal and parental ethnicity, language spoken at home and language knowledge. What has been suggested by these authors is to measure those factors over time to understand fully the dynamics of Russophones’ identity in Estonia (Brady & Kaplan, 2009). A book edited by Ragne Kõuts (2002) found an identity shift, changes in the self-perception of Russian speakers in Estonia from the 1990s to 2000s as a result of changes in narratives in the local media. With that in mind, this thesis aims to continue the identity shift monitoring through a similar, but narrower, media observation.

To narrow down the scope of the research, I chose Russian popular culture representations in Estonian Russophones’ discourses because Russian popular culture is one of the soft power mechanisms within the ‘Russian World’ that is commonly and easily accessible to Russian-speaking masses in Estonia (Dittmer, 2010), its reception by Estonian Russophones is believed to show the relations between Estonian Russophones and Russia as a Significant Other, and the meanings attached to Russian popular culture representations in the local media do not necessarily copy the meanings circulating among elites as it is the case with political discourses. Examples of Russian popular culture include cultural production (music, films, art, etc.) and famous figures, which can include creators of culturally significant content. Popular culture representations are a valuable source of “a variety of public narratives, all intersecting in one ontological narrative” (Dittmer, 2010: 74) that shape group’s identity through exchange

of shared meanings attached to the Others and interaction with those meanings. “In other words, we can actively contribute to the changing of our selves by actively engaging with some discourses and institutions over others” (Dittmer, 2010: 158) (this is further explained in the following chapters).

Throughout this thesis, the Russian-speaking minority is also referred to as Russophone, “an imagined ethnosocial community of ethnic Russians and other Russian-speaking populations that emerged as ‘beached diasporas’” (Jašina-Schäfer, 2021: 6). No clear-cut distinction between the sub-groups is drawn as different studies contained either one or both, and the method used in this paper is also not able to separate Estonia Russians from Russian citizens living in Estonia or from other Russian speakers with an ethnicity other than Russian, but it is beyond the scope of this thesis. Employing other methods, future researchers can emphasize the differences between the sub-groups and their identities.

#### **2.4. Social cognitive theory of identity**

This thesis on Russian speakers’ identity in Estonia relies on constructivist scholarship in international relations, specifically Ted Hopf’s social cognitive theory of identity. This theory was presented in his 2002 book “Social construction of international politics”. There he suggested that most existing social and psychological theories imply deductive reasoning, where identity is rather disproved or confirmed from researchers’ presumptions. Those theories led to the subjective and objective methodological choices, such as surveys and content analysis described in the previous chapter. He voiced a need for an opposite, inductive method and theory in studying identity, where identity is not pre-defined but reconstructed from existing discursive formations because identity is a constellation of categories of societal discourses that define the group or what it means to be a member of a group (Allan, 2016: 2). Identity is then derived from an intersubjective reality, “a more fundamental domain of social action than the objective world” (Hopf, 2002: 6), where societal discourses that make up identity are embedded. In his later works he explains in detail why the intersubjective knowledge that has been overlooked is so important and what makes it different from the objective or subjective reality:

Intersubjectivity is the reality generated within a community, society, or group, of shared understandings of the world out there. It cannot be reduced to either objective reality -- that is, the reality that is out there independent of our perceptions of it, or subjective reality, the reality each one of us perceives as individuals. (Hopf, 2009: 279)

Hopf bases his theory on previous accounts offered by social scientists and social psychologists, particularly I note the influence of symbolic interactionism and structuration theory. Like in Anthony Giddens's structuration theory, Hopf overviews the agency-structure model, where agents' identity is created and reinforced by structure and vice versa. It is agents' interactions that keep the social structures alive. Hopf (2009: 280; 2002), however, questions agency, claiming that agents act through the logic of habit – “the way in which people go on in the world relying on taken-for-granted knowledge of that world” – rather than rationally or independently. Like in symbolic interactionism, this habitual behavior, individuals' decisions and feelings occur due to familiar shared meanings that individuals gained from their environment and social circles throughout their lives. Popular culture and its representations, discussed in the next chapter, are believed to contain and reproduce those intersubjective meanings (Keating, 2008). Wendt (1999: 163) referred to those meanings as “group beliefs” inherited and/or internalized by individuals:

Group beliefs are often inscribed in “collective memory,” the myths, narratives, and traditions that constitute who a group is and how it relates to others. These narratives are not merely the shared beliefs held by individuals at any given moment (though they depend on those beliefs), but inherently historical phenomena which are kept alive through the generations by an on-going process of socialization and ritual enactment. It is in virtue of such memories that groups acquire continuity and identity through time. ... once collective memories have been created it may be hard to shake their long-term effects, even if a majority of individuals have “forgotten” them at any given moment.

Hopf (2002: 5) calls those meanings “product of an intersubjective social structure” within which individuals establish themselves and others:

This is what Berger and Luckmann have referred to as the “social stock of knowledge,” but it could be called, without great conceptual violence, Michel Foucault's discursive formation, Bourdieu's habitus, Clifford Geertz's web of meaning, or Edmund Husserl's life-world. Each of these, roughly speaking, is a particular sociohistorical temporal space within which particular intersubjective meanings predominate.

Thus, for instance, researchers like Norman (2018) claimed that in Estonia Russian-speaking minority' identity got tied to symbols like the Bronze Soldier and the Narva tank or other Second World War monuments because this community assigned meanings to the monuments. Such symbols with specific meanings behind them were tools

for the Russophone community in making sense of its collective existence in a situation where the social framework of memory has been replaced and the new framework does not offer any positive means of identification to the majority of Russian-speakers in Estonia. (Norman, 2018: 188)

Still, what matters are not the symbols themselves but what they symbolize and how they affect identities. Symbols like the monuments mentioned contain meanings that Estonian Russophones put into them. These meanings, exchanged within the respective group, represent aspects of their collective identity. Studying those meanings, be it monuments or popular culture representations, helps to recover parts of collective identity.

Hopf (2002: 22) states that “[e]very society is a social cognitive structure, every society comprises particular discursive formations that constitute that structure, and every individual has a multitude of identities that may or may not be part of a discursive formation.” It is important to acknowledge that agents can make up several, at times contradictory, social cognitive structures. They can have several identities: mother, climate change activist, professional athlete, etc. as they interact with different Others and/or in different structures (Hopf & Allan, 2016) (more on identity in the following chapter). Agents’ habits or “everyday naturalizing practices” (Hopf, 2009: 283) embedded in social structures (re-)produce collective identities. Habits and subsequently, identities are subject to change because the discourses or meanings they are dependent on are constantly contested (Abdelal et al., 2009: 30). The question is only in the degree of contestation that can cause a change from time to time. “[H]abits may be broken if one is convinced that they are normatively unacceptable. Given enough time, conscious deliberation can override habits” (Hopf, 2010: 543). This thesis also considers Wendt’s (1999) argument that habits and identity can also be changed if a group goes through a shocking exogenous event. This thesis, thus, should be able to trace changes in identity due to a high level of contestation, but also under the circumstances of a significant event, the war in Ukraine that is believed to have affected the matter of Russianness.

## **2.5. Concepts of identity and (popular) culture**

### *2.5.1. Identity*

There is no universal definition of identity. Brubaker and Cooper (2000) illustrated how the definition adjusts based on the agenda. They conceptualize it as the Self that is shaped by sameness and difference across time and persons. Lebow (2016: 79) refers to it as consisting

of many self-identifications, which “in turn are largely a function of our roles, affiliations, and relationships with our bodies”. Both definitions refer to individual identity and indicate that it changes over time or when one interacts with different Others. These definitions can also be applied to collective identity as individuals cognitively make up groups by exchanging discourses. Hall (2013: 3) defines identity as describing “who we are and with whom we 'belong'”. For identity to exist there needs to be an “Other”, a representation of a group which individuals do not “belong” to. Tajfel claimed that “identity is a part of an individual’s self-conception which derives from knowledge about one’s belonging in social groups, together with the value and emotional meaning ascribed to the groups” (Tajfel 1981 cited in Vihalemm & Kalmus, 2009). This thesis adopts Hopf and Allan’s definitions (2009: 280; 2016: 2) where identities are constellations of categories of societal discourses that define the group or what it means to be a member of a group and are produced through intersubjective “social interaction[s], [that] are cognitively necessary to make one’s way in the world and are embedded in social structures of everyday life”. Identity then is a cognitive economy device that gets reproduced by members of a group through social interactions during which meanings are exchanged and distributed. Berg and Ehin’s (2009: 2) conceptualization of identity relying on three premises is also useful for this thesis as they summarize the properties of identities expressed by authors mentioned above: “identities are constructed, not natural or essential; they are relational and involve references to various “Significant Others”; and third, identities have a discursive, narrative structure”. These criteria also help to explain how Estonian Russophones’ identity is looked at in this paper. Their identity is (re-)constructed by members of the Russophone community in Estonia. It exists as long as members of the group identify “Significant Others” like Russians in Russia or ethnic Estonians in Estonia whom they differentiate themselves from. Studying Russian popular culture representations in Estonian Russophone discourses thus helps to understand how Estonian Russophones perceive their Significant Other and construct own identity based on differentiation from that Other.

Despite some researchers’ essentialist claims for identity to be fixed (Verdugo & Milne, 2016), constructivist theory refers to this concept as fluid and intersubjective, meaning that it does not have an objective answer. Objectivity is out of reach and exists independently of our understanding of it (Hopf, 2009). Collective identity only exists as part of social interactions and needs to be found within those interactions and exchanges of meanings. By these means, “we have to reconstruct the phenomenological intersubjectivity that characterizes a collection

of identities” (Hopf, 2002: 7). “Intersubjectivity is the reality generated within a community, society, or group, of shared understandings of the world out there” (Hopf, 2009: 279).

Identity, whether collective or individual, is relational and cannot form and function without any social influence: “one’s identity is relevant only in relationship to other individuals and groups, and is re/produced only in interaction with them” (Hopf, 2009: 281; Abdelal et al., 2009). One can have several identities but they exist only if distinguished from Others while interacting with different Others and/or within various structures (Hopf & Allan, 2016). This creates a dichotomy between the Self and the Others, which cannot exist without one another. What constructivists still question is the extent to which the Self and the Others exist in conflict. This paper adopts Hopf’s (2002: 7) idea that the Self and the Others do not need to be in conflict but co-exist with each other: “[i]dentities are always relational, but only sometimes oppositional”. Identities presuppose the same Self that interacts with and relates to different Others over time. Nevertheless, as touched upon in the theory section, identity is subject to change depending on the social setting (Nedozhogina, 2021; Dittmer, 2010) and/or exogenous shocks (Wendt, 1999). “[...] identities are always in process, always contested, always an accomplishment of practice. Sometimes their reproduction is relatively unproblematic because contestation is low, in which case taking them as given may be analytically useful” (Wendt, 1999: 340). But if contestation is high, identities change reproducing different discursive formations.

In summary, adapting various definitions of identity, this thesis sees collective identity as a product of numerous intersubjective social interactions within a group and of a group with Significant Others, during which meanings are exchanged. Identity is, thus, socially constructed through discourses. It exists in relation to and as long as there are Significant Others. Identity is fluid and can change throughout different timeframes upon a high level of contestation or as a result of exogenous shocks.

### 2.5.2. *Culture vs. popular culture*

Researchers often look at culture and identity in a similar vein (Wendt, 1999). Similarly to identity, researchers question whether culture is subjective, objective, or intersubjective. Here, constructivists also hint at its intersubjective nature:

Rather than being an objective force bearing down from the outside or a purely subjective phenomenon existing only in the imagination of the individual, culture

should be located in the inter-subjective domain, that of social exchange and the construction of shared meanings. (Keating, 2008: 111)

Identity and culture are not the same, however. Culture is part of social structures that help an individual to establish their identity as different from others and find belonging to a group. Culture can be conflictual and cooperative but does not define the relationship between two entities like identity does.

Culture is broadly defined as socially shared knowledge that is “both common and connected between individuals” (Wendt, 1999: 141). It contains meanings, habits, and discourses that are part of social structures reproduced by individuals. Wendt (1999: 164) clarifies further that “culture is more than a summation of the shared ideas that individuals have in their heads, but a “communally sustained” and thus inherently public phenomenon”. Culture is never stable, even though it “plays a key role in making interaction relatively predictable over time, generating homeostatic tendencies that stabilize social order” (Wendt, 1999: 187). Culture is constantly reproduced. “It links the individual and the collective levels of consciousness and action by socializing individuals in common meanings, while individuals in turn help to reshape it” (Keating, 2008: 111; Wendt, 1999).

Popular culture then is where those discourses consumed and reproduced by the masses can be found. “[P]opular culture [can be understood] both as an archive (a constantly expanding ‘cultural inventory’ of texts, images, soundtracks and other works) and as a way of life that involves consuming these products” (Morozov & Pavlova, 2021: 7). Because “popular culture is available to most people in a society relatively easy” its representations in the local discourse are believed to be a great domain where meanings and discourses emerge and are exchanged (Dittmer, 2010: 23; Morozov & Pavlova, 2021). Often through popular culture representations people express their identities and exchange meanings with and about Significant Others.

[I]f popular culture is but a murky mirror image of certain values and feelings held by a large body of people in a given time, it is a mirror none the less. And it has reflected over time the feelings and aspirations of people, their attitudes to the regime, and their vision of self. Some long-range shifts in popular values are discernable. (Stites, 1992: 208)

In summary, culture is a part of social structure that helps one find and differentiate its identity. Popular culture is a source of meanings and discourses that are exchanged to reproduce the

social structures that constitute identity. Popular culture representations then indicate how these meanings are read by the audience.

## **2.6. Research question and expectations**

In his empirical work, Hopf primarily studied collective identities on a macro-level, i.e. national identities comprised of social agents that affect decision-makers' foreign policy choices. For instance, he concluded that the relationship between the Soviet Union and China changed in the 1950-60s, not because of individual decision-makers' choices, but because that relationship was influenced by the changes in national identities (Hopf, 2002). This macro-scale idea, I believe, is valuable when applied to the micro-level of national minorities' identities, such as that of the Russophone community in Estonia. As mentioned earlier, besides the fact that the Estonian Russophones' identity has not been well studied yet in general and especially so from a bottom-up approach (mass discourses are observed less as they are), the Russophone community has only been looked at via its interaction with (or integration to) the Estonian hegemonic identity. If we take Russian speakers in Estonia as having a separate identity from Estonians, their interaction with other Significant Others (like Russia) is yet to be researched. In this thesis, I view Estonian Russophone identity separately from Estonian and Russian identities as literature review inclined to claiming that since the dissolution of the Soviet Union Estonian Russophones developed own identity that interacts with Other identities.

The objective of this thesis is to study whether there has been any change in how Estonian Russophones interact with the Significant Other, i.e. Russia, as a result of the high level of contestation of the identity of the Significant Other caused by an exogenous shock, i.e. the war in Ukraine, and how that event has affected the identity of Russophones in Estonia. In other words, whether the exogenous shock resulted in a change of meanings that make up Russophone identity in Estonia. Since identity is relational (Hopf, 2009: 280) and Estonian Russian speakers' self-identification as part of their identity is defined through the relationship with a Significant Other (Berenskoetter, 2010; Lebow, 2016; Neumann, 1999), which in this case are Estonia(ns) and Russia(ns), in this thesis the local Russian-speakers' identity is studied through representations of and relationship with Russia as a Significant Other. To narrow down the scope of the research, I chose popular culture representations as one of the forms of discourses that is commonly and easily accessible to Russian-speaking masses in Estonia and are indicative of minority identity's relations with the Significant Others. Particular attention

is paid to *rossiyskaya* popular culture representation in local discourses. First, because previous literature claimed that local Russophones have strong cultural, not political, ties to Russia. Second, *rossiyskaya* popular culture is believed to have undergone an exogenous shock due to the war in Ukraine which consequently could have affected how Russian speakers in Estonia view Russian popular culture and Russia as a Significant Other. *Rossiyskaya* popular culture works (literature, movies, music, etc.) and the Russian language were claimed to be used as “soft power tools” by Russia in its foreign policy abroad (Russian Federation Presidential Decree № 611, 2022) and, thus, a change in reception of Russian popular culture can constitute a change in relations with the Significant Other. The change in identity discourse in relation to a Significant Other may also result in change in some aspects of identity. *Rossiyskaya* popular culture is henceforth be referred to as Russian popular culture. It is, thus, important to briefly mention the difference between *russkiy* and *rossiyskiy*. According to Andy Byford, Connor Doak, and Stephen Hutchings (2020) *russkiy* “refers to the Russian language [and literature] ... [and] ... the East Slavic ethnocultural group associated with that language”. *Rossiyskiy*, “by contrast, means, roughly, ‘pertaining to the Russian Federation’”.

The crisis in relations between Russia and the West mainly focuses on the war in Ukraine that began in 2014 and intensified in 2022. It served as a possible turning point for the idea of Russianness, both inside and outside Russia. This thought that the war in Ukraine has affected Russianness was brought up by Brednikova and Nikiforova (2019) and Davydova-Minguet (2019). In this regard, I want to test whether Estonian Russian speakers’ reception of *rossiyskaya* popular culture as well as identity were also affected as part of a high level of contestation of Russianness and exogenous shock, in this case the war in Ukraine. Based on the earlier described theoretical background, where Hopf’s social cognitive theory of identity was taken as a core, changes in identity are believed to consist of changes in representations, discourses that habitually made up Russian speakers’ social reality. Thus, through studying popular culture receptions, and changes in their meanings, I want to trace their effect on the Estonian Russophones’ relations with the Significant Other (i.e., Russia) and subsequent influence on the collective identity of Estonian Russophones.

To sum up, I study Estonian Russophones’ identity in relation to Russia as a Significant Other. This relationship has been studied considerably less than the relationship with Estonian hegemonic identity. What interests me, in particular, is whether there was a change in Estonian Russophones’ reception of Russia after the undeclared war in Ukraine began in 2014 and entered a full-scale war stage in 2022. Since one’s identity is always relational, the relationship

between Estonian Russophones and Russia, or rather its popular culture, helps me understand Russian speakers' identity in Estonia. Popular culture representations in the local discourses were chosen to narrow down the scope and, relying on the previous research findings, because cultural ties to the Russian state are strong among Estonian Russophones. Russian-language Estonian media is looked at as a source where Estonian Russophones exchange identity discourses, including views on Significant Others. Authors of articles, opinion posts, letters to editors and interviewees that occur in media are believed to showcase identity discourses they are part of in their everyday life.

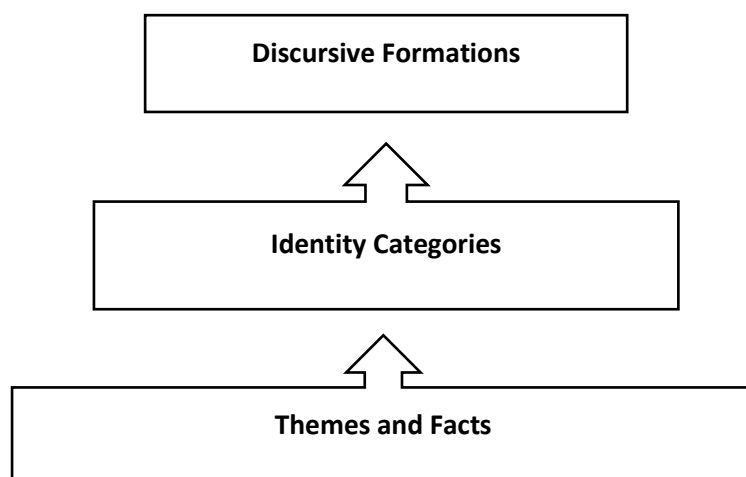
The thesis' research question is formulated as follows: *How have the Russian popular culture representations changed in Russian-language Estonian media as a result of the crisis in Russia-West relations starting from 2014?*

### 3. Methods and data

This paper takes a form of a case study of Russian-Estonians' identity through their relations with the Significant Other, i.e. Russia, and their attitude(s) to Russian popular culture representations. The research is conducted using discourse analysis, specifically a combination of interpretive and quantitative methods through coding texts as introduced by Hopf and Allan (2016) in their Making Identity Count (MIC) project. Their project created a database "of transparent, replicable reports on national identity that can be used as the basis for quantitative operationalizations of identity, inductively recovered" (Hopf & Allan, 2016). What quantitative data has lacked so far is the intersubjectivity that discourse analysis provides. Since "[d]iscourse analysis has been described as 'the close study of language in use'" (Dunn & Neumann, 2016: 4) and language is "a series of collective codes and conventions through which things [...] are given meaning and endowed with particular identities" (Dunn & Neumann, 2016: 2); we can trace the changes in language structure in a large pool of data to observe the development of Russian popular culture representations in local minority's discourses. It is crucial to remind that an audience's reception of Russian popular culture in its discourses is formed on the basis of shared knowledge that has been received through social interactions and the immediate environment. Those discourses are considered representative of a collective self (more so, if data repeatedly occurs) (Hopf & Allan, 2016). Popular discourse is a primary focus as it is representative of the masses, whereas 'official', 'elite', or 'expert' discourses are not.

In this thesis, a news outlet is used as an example of popular discourse domain where Russophones living in Estonia express themselves through opinion posts, letters to the editor, and so on; as well as affect the media channel through popular demand. Although media channels controlled by the "elites" can omit some discourses present in Estonian Russophones' community, the opinion-makers of this small community are likely to be speakers in a given media channel. The authors of articles, opinion posts, interviewees are often Estonian Russophones' who inevitably are affected by social discourses and settings they live in. Using discourse analysis further helps to study a population group as it is, without it being exposed to pre-theorization or interaction with researchers. As mentioned before, discourse analysis, as opposed to the earlier mentioned methods, provides intersubjective data that is closest to real perceptions and interpretations in a given time in the past as it views "how people express their beliefs when no one is listening or asking" similarly to ethnography, which, in turn, should be conducted right at the specified time (in present) (Hopf & Allan, 2016; Hopf, 2009). Discourse analysis of texts and similar sources of shared meaning from certain periods in the past is a

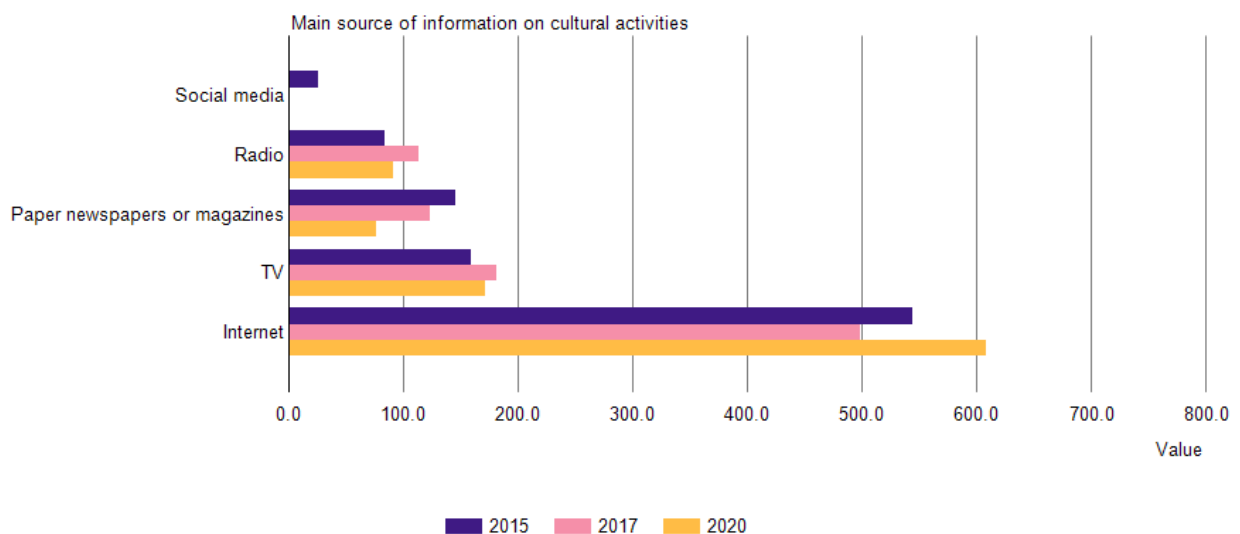
useful way to study collective identities because pre-theorization is avoided, and discourses are inductively recovered reflecting the identity as it might be, and not based on an author's prior constructed beliefs. "While they sacrifice some reliability, inductive strategies are more valid because they are more likely to produce a picture of identity that the persons under study would understand and agree with" (Hopf & Allan, 2016; Hopf, 2009). The lack of reliability I plan to tackle by producing a comparable database similar to the ones created under the Making Identity Count projects. Their approach allows qualitative discourse analysis to be meshed with quantifiable data. In simple terms, it is discourse analysis with a little premise of the content analysis approach. The qualitative part provides interpretivist data from a certain point in time with the content of shared meaning. This data is turned into a quantitative database in order to make it comparable to see whether people's expressions and beliefs have changed (more details below). Hopf and Allan's approach to discourse analysis prizes both validity and reliability, either of which gets often compromised in other methods. The research is valid because discursive formations of identity are inductively recovered and constructed based on available themes and facts in the text (see Figure 2 from Hopf & Allan, 2016). The research is reliable because it produced "reproducible results at the level of discursive interpretation" (Hopf & Allan, 2016: 20).



**Figure 2.** The Making Identity Count Framework. Source: Hopf & Allan, 2016.

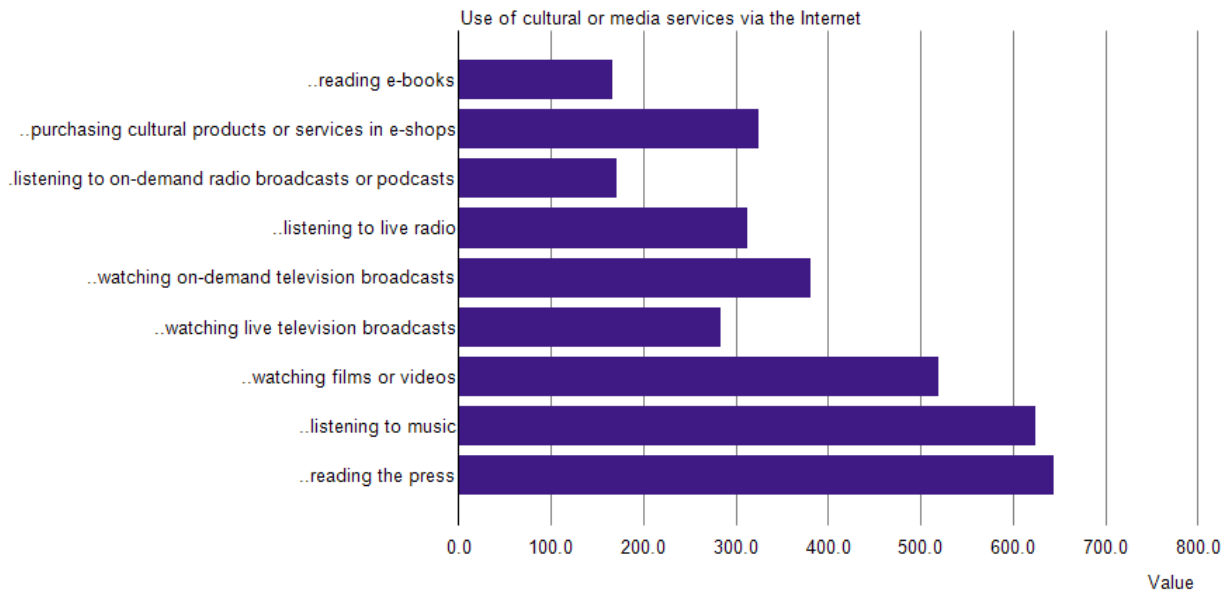
This thesis conducts a discourse analysis of an online Estonian Russian-language news outlet, Delfi. A news outlet was chosen for the following reason. Brady and Kaplan (2009: 48) mentioned that news outlets, such as Delfi, containing opinion posts and not fully owned by the state, are a good source for mass, rather than elite, discourse. Thus, Estonian Russophone

opinion-makers are likely to also be speakers in Delfi and share the discourses they circulate in form of articles, opinion posts, interviews, etc. The mass discourse can reflect popular culture representations well as they come to people’s attention. This was confirmed after the data collection was completed. The mass discourse is actively exchanged within the group under study as they read and interpret the messages that circulate in mass media. The repeated discourses are part of one’s identity that individuals in the group continuously reconstruct by interacting with and producing the texts. Such source selection can, however, hide some discourses when articles and stories get filtered by Estonian media. It is thus should be claimed that Delfi does not show all views and only representative of some discourses present among Estonian Russophones. Other methods, like interviews and ethnography, could present discourses omitted in media space. Specifically, an online media portal was chosen because, according to the data from Statistics Estonia (2020), most people aged 15 or older in Estonia use the internet as their main source of information on cultural activities (see Figure 3). As shown in Figure 2, the internet dominates significantly over radio, paper newspapers and magazines, and television broadcasting. This is not surprising as Estonia posits itself as a digital country.



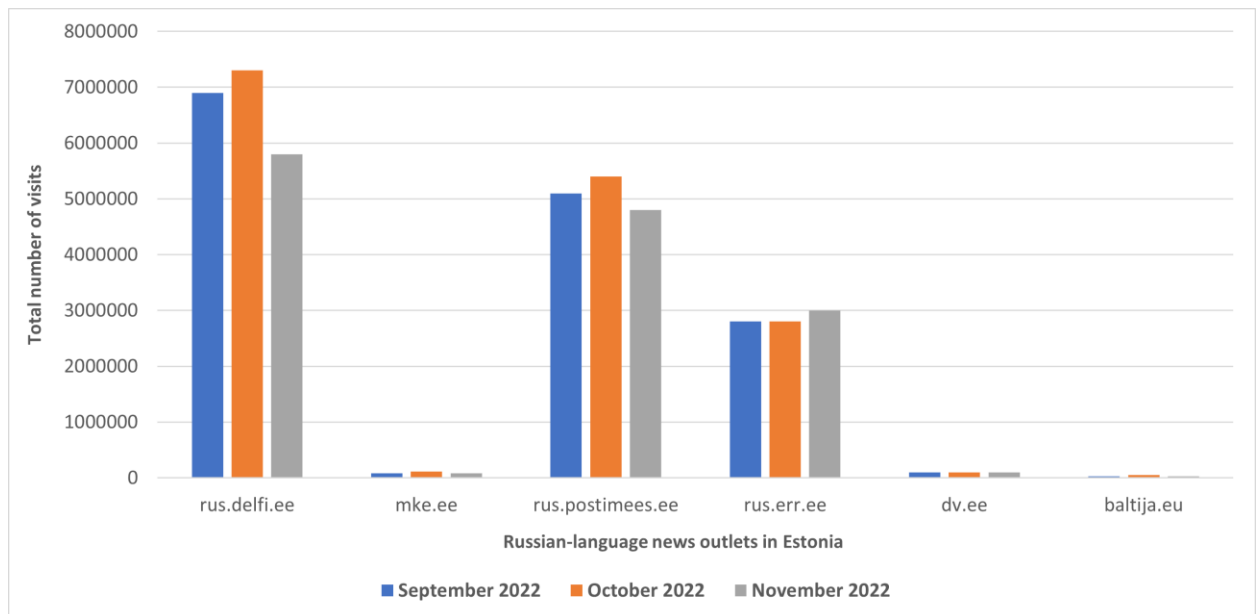
**Figure 3.** The main source of information on cultural activities among Estonians aged 15 and above in the whole country. The axes include the type of information source and the number of respondents using it. Source: Statistics Estonia.

Other data from Statistics Estonia (2017) also backs up the previous figure. It suggests that people who use the Internet as an information source mostly do so for reading the online press, like Delfi (see Figure 4).



**Figure 4.** Use of cultural and media services via the Internet in 2017 in Estonia. Source: Statistics Estonia.

Russian-language Delfi, specifically, was chosen because it is the most visited news outlet in Estonia. The total traffic and engagement numbers are the highest in comparison to other Estonian news sources. According to SimilarWeb (2022), a web analytics company specializing in web traffic and performance, in September, October, and November of 2022 Russian page of Delfi received the highest number of total visits compared to other Russian-language media channels (see Figure 5).



**Figure 5.** The total number of visits to Estonian Russian-language news outlets within September, October, and November of 2022. Created by the author based on data from SimilarWeb.

To further frame the scope, data gathering focused on pre-identified time periods. I looked at Delfi articles from 2010, 2014, 2020, and 2022. 2010 and 2020 data come as part of the research project PRG1052 “National identity and Estonian-Russian relations: a longitudinal study of elite and mass discourses” that I work in and have collected data for (more details in the next section). 2014 and 2022 are added as potential “turning points” for shared meanings that Estonian Russophones exchange. The available data was sorted by systematic-random sampling: the first day of every month in the selected years. All articles available for a given date are looked through to find discourses associated with Russian popular culture. Identified discourses, “representational practices through which meanings are generated” (Dunn & Neumann, 2016: 2), should bring attention to prominent topics widely represented in texts and help monitor their popularity and applicability throughout the time before and after the significant deterioration of the Russia-West relations. These discourses are coded in an Excel table in the form of one or more sentences from the article texts that hold relevant meanings (e.g., opinions on Russian celebrities’ work). Texts are broadly defined here as writings, visual images, and audio (Hopf & Allan, 2016). The coder, thus, can note a discourse in a video accompanied by a voice-over and does not have to restrict themselves to only typed material. The content of the code is determined by an individual coder. The coder should limit his or her biases because the chosen sentences guide an individual code that is representative of the traced discourse. Although MIC projects ask coders “to proceed inductively, using categories in the texts rather than their own pretheorized notions & classifications” (Vucetic, 2015: 4), I should acknowledge that discourse is subject to the analyst’s subjective interpretations based on individual background, knowledge, beliefs, and even mood. Nevertheless, “such differences within and between readers are not so wide as to undermine the intuition that some readings of a text are more coherent than others” (Vucetic, 2015: 2).

The coding table (see Excel attachment) consists of 13 columns: code, quote, valence, comments, author, text title, source title, source year, source month and day, and URL. ‘Code’ is a section where a raw coding label is assigned based on the selected piece of text. The bottom-up, inductive approach is used to code the text and, thus, the study does not have pre-determined categories. The copy of the piece of analyzed text is then inserted in the ‘quote’ column. ‘Valence’ is indicated based on the sentiment in the analyzed text. It can be positive (+), negative (-), neutral (/), or ambiguous (~); aspirational and aversive indices indicate that chosen attribute is presented as desirable or unwelcome with regard to the future. Codes can refer to Significant Others. In this case, it can be anything about an external to the studied

groups' country (e.g., Russia and everything that relates to it) (those are marked as External Other – 'xO: [code label]'); historical period (e.g., Soviet Union, marked as Historical Other – 'HO: [code label]'); and internal groups that are sidelined by the group under study (e.g., Russian citizens in Estonia, marked as Internal Other – 'IO: [code label]'). The 'comments' column includes any relevant thoughts or highlights of the coder. 'Author', 'text title', 'source title', 'source year', 'source month and day', and 'URL' columns are used to reference the piece of text analyzed should one wish to return to it.

The coding works in the following way. When a coder comes across a sentence containing valuable information, all emerging themes are coded separately as they can have different valence. Translated<sup>1</sup> example from the Excel attachment: 'The performance is modern, lively, intelligible, leaving the feeling of a celebration. You leave and think: "Oh, this is what Russian theatrical art is like. Because in our latitudes, you can forget what it is like."' (*Спектакль современный, живой, внятный, оставляющий ощущение праздника. Выходишь и думаешь: "Ах вот, оказывается, какое оно, русское театральное искусство. А то ведь на наших широтах и позабыть можно"*). One can notice at least two themes in this context – 'xO: Russian theatrical art' and 'IO: Estonian Russophone culture'. The first code, 'xO: Russian theatrical art', an analyst can code under positive valence because the text compliments Russian theatrical performance that the author had seen and praises Russian theater in general ('The performance is modern, lively, intelligible, leaving the feeling of a celebration. You leave and think: "Oh, this is what Russian theatrical art is like)'). The second code, 'IO: Estonian Russophone culture' produces a pessimistic sentiment about the state of Estonian Russian-language theatrical art implying that Russian culture is underrepresented or in bad condition in Estonia ('Because in our latitudes, you can forget what it is like.'). and, thus, labeled with a negative valence. First code label needs to be preceded by an 'xO:' mark indicating that the code talks about Russia as an External (Significant) Other. The second code is marked by 'IO:' showing that the Russian-language theatrical culture is sidelined or not paid enough attention to in the Estonian national discourse. These marks are helpful when sorting through the data at the stage of analysis.

The coded data is categorized into more prominent groups of discourse using quantitative indicators and pivot tables for a better analytical overview (see Chapter 4 for more details). Coded valence was subsequently used to see how Russian popular culture representations were

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<sup>1</sup> All code translations from Russian to English were made by this thesis' author.

presented in a given year and to compare the reaction and relation to the Significant Other, i.e. Russia, throughout the selected years.

### **3.1. Case selection**

This thesis is connected to a larger project – PRG1052 “National identity and Estonian-Russian relations: a longitudinal study of elite and mass discourses” – funded by the Estonian Research Council and led by the thesis supervisor, Viacheslav Morozov. This project produces a large pool of data, part of which I use for my analysis and expand on. The part of the project that I participate in focuses on local Estonian Russophones’ perspective as part of the Estonian national identity construction after regaining independence. This project, my participation in it, and the rich literature on the topic at the University of Tartu served as the main reasons why this thesis looks specifically at Russophones in Estonia and nowhere else.

From broader theoretical terms, studying Russophone minority in Estonia, or any other linguistic or ethnic minority in the post-Soviet space, is needed to enrich ever-expanding fields of postcolonialism and transnationalism, where those groups were priorly overlooked. Immediately after the dissolution of the Soviet Union the resurging interest in postcolonial studies has left out Russophone minorities in almost all of the countries of the former Soviet Union understudied. Postcolonialism brought attention to rise in nationalism in Eastern Europe, which in turn highlighted the question of Russian-speaking minorities to many researchers. Despite the fact that Rogers Brubaker (1996) raised the question of how Russophones’ identity has and is developing in relation to the “host” and “homeland” state already in the 1990s, in the 2020s Kallas (2021) mentioned that the relationship between Russophone minorities and the imagined “homeland” (Russia) has still not been researched well in comparison to the “host” state and minority dynamics. As mentioned before, the primary focus was given to integrating and adapting Russophones to states’ nation-building strategies. Besides postcolonial studies, researchers like Vihalemm and Juzefovičs (2022) used transnationalism to understand the Russophone community in Estonia, primarily the Russophones with attachment to Russia through relatives, media, citizenship, culture, memories. Here as well the link between the minority (in most cases, Russophones who migrated to “host” states after they gained independence) and “homeland” Russia is questioned, especially so due to Russia’s neoimperialist policies and actions. The topic gained a new layer of social significance after Russia invaded Ukraine, when countries like Estonia, Latvia, and Kazakhstan with a big share

of the Russophone population became concerned for national security, unity between the ethnicities, and loyalty of Russophones' to the state.

To sum up the third chapter, this thesis uses discourse analysis as proposed by Hopf and Allan for studying identity in their Making Identity Count framework. This method suggests conducting discourse analysis of texts ("text" might include writings, video, and audio material) while coding the received meanings into a quantitative database (i.e., an Excel table). Meanings are categorized into genres and are assigned valence to track the sentiment applied to a particular code. The code labels are derived from the text itself and are not pretheorized. These labels are sorted into the emerging dominant categories of discourse.

The combination of qualitative and quantitative approaches helps to trace identity discourses and make them comparable throughout time. This also ensures that neither validity nor reliability gets disadvantaged.

This thesis conducts a discourse analysis of a Russian-language Estonian online media outlet, Delfi. The data collection is narrowed down to the first day of every month of 2010, 2014, 2020, and 2022. This is aimed at limiting the material to a manageable amount and randomizing it. The same practice is applied in the PRG1052 and other MIC research projects. Data for 2010 and 2020 were part of a research project called "National identity and Estonian-Russian relations: a longitudinal study of elite and mass discourses", while 2014 and 2022 data were collected separately. 2014 and 2022 were chosen as years with potentially high levels of contestation of Russianness as a result of Russia's aggression in Ukraine.

The case selection of Estonian Russophones occurred for the following reasons: this thesis is part of a larger research project that studies Russophones' identity as part of the Estonian national identity; emerging sub-fields in postcolonial and transnational studies call for research on ethnic and linguistic minorities in the post-Soviet space which were and are affected by nationalism in "host" states and neoimperialist views of the "homeland" Russia; the "Russian question" became more socially significant and widely discussed in countries with large Russophone minority population like Estonia because of Russia's aggression in Ukraine.

## **4. Analysis and discussion**

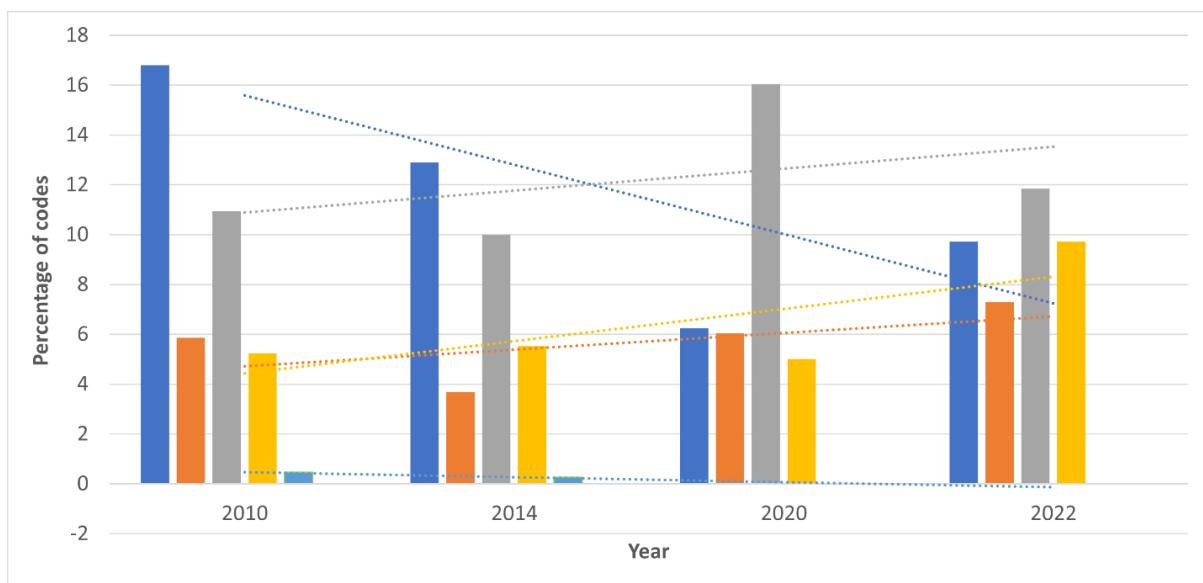
### **4.1. Coding process**

The data collection took place throughout 2022 and produced 2,964 raw codes. The coding of discourses as outlined in Chapter 3 provided me with a pool of data for each year (see Excel attachment). 2010 and 2020 have a higher number of raw codes because these years were a part of the PRG1052 project. The raw codes were later converted into a pivot table where one can see emerging discourses assigned by the text, their number and the predominant valence assigned by a coder. In the MIC projects Hopf and Allan (2016) use what they call the “raw count table” which contains a raw count of code categories and the “topographic table” which incorporates valence. For this thesis, one table was created, where both table ideas as per Hopf and Allan are combined. The pivot table consists of code categories, six valence indicators, and the total raw count of valence and code categories. Contrary to Hopf and Allan’s suggestion to narrow-down collected data using their valence conversion formula, I look at each valence category separately to get a better (rather than generalized) view of Estonian Russophones’ reception of Russian popular culture. I illustrate my findings through figures instead of topographical tables as per Hopf and Allan. At the stage of pivot table creation, irrelevant codes that were not connected to Russia and/or Russian popular culture were excluded. This has resulted in a decrease in the number of codes used for analysis. I, thus, used 1,838 codes to achieve the objective of the thesis.

The codes from the pivot table were sorted into dominant categories. The dominant categories consist of various subtopics that can be observed as the color-coded sections in the pivot table and larger raw codes table. The dominant discourses can be seen in the Excel attachment sorted by color under each year’s Excel sheet. This thesis focuses on two categories called ‘Russian popular culture and cultural figures’ (light green color in the Excel sheets ‘2010’, ‘2014’, ‘2020’, ‘2022’) and ‘Russian media channels’ (dark green color in the Excel sheets ‘2010’, ‘2014’, ‘2020’, ‘2022’). Four more categories that stood out when looking through Russophones’ perceptions were used additionally to explain the development of reactions to Russian popular culture and identity. Those four categories are: ‘Soviet Union’ (light blue color in the Excel sheets ‘2010’, ‘2014’, ‘2020’, ‘2022’); ‘Russia’ and ‘Russians’ (light and dark orange colors, respectively, in the Excel sheets ‘2010’, ‘2014’, ‘2020’, ‘2022’); ‘War in Ukraine’ (dark red color in the Excel sheets ‘2010’, ‘2014’, ‘2020’, ‘2022’). Gray-colored categories were not included in the dominant categories but left in the pivot table as relevant

to the topic and for reference to the raw codes table. The pivot tables were created for each year under study. They can be found in the same Excel sheets as raw codes tables. Categories from these pivot tables were used to create graphs where sentiment change can be monitored. To make the data comparable across years the graphs reflect the pivot table data in percentage terms as the total count of codes differs from year to year. To do this, the number of codes with a certain valence from the pivot table was divided by the total number of codes for a given year. These numbers were taken from the pivot tables.

#### 4.2. Russian popular culture representations in Estonian Russophones discourses



**Figure 6.** Russian popular culture representations in Estonian Russophones’ discourses in Russian-language Delfi media channel throughout 2010, 2014, 2020, 2022. The blue bar indicates the percentage of Russian popular culture related codes within a given year that had positive valence; orange – negative valence; gray – neutral; yellow – ambiguous; green – aspirational; red – aversive. Trendlines of respective colors were added for comparison of sentiments across years.

In 2010 Russian popular culture representations were largely shown in a positive manner (see Figure 6). About 17 percent of collected codes related to Russian popular culture had a positive valence and a little less than one percent of codes showed an aspirational index. This means that Estonian Russophones received Russian popular culture well and even aspired to have a similar cultural development in Estonia. 11 percent of codes had a neutral view on Russian popular culture. This section mainly includes dry reporting on Russian cultural and sports figures or events. Roughly six percent of codes, on the contrary, had a negative valence, five percent of codes expressed ambiguous sentiment where Russian popular culture reception was

not clearly defined. No aversive indices were noticed. Prior to the war in Ukraine, I see that the gap between positive and negative sentiments towards Russian popular culture is noticeable. Overall, as well Russian popular culture representations appeared in Estonian Russophone discourses more often than in the following years. Although the war in Ukraine has not yet begun then, 2010 data helps to see and analyze the changes in Russian popular culture representations.

In 2014, although, the number of Russian popular culture representations went down, the sentiments continued as in 2010 (see Figure 6). 13 percent of codes had a positive valence in 2014 compared to 17 percent in 2010. The negative sentiment, however, also decreased by about two percent. What is interesting is that Russian popular culture representations were more looked at ambiguously that year. This corresponds to the additional data on how the war in Ukraine was received in the Estonian Russophone discourses (see Figure 7). When the war in Ukraine began in 2014 Estonian Russophones either did not know how to react to it or reacted in equally positive and negative manner (see Figure 7). At the beginning of the war in 2014, the coded texts also show a larger share of ambiguous valence (yellow bar on Figure 8), when the two sides were conflicted or took an unclear position: “[I]n our society, opinions regarding Crimea are polar - was it legal or illegal, beautiful or terrible, or something else” (Delfi, 2014c; coded in line 227 in the Excel sheet ‘2014’). Neutral sentiment toward Russian popular culture representations was dominant in 2020. In 2020 positive representation of Russian popular culture went down significantly compared to the previous two years. It made up six percent of all codes for that year. The positive and negative sentiments toward Russian popular culture were at equal standing with the negative valence back up to about six percent as in 2010. In 2020, when Estonian Russophones’ information space was taken over by other topics than the war in Ukraine (less than one percent of codes in 2020 mention the war in Ukraine; see Figure 7), the level of ambiguity over how Estonian Russophones received Russian popular culture also went down. No aspirational indices were marked that year at all compared to some in the previous years,

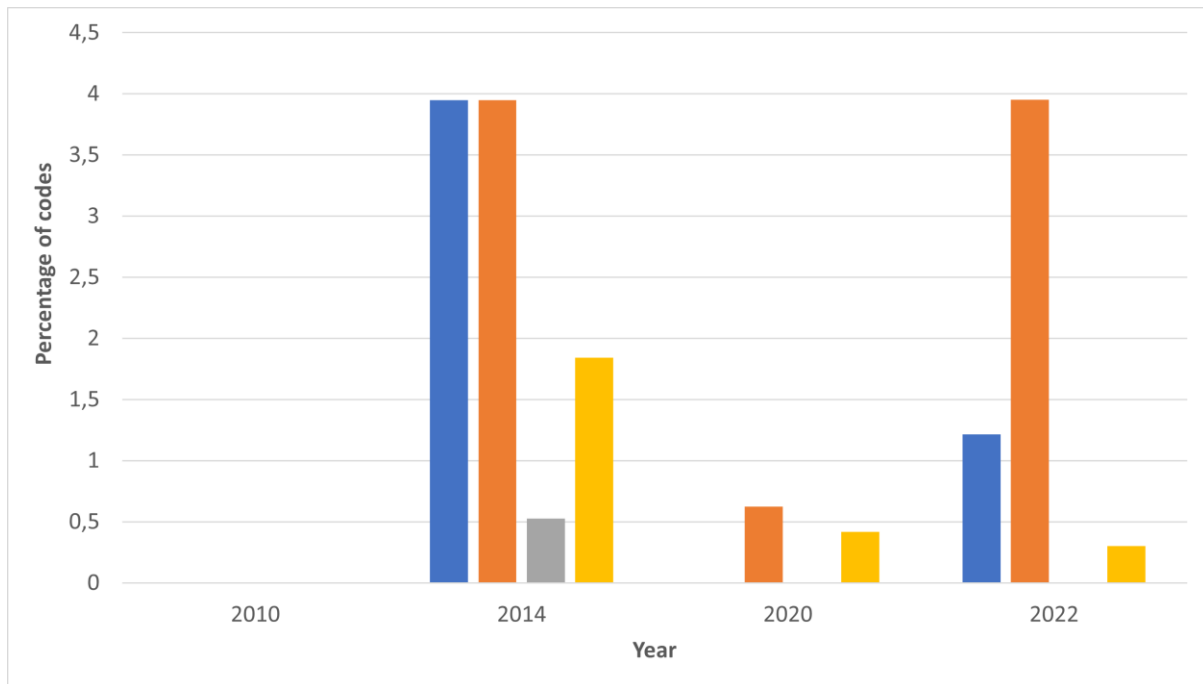
In 2022 the positive reception of Russian popular culture was lower than in 2014. The neutral reporting also decreased in 2022 compared to 2020. The level of ambiguous and negative reception of Russian popular culture were the highest in 2022 and made up about 10 and seven percent of all codes that year, respectively. A noticeable increase in ambiguous codes in 2022 compared to the somewhat stable numbers in the previous years can be explained by a clash of pro-war and anti-war sentiments in Russian popular culture itself (discussed in detail below).

It is also possible that Estonian Russophones did not know how to react to a large flow of conflicting information from Estonian and Russian sources that they were exposed to or its spread into the masses through cultural elements as well. 2014 showed an equal percentage of codes with positive (blue bar in Figure 7) and negative (orange bar in Figure 7) sentiment. The data indicates that Estonian Russophones were divided on the issue with some supporting the annexation of Crimea and others condemning Russia's actions. This division persists in 2022 and was noted by a Delfi correspondent Ekaterina Konakova (2022a), who interviewed people in Narva on their views on Russia and the war in Ukraine. People within the same friend group have different understandings of the situation. If one interviewee says:

Those who believe that Ukrainian is Nazi, need to go over the [Narva-Ivangorod] bridge, and farewell! Who wants war in the 21<sup>st</sup> century? And how is this even possible? And why is it happening to Ukraine? Putin himself cannot explain why he attacked Ukraine, he does not properly explain his plans. (Konakova, 2022a; coded in line 220 in the Excel sheet '2022')

Another one opposes:

We used to call [Russian relatives in Ukraine] often, they were telling us how Ukrainians were bombing them. That is why I think that Putin is right, he is protecting his own people. You always have to save your own. (Konakova, 2022a; coded in line 234 in the Excel sheet '2022')



**Figure 7.** Estonian Russophones’ reaction to the war in Ukraine in Russian-language Delfi media channel in 2010, 2014, 2020, 2022. The blue bar indicates the percentage of codes related to the war in Ukraine within a given year that had positive valence; orange – negative valence; gray – neutral; yellow – ambiguous.

The level of ambiguity about the war in Ukraine goes down over time. The longer the war continues, however, the less positive reception for Russia’s war in Ukraine is shown. Unlike in 2014, in 2022 the negative sentiment toward Russia’s war in Ukraine is three times higher than the positive sentiment. This can be explained by either the fact that some Russophones in Estonia are of Ukrainian origin and they had family members or relatives directly affected by the full-scale Russian offensive that involved all Ukrainians; global economic effects of the war in Ukraine (e.g., higher inflation); or the local media influence that switched from using Kremlin-aligned sources and took a pro-Ukraine stance in their reporting and silenced pro-Russian stances. A contributing factor would also be a generally lower number of Russian media channels circulating in Estonian media space as Kremlin-aligned media channels were gradually pushed out of Estonia (e.g., Russia Today and Sputnik stopped operating in Estonia since the war in Ukraine began (EUvsDisinfo, 2021; European Council, 2022)). The larger negative sentiment read in Delfi does not, however, cancel the fact that some Russophones in Estonia still might support the annexations of Ukrainian lands and prioritize Russian television or other Kremlin-aligned media channels. The support is mostly visible in interviews with Estonian Russophones rather than reporting by Delfi correspondents. One coded Delfi article in particular discussed how Russophones bypass the fact that Estonian broadcasting media providers stopped including television channels that spread Russian propaganda:

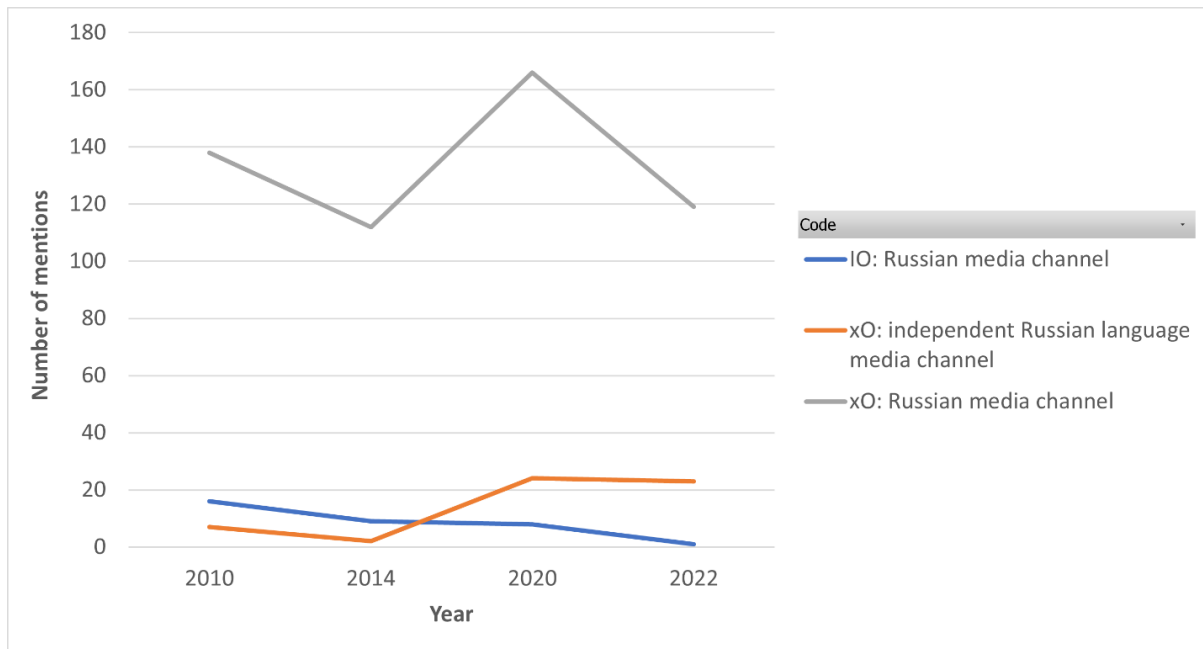
Igor, a resident of Narva, recalls that five days after Russian channels stopped broadcasting, he watched through his workplace window how a large stream of people has been continuously walking by since ten in the morning, and almost everyone was carrying something in the same packages. “I went outside to see what was going on,” Igor recalls. - People were carrying antennas. I did not know what was inside the packages themselves. I met my friend and asked him what the fuss was about. He said that one of our local shops started supplying [satellite broadcasting] equipment that receives Russian channels. And in 4 hours I saw about fifty people who bought antennas and calmly walked home. (Konakova, 2022b; coded in line 245 in the Excel sheet ‘2022’)

Russian media was analyzed separately from other aspects of Russian popular culture due to its large raw count and as it mostly gave neutral valence, which would have interfered with the popular culture representations reading (see Figure 8). The earlier mentioned study by Kirch (1997) found that Russian-language media in Estonia predominantly used Russian media channels as information sources. Interestingly, this fact has persisted to this day. Delfi referred to RIA Novosti, ITAR-TASS, Lenta.ru, and other Russian media channels as sources for most world events news, Russian and other countries’ popular culture information, and even articles that can be labeled as general interest topics (e.g., how to cure flu; best dog breeds, etc.). The graph line (in gray) dips in 2014 and 2022. This is believed to happen due to a decrease in the usage of Russian media as a source for world news (especially, topics like the war in Ukraine). For instance, the most cited Russian media channels in Delfi – RIA Novosti, ITAR-TASS, and Lenta.ru – share Kremlin-aligned perspectives and propaganda that are considered dangerous for Estonian national security as mentioned in the earlier chapters. Access to some Kremlin-aligned media channels was restricted in Estonia since the war in Ukraine began in 2014 (EUvsDisinfo, 2021; European Council, 2022). Some Russophones in Estonia were not happy about the absence of Russian media channels neither in 2014:

I believe that the most effective fight is to provide people with as much information as possible, to do everything to be as honest and complete as possible about your view of the problem, and to hope that in such a situation people will make their own choice (Delfi, 2014a; coded in line 146 in the Excel sheet ‘2014’)

Nor was it the case in 2022: “By the way, our Russian channels were turned off. What is more, they [the Estonian government and cable companies] cut off some of the channels, and gave

nothing in return” (Konakova, 2022b; coded in line 243 in the Excel sheet ‘2022’). Others, however, supported the decision to restrict Russian media channels: “Objections to [broadcasting] the [Russian] channels NTV, RTR *Planeta*, and PBK [First Baltic Channel] are obvious. They stir up militaristic sentiments, carry out military propaganda, pour streams of lies on the audience” (Delfi, 2014b; coded in line 176 in the Excel sheet ‘2014’). Instead of Kremlin-aligned media channels, Delfi used information from independent Russian or Russia-focused media channels like *Novaya Gazeta*, *Meduza*, *Dozhd*, and *Ekho Moskvy*. Although their number is still smaller, they show an upward trend, and independent Russian media might continue to be referred to more often. In addition to the last, instead of Kremlin-aligned media channels, Delfi began referring to media channels like BBC News Russian, Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty, *Deutsche Welle* in Russian, or non-Russian-language media of other countries (i.e., Reuters, the Guardian, CBS News, *Der Spiegel* when reporting on general world news, *The Daily Mail*, *People* magazine, *Vanity Fair*, etc. when sharing popular culture related information). The mentions of the local Russian-language media channels were not as prominent, with the exception of ERR’s *Aktualnaya Kamera* and Radio 4. Radio 4, one of the Estonian Public Broadcasting channels, is believed to be well-regarded among Estonian Russophones: “for 17 years, Radio 4 has been a news and information center, and now it is also the guardian of the identity of non-Estonians” (Delfi, 2010a; coded in line 610 in the Excel sheet ‘2010’). Since I focused on Russia primarily, local media channels were not given much attention while coding, and, thus, the numbers might be slightly higher.



**Figure 8.** Russian media channels mentions in the analyzed articles: trend by year. The blue line shows the number of mentions of Estonian Russian-language media (e.g., ERR in Russian), orange is independent Russian-language media channels in Russia (e.g., Ekho Moskvyy, Nezavisimaya Gazeta before relocation from Russia) or outside of it but with a focus on Russia (e.g., Meduza, Nezavisimaya Gazeta after relocation); the gray line represents Russian media (includes Kremlin-aligned media channels, magazines or online outlets based and produced in Russia).

Overall, from 2010 to 2022 the data on the sentiment of Russophones in Estonia in relation to Russian popular culture representations showed a decreasing trend in the number of times Russian popular culture representations were mentioned. Note that Russian popular culture included many sub-topics, such as Russian cultural figures, Russian sport and sports figures, Russian TV shows, Russian internet culture, and Russian film and music production works. When analyzing the valences, a sharp decrease in positive (blue trend line) reactions to Russian popular culture discourses became visible (see Figure 6). Other valence indices (orange trend line – negative valence; gray – neutral; yellow – ambiguous; green – aspirational) are slowly on the rise as the war in Ukraine continues. The fact that Estonian Russophones discussed less Russian popular culture representations could suggest that they either got disappointed in Russian popular culture (see an increase in negative sentiment and decrease in aspirational index, the orange bar in Figure 6) that got heavily penetrated by propaganda after Russia attacked Ukraine, or that Russophone mass discourses were affected by elite or dominant Estonian discourses.

The war in Ukraine has affected Russian popular culture works. After the full-scale war against Ukraine was launched by Russia in 2022, Kremlin's propaganda became easily noticeable in Russian popular culture. Popular culture, in general, is a domain controlled by “the interests of the economically and ideologically dominant; they have lines of force within [popular culture resources] that are hegemonic and that work in favor of the status quo” (Fiske, 1989: 2). Thus, the presence of propaganda is not as surprising as Russophones' reactionary acceptance of this fact. “If the cultural commodities or texts do not contain resources out of which the people can make their own meanings of their social relations and identities, they will be rejected and will fail in the marketplace. They will not be made popular” (Fiske, 1989: 2). But Kremlin-aligned agenda was picked up in the popular culture domain in Russia. Politics became meshed in where Estonian Russophones did not expect it to occur. For instance, the St. George's ribbons, which first came into Russians' daily life top-down when the Russian government and RIA *Novosti* state media channel promoted their usage in 2005 in memory of the Great Patriotic War (BBC News, 2022; Gorelov, 2020). Since then some Russian speakers accepted and used those ribbons as symbols of a particular way of remembrance of the Great Patriotic War. In Estonia they also used in protest to the Estonian government. After those ribbons started resurging in relation to the war in Ukraine in Russian media and popular culture works, they gained a negative connotation in Europe. Soviet symbols like the St. George's ribbons that were used by Estonian Russophones for self-identification and in protest to the Estonian government have turned to mean support of the war in Ukraine and Putin's administration (Gorelov, 2020), a political statement that not all Estonian Russophones would support. After the Russian attack on Ukraine in 2022, these symbols appear more often in the media in support of the annexation of the Ukrainian regions. The St. George's ribbons get shaped into the letter Z, a new symbol used to show support to the Russian forces in Ukraine (Coalson, 2022). Those symbols also appear in social media in form of posters, hashtags, and memes that make fun of both supporters and opposers of the Russian government. Russian popular culture figures produce works or get interviewed, where they openly stand with Kremlin's decisions. Quite often the symbols of the victory in the Second World War and those in support of the Ukrainian invasion are equated, whereas WWII symbols receive additional meaning. Thus, for instance, a Russian music artist called SHAMAN released a song, where he equates the Red Army soldiers to the current Russian Army and labels them ‘heroes’.

Russian popular culture representations in the Estonian Russophones' discourses were also split because of the war in Ukraine. If before the war in Ukraine began, Russian cultural and sports figures were praised and only positive meanings were attached to them:

He is without a doubt the number one newsmaker at this competition – [Evgeni] Plushenko [a famous Russian figure skater]. Every step is followed by cameras, the attention of the audience during training (even when there are 5 athletes on the ice at the same time) is riveted only to him, and when he is on the rink during the competitions, the audience cries of joy in the literal sense of the word. "Zhenya, show them!" shouts a spectator from the Russian sector during an absolute silence. And he gives the public what is expected of him - a confident, powerful, artistic performance. The fact that Plushenko returned is also for the benefit of our organizers [Tallinn organized the European Figure Skating Championship in 2010] since many paid money for a ticket because of Plushenko. (Vinogradov, 2010; coded in line 410 in the Excel sheet '2010')

After the war began Russian popular culture representations, if any, are largely reported on with a neutral or ambiguous sentiment, and at times negative sentiment. Thus, for instance, some cultural figures in Russia support the Russian government, while others oppose it. Although Russian popular culture figures were labeled as pro-war or anti-war in some of the articles, it was highlighted that most of them are anti-war, which somewhat disregarded the pro-war sentiments present among Russian cultural and sports figures whom Estonian Russophones could also follow:

It should be noted that *few people openly justify* [highlight by author] the military intervention. Among them are singers Nikolai Baskov, Oleg Gazmanov and Nikolai Rastorguev, TV presenters Tina Kandelaki and Alla Dovlatova, actor Vladimir Mashkov. Science fiction writers Sergey Lukyanenko and Oleg Divov signed a letter of support for Putin from writers. Other figures who previously somehow supported the official policy of the Russian authorities in the Crimea and Donbass are still in silence. [...] At the same time, *the majority takes an anti-war position* [highlighted by the thesis' author]. One of the firsts was TV presenter Ivan Urgant and singer Valery Meladze. [...] Dozens of other well-known musicians, actors, athletes, and bloggers joined the anti-war appeals: Andrei Makarevich, Liya Akhedzhakova, Sergei Lazarev [later changed his position to the pro-war], Ksenia Sobchak, Maxim Galkin, Anastasia

Ivleeva, Fedor Smolov, Jan Nepomniachtchi, Kristina Orbakaite, Natalia Ionova (Glyukoza) Danila Kozlovsky, Irina Starshenbaum, Marina Zudina, Katerina Shpitsa, Daria Poverennova, Aliko Smekhova, Alexander Tsypkin, Boris Akunin and others. (Delfi, 2022a; coded in lines 74-77 in the Excel sheet '2022')

Those pro-war and anti-war labels were rarely followed up in the other Delfi articles and even pro-war cultural figures were later paid attention to and mentioned in a neutral form despite their pro-Kremlin political statements (see example in the next paragraph). The neutral valence was primarily assigned to dry mentions of popular culture representatives, such as the news about the birth of a child in a well-known celebrity's family: "Today is a big day for a close-knit family of the popular artist Sergei Zhukov. Soloist of the group "Ruki Vverkh!" became a dad for the fourth time" (Delfi, 2014e; coded in line 584 in the Excel sheet '2014'). Some Estonian Russophones are expected to share this preference to focus on culture without politics as much as it is possible.

An example of a change in sentiments towards Russian cultural and sports figures and their works among Estonian Russophones can be seen through representations of Ivan Okhlobystin, a Russian actor and screenwriter, who expressed his support for Russia's invasion of Ukraine in 2014 and repeatedly so in 2022. In 2010 he and his works were presented in a positive manner: "The films "DMB", "Down House" and "Garbage Man", the scripts for which were created by Ivan Okhlobystin, became high-profile events in Russian cinema, and the characters' lines were quoted by the audience" (Delfi, 2010b; coded in line 1222 in the Excel sheet '2010'). In 2014 the sentiment toward his figure turned negative: "Okhlobystin 'constantly thirsts for blood - both Ukrainian and Russian' because he 'offers to start a bloody war' between Russia and Ukraine" (Delfi, 2014f; coded in line 605 in the Excel sheet '2014'). In 2020 the code is ambiguous:

"I am sure you will be in heaven. Meet me, I will be there soon," actor Ivan Okhlobystin dedicated such a message to a deceased friend. What is this - a promise of his imminent death? Premonition of fatal events? Ivan's fans at least became wary... (Delfi, 2020; coded in line 346 in the Excel sheet '2020')

Lastly, in 2022 his persona was looked at neutrally without any mention of his pro-war in Ukraine views: "The two eldest daughters of Ivan Okhlobystin announced a new addition to the family. What is more, Anfisa and Evdokia are approximately at the same gestational age.

The famous family accepts congratulations” (Delfi, 2022b; coded in line 281 in the Excel sheet ‘2022’).

If in 2010 and in 2014 Russophones looked up (aspired) to Russian popular culture, it has not been the case since. The decrease can also be tied to the emergence of the local Estonian Russophone artists who took away some attention of the Estonian Russophones. Those can include singer Tatjana Mihhailova-Saar who represented Estonia in the 2014 Eurovision, singer-songwriter Stefan Airapetjan who represented Estonia in the 2022 Eurovision, as well as band Tam i Tut (from Narva), and numerous Estonian rappers: Stuf (Evgeniy Lyapin), DMS and Kiraz, internationally known Tommy Cash (Tomas Tammemets). Michael Cole (2022), for instance, also suggests that Estonian Russophones developed a separate identity and demonstrates it through analysis of a popular song by Nublu, featuring Gameboy Tetris, “für Oksana”. Already at the stage of data collection, one might notice, however, that Estonian Russophones’ own popular culture production is mentioned significantly less than that of Russian. Existing data on the local Russophone culture, however, shows a positive reaction to its existence. This topic, which is out of the scope of this thesis, was rather studied using a different approach to discourse analysis by scholars like Cole (2022). Studying Estonian Russophones’ identity through the development of their own popular culture using the MIC method will require either more different sources or might gather too little data on them if using the same data collection strategy.

### **4.3. Russia as a Significant Other and Russophones’ identity in Estonia**

The negative, neutral and ambiguous sentiments present in Estonian Russophone discourses toward popular cultural and sports figures from Russia who support the war in Ukraine and the Russian government confirm the previous findings of researchers who studied the Estonian Russophone minority and claimed that Estonian Russophones’ “political identity with the Russian Federation was not constructed at all” (Jakobson, 2002: 51). In the analyzed Delfi articles views on Russian politics and government are predominantly negative (see orange bars on Figure 9). Russia is seen as a disadvantaged Significant Other even more so after the war in Ukraine began. As pointed out by Cole (2022) and seen in this dataset as well, some Estonian Russophones have a pessimistic view of Russia because of lower socio-economic benefits than in Estonia, which pays higher salaries and social assistance, has a better healthcare system, and offers more flexible travel opportunities. Two of the following coded texts show how different Russia and Estonia are in the eyes of Estonian Russophones:

If we talk about monthly allowances for a child [in Russia], then Elena, according to her story, receives 70 rubles a month, this is the children's subsidy. With that kind of money, you can buy 10 glazed curds or 5 good yogurts. Putting it in a nutshell, you are on your own. (Pavlova, 2010; coded in line 243 in the Excel sheet '2010')

[In Estonia] The rule of law is not an empty phrase. E-government too. Schengen is a magical word. We have a lot of pure untouched nature. Lots of freedom. You can do an automobile checkup without a bribe and a queue. You are not terrorized by either the Tax Office or any other inspectorate. You do not have to be afraid of police brutality. The courts try to correctly understand and apply justice [...] Pensions, despite the fact that we do not have oil [...] are always higher than in Russia. (Delfi, 2014c; coded in lines 232-233 in the Excel sheet '2014')

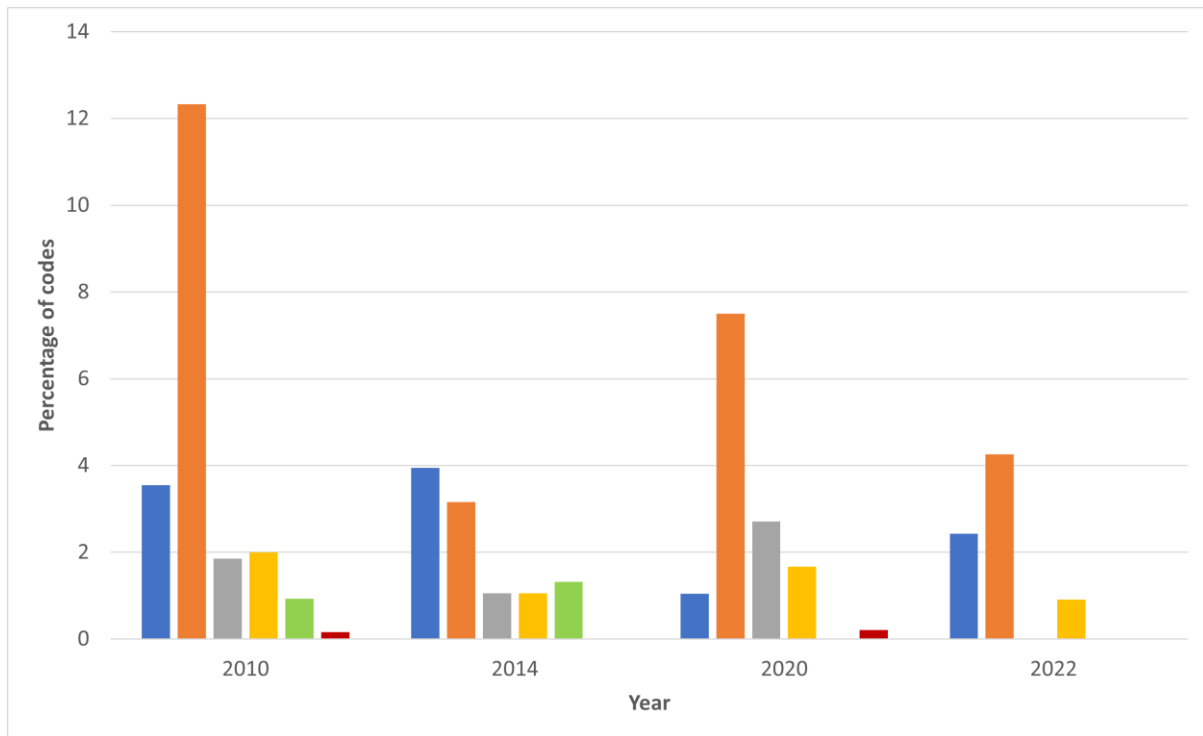
Putin's administration is deemed responsible for the economic and political disadvantages. As mentioned in the previous section, discourses condemning Russia's domestic policies like the suppression of freedom of speech, and foreign policy decisions, such as the annexation of Ukrainian lands in 2014 and 2022 dominate in the analyzed articles. But the pro-Russia views could have been simply underrepresented in Delfi articles with most of them showing in interviews with Estonian Russophones on the streets than in texts produced by Delfi correspondents and published letters to editors. The collected data was able to trace that at times Russian citizens or pro-Kremlin groups in Estonia were "othered" by Estonian Russophone citizens highlighting them as a security threat or condemning any anti-Estonia views. Many Estonian Russophone citizens, however, have family members in Russia or from Russia and living in Estonia. In personal cases, the "othering" does not occur. The "othering" of Russia's citizens by the Russophone citizens of Estonia and of a collective Russophone community by the Estonian majority, however, might have been exacerbated as a result of the Russian foreign policies directed at spreading its soft power influence in neighboring countries and the war in Ukraine. Russophones in Estonia now feel pushed away from the Estonian society because of the Russia media consumption or attachment to the Soviet history (Boffey, 2022; Azar, 2022).

Some Estonian Russophones related to Russian politics and mentioned it in a positive manner when it comes to Second World War interpretations, a point of history that distances them from ethnic Estonians (Gorelov, 2020). Some examples from the coded texts are below:

[In Estonia] Only Vladimir Ivanov, Consul-Counsellor of the Consulate General of the Russian Federation, responded to the invitation to participate in the morning rally on the day of the anniversary of the start of the Second World War, [paying] tribute to the memory of the victims of Nazism. (Kapov, 2014b; coded in line 496 in the Excel sheet '2014')

If the Nazis left, no one would have touched Ukrainians, - he confidently declares. - People should live and not suffer. There, the Nazis level everything to the ground, while Russia restores it. This is her [Russian] support. My grandfather died in a concentration camp, my father fought [in the Second World War], and I should look at fascism? (Konakova, 2022a; coded in line 217 in the Excel sheet '2022')

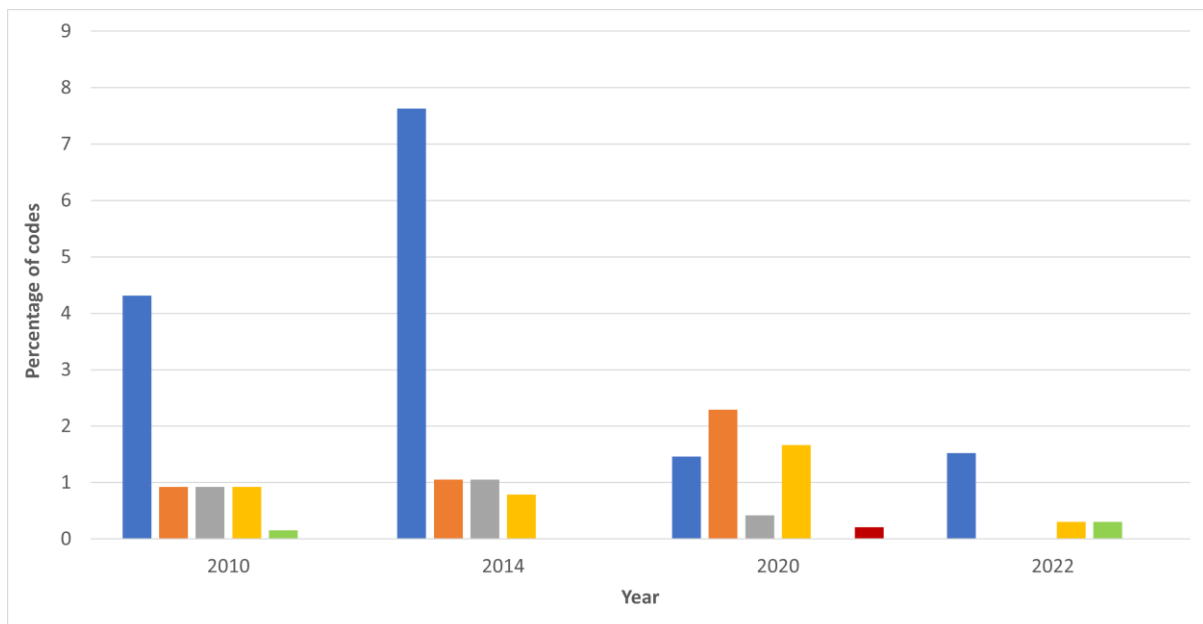
Among the other factors where Estonian Russophones relate to Russia are the so-called traditional family values, Orthodox Church, and family members living in Russia. For example, those meanings appear in the text like this: “The church and parish support traditional family. We consider same-sex sexual life unacceptable” (Delfi, 2014d; coded in lines 444 and 445 in the Excel sheet '2014'). Since the Russian Orthodox Church is an important value and identity institution for some Estonian Russophones, the Estonian Orthodox Church of the Moscow Patriarchate, particularly its primate – Metropolitan Eugene, was questioned by the Estonian Ministry of Internal Affairs on his views on the war in Ukraine in October of 2022. Metropolitan Eugene then voiced a disagreement with Patriarch Kirill of Moscow on the position on the war in Ukraine but claimed that no plans for autocephaly are in place (Metropolitan Eugene, 2022). Estonian Russian-language media channel, ERR, conducted a survey among its Estonian Russophone audience posing a dichotomous question: Is it important for the Estonian Orthodox Church of the Moscow Patriarchate to have a defined stance on the war in Ukraine? 87 percent of their television program viewers and 74 percent of their online news portal readers answered “No, leave the Church alone” (Solts, 2022). This arguably shows that Estonian Russophones consider the Russian Orthodox Church to be separate from and unrelated to politics which most of them dislike as a whole.



**Figure 9.** Sentiment on Russian politics and government in Russian-language Delfi media channel in 2010, 2014, 2020, 2022. The blue bar indicates the percentage of codes related to Russia (e.g., its government, politics, economy) within a given year that had positive valence; orange for a negative valence; gray – neutral; yellow – ambiguous, green – aspirational; red – aversive.

Cultural attachments to Russia in Estonian Russophone identity might change as a result of the war in Ukraine. Estonian Russophones who have a strong attachment to the Soviet history and symbols popularized in Russia in support of the government, WWII, and the war in Ukraine can find themselves alienated as those symbols receive more of negative sentiments in discourses that Estonian Russophones live by. Those views also contradict the Estonian national identity that views the Soviet Union era as occupation or colonization. Researchers have often mentioned that Estonian Russophones’ identity is tied to the memories of the Soviet Union (e.g., Kirch et al., 1997; Vihalemm, 2007; Norman, 2018), rather than independent Russia. Compared to the largely negative sentiment toward Russia as an External Other, the Soviet Union as a Historical Other is mentioned more positively (see Figure 10). An example of this can be seen in one of the coded texts: “Soviet period is a part of the history of the country, which cannot be simply taken and brushed aside.” (Kapov, 2014a; coded in line 123 in the Excel sheet ‘2014’). This aspect of the Estonian Russophones’ identity needs a separate research paper as it is undergoing changes. It is too early to judge whether these Russian popular culture changes affected the Estonian Russophones’ commemoration style and only future research can show if it is the case. The data from this thesis’ coding shows a decrease in

the overall percentage of Soviet Union related discussion in the 2020s. I presume that this aspect of the Estonian Russophones identity is being contested as generations change and memories of the Soviet Union are being washed out, as a result of the current young adults engaging in the collective identity construction were born after the USSR stopped existing. The high level of contestation can also be visible in the interviews with Estonian Russophones, who either condemn or support the Estonian government’s decisions to remove the Soviet symbols and monuments from public spaces: some are open for this change (separation from the Soviet memories), while others are actively resisting it (Azar, 2022). The younger generation tends to look at the Soviet monuments as rebellious symbols of their Russianness that distinguish them from Estonians, but do not always agree with their parents’ views, who have personal memories attached to those symbols (Torop, 2022). The older generation, primarily, relates to the Soviet era and sees the Soviet monuments as a representation of how their parents and grandparents, as they believe, liberated Estonia from Nazi Germans and rebuilt cities like Narva (Torop, 2022). Vladimir Tserdakov, a singer-songwriter from Narva, for instance, expressed his disappointment about the removal of the Narva tank in August 2022 through a song, where the “othering” by Estonian hegemonic identity of the Estonian Russophones’ identity is criticized (Tserdakov, 2022).



**Figure 10.** Sentiment on the Soviet Union, Soviet history, and Soviet monuments in Russian Delfi media channel in 2010, 2014, 2020, 2022. The blue bar indicates the percentage of Soviet Union related codes within a given year that had positive valence; orange – negative valence; gray – neutral; yellow – ambiguous, green – aspirational; red – aversive.

Some discourses also show that Russophones in Estonia share a strong emotional and political attachment to Estonia (see also Cole, 2022) and as an extension parts of its national identity:

There is so much good here that is worth and should be protected. We all stand for the Estonian state. Both native Estonians and the first generation who came here from Siberia, and Jews, and Finns, and everyone who lives here with us. (Delfi, 2014c; coded in line 229 in the Excel sheet '2014')

The cultural attachment to Estonia in Estonian Russophone identity can also get strengthened as Russian popular culture representations gain negative reception and Estonian Russophone popular culture can get popularized due to emergence of local artists.

To sum up the analysis and discussion, Russian-language Delfi, in fact, has had a high number of positive mentions of Russian popular culture representations in 2010. Although elements of Russian popular culture are present in 2014, 2020, and 2022 reporting, their overall number is steadily decreasing. Moreover, Estonian Russophones attach and circulate different meanings after 2014 than in 2010. Russian popular culture representations had negative, ambiguous, and neutral sentiments dominating after 2014 compared to positive ones in 2010. Although the political identity of Estonian Russophones was for long not attached to Russia, the cultural attachments with Russia can dilute as the negative or neutral sentiments rise. The war in Ukraine brought a lot of ambiguity and uncertainty on Estonian Russophones cultural identity. The war in Ukraine could have been a significant enough exogenous shock to the idea of Russianness and Russian popular culture that it transmitted across borders. Nevertheless, it is important to note that the fact that all four reception markers were present throughout the studied years shows that Russophone minority in Estonia is not homogenous and has differing views on Russia and its popular culture as Significant Other for their identity. It has also been mentioned that the dominating sentiments could also be filtered by Estonian media, which has a final say at what opinions and discourses have a right to be published.

The change in interaction with the Significant Other, i.e., Russia and its popular culture, is expected to affect how Estonian Russophones view themselves – separate from Russian imperialist discourses, which also touch upon Estonian Russophones' attachment to the Soviet past. This would be especially interesting to trace also after 2022. Estonian Russophones' identity somewhat is still tied to the Soviet past but the change in meanings of the Soviet symbols that Russia and Russians are currently undergoing might break that tie in the long

term. Russian popular culture was affected by those meaning changes too. For instance, some Russian cultural figures, such as singer-songwriter SHAMAN, compare and almost equate WWII symbols and achievements to that of the Russian army in Ukraine. The stronger those narratives penetrate Russian popular culture representations that Estonian Russophones consume and produce, the more backlash is expected on Estonian Russophones' identity in relation to the Soviet past. Already now Russian speakers express their concerns in media over how they feel pushed away by Estonians for their attachments to Soviet history and Russia's media space. The decline in identification with the Soviet past can occur as a result of these pressures and as generations that have first-hand experience with the Soviet Union shrink. In case the younger generation of Estonian Russophones born after the collapse of the USSR continues to use Soviet monuments and artifacts or develops new ways to define their Russianness distinct from the Soviet past and Russian imperialist identity, then Estonian Russophones' collective identity will continue to live and interact with Estonian and Russian identities as Significant Others to their own identity.

## 5. Conclusion

The objective of this thesis was to study Estonian Russophones' identity through their interaction with the Significant Other, i.e. Russia, and monitor whether there was any change as a result of the high level of contestation of the identity and interactions with the Significant Other caused by an exogenous shock, i.e. the war in Ukraine. To put it differently, whether the exogenous shock resulted in a change of meanings that make up Russophone identity in Estonia. A large share of the previous studies researched Estonian Russophones using other methods and as part of the state integration programs and nation-building agenda. The literature has also lacked research looking at relationship between Estonian Russophones with Russia as a Significant Other. The surge of nationalism in postcolonial studies overshadowed the research on diaspora and transnational migrants' identity in the post-Soviet space. It was, thus, important to study the Estonian Russophones' identity based on the mass discourses and without pretheorizing data to see the intersubjective reality that Russophones live in. This thesis studied the Estonian Russophones' identity and its relations with Russia as a Significant Other during the war in Ukraine. The "Russian question", thus, also became more socially significant to research as it is widely discussed in countries with a large Russophone minority population also as a security concern because of Russia's aggression toward Ukraine.

To narrow down the scope of the research, I viewed Russian popular culture representations as Significant Other's domain commonly and easily accessible to and actively circulated in the Russian-speaking masses in Estonia. The interpretations of the Russian popular culture representations in Estonian Russian-language media served as an indicator of the Estonian Russophones' relationship with and to Russia as a Significant Other. This thesis answered the following research question: *How have the Russian popular culture representations changed in Russian-language Estonian media as a result of the crisis in Russia-West relations starting from 2014?*

This thesis conducted a discourse analysis of the Russian-language online media portal Delfi as one of the sources where meanings of Russian popular culture circulate and are consumed by the Estonian Russian-speaking community. Particularly Delfi was chosen as the most visited Russian-language media channel in Estonia. The discourse analysis implied methodology proposed by Hopf and Allan (2016) within their Making Identity Count framework. This method suggested conducting discourse analysis of texts while coding the received meanings into a quantitative database assigning valence to track the sentiment applied to a particular code

instead of pretheorizing and categorizing them prior to the data collection. Received meanings were categorized into genres only at the data analysis stage. The combination of qualitative and quantitative approaches helped to track identity discourses as they exist in an intersubjective environment among Russophones living in Estonia. The combination also helped to make the data comparable throughout 2010, 2014, 2020, and 2022 that were chosen for data collection and ensured that neither validity nor reliability was overlooked. The data for 2010 and 2022 were a part of the research project called “National identity and Estonian-Russian relations: a longitudinal study of elite and mass discourses”, while 2014 and 2020 data were collected separately. Analyzing texts prior to and during the Russian invasion of Ukrainian territories helped to trace the change in meanings attached to Russia and Russian popular culture.

The analysis showed that after 2014 and more so in 2022 there were high levels of contestation of Russianness among Estonian Russophones as a result of Russia’s aggression in Ukraine. In this regard, Estonian Russian speakers’ reception of *rossiyskaya* popular culture as well as identity were and currently are being questioned both in the national Estonian discourses and within Estonian Russophone discourses. If in 2010 Russian-language Delfi had a high number of mentions of the Russian popular culture representations, in 2014, 2020, and 2022 reporting, their overall number has been steadily decreasing. Moreover, Estonian Russophones attach and circulate different meanings after 2014 than in 2010. Russian popular culture representations had negative, ambiguous, and neutral sentiments dominating after 2014 compared to positive ones in 2010. Although the political identity of Estonian Russophones was for long not attached to Russia, the cultural attachments with Russia can dilute as the negative or neutral sentiments rise. The war in Ukraine brought up some ambiguity and uncertainty in Estonian Russophones cultural identity as the relationship with Russia are questioned within the community and in the Estonian national discourse.

After the war in Ukraine began Russian popular culture representations were often reported on with a neutral or ambiguous sentiment since there is now a divide among popular culture works in Russia. Thus, for instance, some cultural figures in Russia support the Russian government, while others oppose it and Estonian Russophones show confused reception of this fact as some do not want to see politics in popular culture. Although in 2022 some Russian popular culture figures were labeled as pro-war and anti-war in analyzed texts, it was emphasized that most of them had an anti-war stance. Moreover, as was illustrated through the example of sentiment to the Russian actor and screenwriter, Ivan Okhlobystin, those labels were skipped entirely and a

neutral sentiment took over in representations of the Russian popular culture figures during the most recent stages of the war in Ukraine. Some Estonian Russophones, thus, are expected to share this preference to focus on culture without politics as much as it is possible. The data analysis, however, also indicated a sharp decline in positive sentiment when it comes to Russian popular culture representations and a gradual rise in the negative sentiment. This is also argued to have been affected by the war in Ukraine and primarily the fact that Kremlin-aligned propaganda became more visible in Russian popular culture that gets influenced by it. The different reception of Russian popular culture shows that there is not one homogenous discourse in Estonian Russophones' views of Russia as a Significant Other. It is important to note that the fact that all four reception markers were present throughout the studied years shows that Russophone minority in Estonia is not a homogenous group and has differing views on Russia and its popular culture as Significant Other for their identity. It has also been mentioned that the dominating sentiments could also be filtered by Estonian media, which has a final say at what opinions and discourses have a right to be published.

The change in interaction with the Significant Other, i.e., Russia and its popular culture, affects how Estonian Russophones view themselves. Since Russian popular culture is affected by the war in Ukraine and some Russian artists compare the war in Ukraine to the Great Patriotic War, Estonian Russophones' identity somewhat still tied to the Soviet past is currently at a point of high contestation, which in the future might result in further identity shift of Estonian Russophones away from Russia as a Significant Other with more points of difference than similarity. As of now, some Estonian Russophones, especially the younger generation, are open to letting the Soviet past stay in the past and letting Soviet symbols like the Narva tank go. But others, largely the older generation who identify with the Soviet era are alarmed by the identity change that has occurred, and its potential future. The more pro-war narratives penetrate Russian popular culture representations that Estonian Russophones consume and produce, the more backlash is expected on Estonian Russophones' identity in relation to the Soviet past, especially since it affects the relationship with the another Significant Other – Estonian identity. The decline in identification with the Soviet past can occur as a result of these pressures and as generations that have first-hand experience with the Soviet Union shrink. In case the younger generation of Estonian Russophones born after the collapse of the USSR continues to use Soviet monuments and artifacts as the definition of their Russianness as suggested by Cole (2022), Estonian Russophones' collective identity will not merge into the

Estonian identity and keep a separate Estonian Russophone identity distinct from Estonian and Russian identities.

The theory and method used in this thesis can be used in studying other minorities as well, whether it be Russian speakers in Latvia or Kazakhstan, or other language minorities that have access to and actively consume own media streams in their language. The limitation of this thesis is, however, the fact that the chosen method and a news outlet source could not differentiate between different categories of Russian speakers, be it the Old Believers, Estonian Russians who were born and raised in Estonia, or the new migrants who came to Estonia after either the fall of the Soviet Union or the beginning of the war in Ukraine. Thus, although I tried to present all the different discourses present in the Estonian Russophones' social structures, the results might be perceived as too generalizing of such a diverse non-homogenous group. One other way to study a certain Russophone group using discourse analysis would be to select their immediate cultural works for analyzing how they express and exchange meanings. Other methods, like ethnography and interviews, are also suggested to supplement this thesis' results and focus on a specific group of Russophones in Estonia. Since this thesis was completed in 2022, it did not include but advises continuing the data collection and, in case of using discourse analysis, including more sources, also from different genres of text, in the following years in order to understand the identity changes better. Therefore, further research on Estonian Russophones' identity in relation to Estonian and Russian identities is suggested to understand the development of Estonian Russophones' identity that is constantly evolving and highly depends on interaction with its Significant Others. Subsequent research might also expand the pool of data or use methods like ethnography to supplement the findings of this thesis.

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