

BRIEF

DEMOCRACY,
'ALTERNATIVE REALITY'
AND ESTONIA'S
RESILIENCE

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Misconceptions, urban legends, social myths, conspiracy theories and toxic narratives, often holding deep and complex roots, have always managed to find a niche in different societies. Their pervasiveness and impact on the attitudes, perceptions, and behaviour of citizens are reliable indicators of societal resilience. And in the age of social media, their circulation is only becoming considerably more widespread and more dynamic and their impact amplified, leading to increased divisiveness, polarisation and loss of trust. These developments, in turn, erode societal cohesion and the ability of communities to cope with adversity. Hostile geopolitical players, including Russia, have found ways, meanwhile, to exploit this environment to advance their own strategic goals while domestic political actors use the salience of misinformation to further their pursuit of power by galvanizing and expanding their support base. This convergence of domestic politics and external threats makes the proliferation of these beliefs, myths, conspiracy theories, and detrimental narratives particularly perilous in the context of national security.

In March 2020, a public opinion survey was carried out in ten European Union member states, including Estonia, seeking to assess public attitudes towards democratic institutions and values, overall levels of satisfaction with the state of affairs, and perceptions of equality in each country.¹ Such surveys are fairly commonplace and, in Estonia, are performed regularly, thereby enabling reasonably sound inferences about the impact of adverse events and trends on societal resilience.² This particular comparative international study, however, also aimed to assess the degree of pervasiveness and entrenchment of various misperceptions, conspiracy theories, and toxic narratives. As the data collection included demographic data on the gender, age, education,

place of residence, and political preferences of respondents, it also provided invaluable insights on the particular segments of society that are most vulnerable to and impacted by 'alternative realities' propagated or even constructed by malignant actors. This brief highlights some of the key findings and takeaways from the results of the survey performed in Estonia.

SATISFIED, YET SCEPTICAL

In general, Estonians are quite **satisfied with their lives** (82%) and current **social standing** (71%). Nearly 60% of respondents believe that everyone has the **chance to succeed** in the country and the same number think that most people in Estonia **can be trusted**. Nevertheless, **not all groups share this optimistic sentiment**. Respondents from Central Estonia, those with lower levels of educational attainment, and people aged 55-64, in particular, express greater feelings of **socio-political alienation**. This is indicated by the fact that, compared to others, respondents in these groups were more likely to agree that their needs are not especially taken into account by the political system in Estonia. The vast majority of these groups (73%) also believe that nothing will change regardless of who holds the reins of government power.

Remarkably, 81% of respondents believe that some groups in Estonian society are **favoured over others**. The top three groups suspected of receiving preferential treatment include people with contacts to political elites (92%), higher income earners (89%), and people from the capital (82%). At the same time, only 21% and 9% of respondents suspected preferential treatment of migrants and minorities, respectively.

A total of 42% of those surveyed report **satisfaction with democracy** in the country, with 47% expressing **dissatisfaction**. Those distinctly dissatisfied include

people from Central Estonia, those aged 45-54, men, and those with lower levels of educational attainment. It is also noteworthy that nearly half of those dissatisfied express the intent not to participate in upcoming elections.

Almost two-thirds of Estonians (65%) agree that **liberal democracy with regular elections and a multiparty system** is the best governance model for the country. Respondents least supportive of democracy and instead more predisposed to the possibility of a system based on a strong and decisive leader without a parliament or elections, 17% of those surveyed, largely hailed from Central Estonia, held lower levels of educational attainment, and expressed less interest in participation in upcoming elections.

Not all political institutions are equally trusted in Estonia. The greatest level of disdain is directed towards political parties, government, and the mainstream media, with 72%, 52%, and 47% of respondents, respectively, expressing their **distrust** in these institutions. **The most trusted institutions**, meanwhile, include the police (87%), the armed forces (76%), and the courts and judiciary (69%).

Assessing the level of **freedom of the mainstream media** in Estonia, only 11% conclude that the media is completely free, with 53% indicating that the institution is rather free and 29%

not free at all. A total of 58% of respondents believe that the **government exerts the strongest degree of influence over the media** in Estonia, followed closely by oligarchs and prominent financial groups (56%). Respondents from Central Estonia, people aged 55-64, and those favouring Conservative People's Party of Estonia (EKRE) in elections are the most likely to believe that the media is not free.

In turning to **threats to personal identity and values**, respondents judged **migrants as the greatest threat** (56%). This threat perception particularly resonated among people aged 45-45, men, those with lower levels of educational attainment, people from Central Estonia, and supporters of EKRE.

On the other hand, a majority of respondents think that the following **do not threaten** personal identity and values in Estonia: the European Union (66%), Western societies and their way of life (62%), the United States of America (58%), people with a different sexual orientation (LGBTI) (50%). The prototypical profile of these respondents included people aged 18-34, those with university degrees, people from Northern Estonia, and supporters of the Estonian Reform Party.

DIFFERENCES IN BALANCING VARIOUS PRIORITIES

Wide gulfs were recorded between different societal groups in terms of their declared **willingness to trade away some of their rights and freedoms** (e.g. the freedom to travel, freedom to associate, free speech, etc.) for other priorities. Though hypothetical, such questions are telling and can portend **social divisions** and signs of **polarisation** in a country. It is critical, therefore, to analyse some of the notable differences between various demographic groups on these questions in Estonia.

In general, 48% are willing to trade away freedoms for **greater security** (43% are unwilling), 46% for a **better financial situation** (46% unwilling), and 42% for the preservation of Estonia's **traditional values** (47% unwilling). The prototypical profile of those willing to **trade freedoms for security** include people aged 65+, those with lower levels of educational attainment, people living in rural areas of Northern Estonia, and supporters of EKRE. Conversely, those unwilling to **trade away their**

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fundamental freedoms for security belong to the following representative groups: aged 18-24, holders of university degrees, people from Tallinn and Southern Estonia, and supporters of the Estonian Social Democratic Party.

Among statistically representative groups of respondents, the following **expressed a willingness to trade away freedoms for a better financial situation**: those aged 35-44, people with lower levels of educational attainment, people from Western Estonia, and supporters of EKRE. Those against, meanwhile, tended to include those aged 55-64, holders of university degrees, residents of Tallinn and Eastern Estonia (Ida-Viru county), and supporters of the Estonian Social Democratic Party.

Estonians supportive of **trading rights and freedoms for the preservation of Estonia's traditional values** can be statistically generalised into the following representative groups: people aged 65+, those with lower levels of formal education, people from rural areas in Western Estonia, and supporters of EKRE. The following societal groups, however, expressed a general preference **not to trade** their rights and

freedoms away for the preservation of Estonia's traditional values: young people aged 18-34, those from Tallinn, holders of university degrees, and supporters of the Estonian Social Democratic Party.

GLOBAL CONSPIRACIES AND LOCAL MYTHS

Overall, the survey data indicates that susceptibility to **various global conspiracies is quite low** in Estonia. A total of 59% of the respondent reject (16% accept) the statement that Jews have too much power and secretly control governments and institutions around the world. Around 44% of Estonians, meanwhile, disagree (37% agree) that world affairs, rather than being decided by elected leaders, is dictated by secret groups that aim to establish a totalitarian world order. And 42% of respondents, moreover, dismiss (26% agree) the conspiracy theory that the terrorist attacks on the World Trade Centre in New York in 2001 were planned and conducted by the American government rather than Al-Qaeda. When it comes to narratives related to national history, 22% believe (65% do not) that Estonia joined the USSR willingly and legally. This latter myth is shared more by people aged 55-64, those with lower levels of educational attainment, and supporters of the Estonian Centre Party.

There are, nonetheless, numerous other **unsubstantiated beliefs and misconceptions** on current affairs that are prevalent in Estonia. A total of 56% believe that the **EU and Brussels dictate**

Around 33% of Estonian respondents believe (51% do not) that **NATO is unwilling or incapable of defending Estonia militarily**. The prototypical profile of this group includes people aged 45-64, those with lower levels of formal education, people from Central Estonia, and supporters of the Estonian Centre Party. The counter viewpoint is generally shared among people aged 18-24 and 65+, holders of university degrees, those from Northern Estonia and Eastern Estonia (Ida-Viru county), and supporters of the Estonian Social Democratic Party. A similar proportion of the population, 30% of respondents, think (59% do not) that the **only purpose of NATO's presence in Estonia is to irritate and provoke Russia**. The generalised profiles of the representative groups that share or do not share this opinion is nearly identical to that described above.

While the survey examined questions that enabled cross-national comparison, in doing so, its major limitation was that it excluded some of the most prolific conspiracy theories, beliefs, narratives and misconceptions circulating locally and/or regionally. Among themes that have attracted 'alternative reality' proponents and resonated throughout Estonian society, for example, are the causes of the ferry MS *Estonia* disaster in the Baltic Sea in 1994, construction of the strategically important 'Rail Baltic' railway line, large-scale money laundering activities of Estonia-based banks, and perceptions of accelerating deforestation in the country. The survey also didn't probe other 'global themes' that have proliferated elsewhere and also reverberated in Estonia, including the introduction of 5G networks and the alleged risks of vaccinations. (As the survey had been completed before the outbreak of coronavirus pandemic, it also did not

look into the spread of conspiracy theories about the causes of the pandemic). Some of these themes have the potential to be turned into political and informational weapons that impede societal cohesion and trust, relations with allies, and even the domestic socio-political order. The reopened case of MS *Estonia* needs to be watched closely, in particular, given its sensitivity and potential for damaging trust between the government and society and between Estonia and Sweden—a key partner in the Baltic Sea region.³

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policies in the country with Estonia holding no say or influence. This should be seen in light of the fact that 57% of Estonians believe that the country has always been oppressed and **its people never able to chart their own path**. This sentiment is primarily shared among the following demographic groups: people aged 45-54, men, those with lower levels of formal education, people from Central Estonia, and supporters of EKRE. Those rejecting this misconception largely include people aged 18-24, holders of university degrees, people from North-Eastern (Ida-Viru county) and Southern Estonia, and supporters of the Estonian Social Democratic Party.

CONCLUSIONS

In light of the degree of satisfaction with democracy and governance in Estonia, there are grounds for optimism regarding the country's resilience. This sentiment is buttressed by survey findings indicating some of the most widespread global conspiracy theories have not gained much traction in Estonian society. Estonians, however, are not completely immune to narratives portraying their country's strategic choices—EU and NATO membership—as harmful or futile. There are also concerns raised regarding people's willingness to make (hypothetical) trade-offs on human rights, fundamental liberties, and security. In this vein, there are some existing and still emerging **intergroup differences** that could potentially augur the rise of detrimental polarisation and a weakening of societal resilience.

These differences—an appealing target and fertile ground for malignant influence operations—fall notably along lines related to **age, levels of educational attainment, overall welfare and life satisfaction, perceptions of inclusion, and geography**. Generally speaking, people from Central Estonia, those aged 45-64, and those with lower levels of formal education can be characterized as groups susceptible to and generally more receptive to conspiracy theories, toxic narratives, and disinformation campaigns. A majority of these groups, moreover, report a **higher level of perceived alienation** from socio-political life in Estonia, thereby further contributing to mistrust, insecurity, and apprehension that comes to be directed towards various issues in the country.

The survey, perhaps surprisingly, found no extreme attitudes or receptiveness to 'alternative reality' in North-Eastern Estonia (Ida-Viru County), an area home primarily to local Russian-speakers. These findings imply that although Russian speakers are often stereotyped and securitised because of their ethnolinguistic background and targeted by counter-disinformation measures from government and civil society, other groups may be even more prone to conspiracy theories and misinformation.

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Regardless, the concerns, grievances and perceptions of **all vulnerable societal groups** should receive adequate attention if further harm inflicted by fact-free and/or fact-twisting 'alternative realities' is to be averted. The role of **civil society**, in particular, should not be underestimated. The promotion of fact-based awareness, critical thinking, a sense of belonging, and buy-in to democratic values is impossible without **strong and active 'grassroots' leadership**. Equally important, however, is identifying the **real geopolitical beneficiaries** of cognitive and emotional manipulations of particular vulnerable groups in society. Their true motives, actions, networks and channels of influence in constructing or amplifying and then propagating falsehoods must be constantly brought into the spotlight of public scrutiny and the actors held accountable for their corrosive impact on Estonian resilience.

ENDNOTES

¹ The poll was conducted on a sample of 1,000 respondents using stratified multistage random sampling in the form of computer assisted personal interviewing (CAPI) or computer-assisted telephone interviewing (CATI). The profiles of the respondents were representative of the country by gender, age, education, place of residence and size of settlement. Respondents were also asked about their political preferences in the manner, which party they would vote for if there were elections next weekend. Collection of data in each country (Austria, Bulgaria, Czechia, Estonia, Hungary, Latvia, Lithuania, Poland, Romania and Slovakia) was coordinated by FOCUS, s.r.o. Conducted in the framework of the project organised by GLOBSEC and supported by the National Endowment for Democracy, the survey formed the basis of a report published in summer 2020. See Dominika Hajdu and Katarína Klingová, [Voices of Central and Eastern Europe: Perceptions of democracy & governance in 10 EU countries](#) (Bratislava: GLOBSEC, 2020).

² One of the most systematic longitudinal studies in Estonia is *Public Opinion and National Defence*, conducted for the Ministry of Defence. While its principal focus is set on defence, its wide-ranging questions cover such aspects pertinent to societal resilience as public trust in institutions, threat perceptions, attitudes towards various aspects of security and foreign policy, media consumption patterns, etc... See, for instance, report from 2019, [Avalik Arvamused ja Riigikaitse](#) [Public opinion and national defence] (Tallinn: Turu-Uuringute AS, 2019).

³ See "[Ratas: Estonia ferry wreck needs a new investigation](#)," ERR News/BNS, 28 September 2020; Jon Henley, "['Tell us the truth': hole found in sunken ship's hull proves us right, say families](#)," *The Guardian*, 4 October 2020.

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ACKNOWLEDGMENT

This brief was produced in close co-operation with GLOBSEC and with the support of National Endowment for Democracy.

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