

## **Semiotic Games and Domestic Geopolitics: Estonian Russophones During the War in Ukraine**

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**Abstract:** This contribution to the Forum analyzes narratives unfolding among Estonian Russian speakers who expose different attitudes towards the war in Ukraine. For this analysis the author selected several media platforms and public figures whose speaking positions are representative and typical for – and duly reflect – the entire spectrum of the current Russophone discourses in Estonia. The analysis singles out three distinct yet interconnected discursive positions that prominently feature in the Russophone milieu – pragmatic, popularly geopolitical and counter-normative.

**Keywords:** Estonia, Russian speakers, Russia, war in Ukraine, popular geopolitics

Since the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991 Estonia consistently pursued Russia-wary policy despite the multiple dependencies on Russia in many economic spheres and vulnerabilities related to a sizable Russophone – and very much Kremlin-oriented – minority, largely concentrated in the eastern county of Ida-Virumaa. It is not surprising that the overall political discourse in Estonia after the restart of Russia's war against Ukraine on February 24, 2022 is drastically intransigent towards the Kremlin. From the outset of the war the Estonian government and the parliament were among the strongest lobbyists for legally qualifying the Russian military intervention as an act of aggression, genocide and terrorism against Ukrainian population (Riigikogu 2022), and for opening EU membership perspectives for Ukraine. Estonia, along with the two other Baltic states, was pushing their EU and NATO allies for incrementally sanctioning Russia for its attack on Ukraine, and cheered Finland's and Sweden's eventual NATO membership as a confirmation of the validity and relevance of the previous Estonia's pro-Atlantic security posture.

In the meantime, Russia's aggression re-actualized what might be generally dubbed domestic geopolitics and, more specifically, a set of issues boiling down to the bumpy process of integration of local Russophones into Estonian society. In this respect, the war has reignited the old lines of division and alienation between the Estonian mainstream politics and the Russian minority that was fearful of being marginalized and ostracized as a group linguistically and culturally identifying itself with Russia. In March 2022 Mikhail Kõlvart (Kõlvart 2022), the mayor of Tallinn, admitted that Russians in Estonia are fac-

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ing hard times. Indeed, many Russian websites were banned, the level of diplomatic and consular relations between the two countries was lowered, the bulk of trans-border contacts with Russia, including in the spheres of construction projects, tourism (Nikolaev 2022) and culture, was cancelled. Apart from that, since the restart of the war Estonian universities refused to admit Russian students, the Estonian government cancelled earlier issued Schengen visas for Russian travellers, and the *Isamaa* ('Fatherland') Party proposed to divest Russian citizens from voting rights at municipal elections and from possessing arms. Many Estonian Russophones disliked the ban on pro-war visual symbols, including the Z-stuff and St. George ribbons, introduced before the Victory Day celebration on May 9, 2022.

The negative reactions to the policies of the Estonian government were paralleled by sceptical attitudes to Ukrainian war refugees exposed by some local Russian speakers. In particular, the mayor of Narva Katri Raik (Raik 2022) acknowledged that the inflow of Ukrainian refugees is provoking "social tensions" in this predominantly Russophone city. The public exposure of slogans "Glory to Ukraine" was a matter of annoyance and irritation in some of Russian language media (Delfi 2022a), and the police had to intervene in a number of cases of fake news about Ukrainian refugees (ERR 2022a). However, KaPo, the Estonian security police, claimed that there is no "fifth column" in the country (ERR 2022b). Moreover, the Estonian government referred to the rise of applications for Estonian citizenship from local Russophones, many of whom have publicly spoken against the war in Ukraine, including the head of the Russian Orthodox Church in Estonia (ERR 2022c).

Within this context, of particular interest are narratives unfolding among Estonian Russian speakers who expose different attitudes towards the war in Ukraine. For this analysis I picked up several media platforms and public figures whose speaking positions are representative and typical for – and duly reflect – the entire spectrum of the current Russophone discourses in Estonia. Importantly, most of these speakers identify themselves as "pro-Estonian" (even "Estonian patriots"), which attests to the variety of meanings and the concomitant semiotic games that such tropes as "pro-Estonian" and "pro-Russian" – as well as "anti-Estonian" and "anti-Russian" – imply and signify. In my analysis I single out three distinct yet interconnected discursive positions that prominently feature in the Russophone milieu – pragmatic, popularly geopolitical and counter-normative.

Let me start with the "*business-as-usual*" type of Russia-centric pragmatism. One of its proponents is the newly created "Vmeste / Koos" group led by Aivo Peterson and Oleg Ivanov who in their public pronouncements argue that EU sanctions against Russia should be lifted due to their harmful effect on the Estonian economy. They assume that Estonia was artificially dragged into the war, while "our European partners keep trading with Russia and then resell to us Russian products, which looks like a robbery" (KOOS / Vmeste 2022c). Within this type of pragmatic narrative communication with Russia plays a pivotal role. In a video shot in front of the Russian Embassy in Tallinn encircled by a fence of self-made posters protesting against the war and accusing Russia of military crimes,

Aivo Peterson said: “Don’t spit into a well unless you have a new one. Whatever happens, we will ultimately need to negotiate with Russia anyway” (KOOS / Vmeste 2022a). This type of rhetoric paves the way for a self-positioning of “Koos / Vmeste” as a reasonable interlocutor with Russia and a “party of peace” that cares about Estonia’s survival against the backdrop of global geopolitical calamities.

The Russia-sympathetic pragmatics, insisting on communication with the Kremlin, in the meantime discursively legitimize Putin’s security standpoint. Thus, Leonid Karabeshkin (Karabeshkin 2022) supposed that “one needs to take seriously Russian security concerns that explain a possible resort of the Kremlin to nuclear weapons”. On another occasion he claimed that by proposing negotiations to Ukraine Russia demonstrated itself as “a peace loving state, which finds understanding among many countries” (ERR 2022d).

Another practically-oriented narrative emerged as a critical reaction to the policy of the Estonian state aimed at locking the border for Russian citizens as a reaction to atrocities committed by the Russian army in Ukraine. This measure was substantiated on both moral and practical grounds, yet was lambasted by a part of local Russophones. In particular, Yana Toom, a member of the European Parliament representing the Center Party (*Keskerakond*), spoke out against the cancelation of Estonian visas for Russian citizens, and assumed that “we resemble those regimes with which we struggle” (Toom 2022a). She admitted that Russia is waging a bloody war, but refused to support its characterization as genocide and terrorism. She also argued that it is only Ukraine that may prevent the war from escalating, and that Putin has to be allowed to “save the face” (Toom 2022b). When asked about how she personally helped Ukrainians, she responded by saying that she sent “books for children in Russian language”, since “it is Russians who flee from Ukraine” (Toom 2022c).

The second cluster of arguments identifiable in Russophone narratives is grounded in what might be dubbed *popular geopolitics*, a set of vernacular – and often speculative and conspiratorial – perceptions and imageries of international relations and world politics. This type of discourse is sustained by strong anti-Western sentiments. Thus, Ivanov and Peterson justify their business-like pragmatism by expectations of NATO’s and the EU’s prospective collapse, and the alleged future prevalence of the Eurasian Economic Union. In a video filmed conversation with a Russian economist Mikhail Khazin, known for his engagement with conspiracy theories, the two co-chairs of “Koos / Vmeste” justified their critical stance towards Ukraine by claiming that this country is ruled by the United Kingdom and therefore is a pawn in the hands of those who allegedly wish to demolish the EU and weaken its major stakeholders (KOOS / Vmeste 2022d). During the parliamentary hearings Ivanov refused to acknowledge Russia as the aggressor, preferring its neutral characterization as “a participant in the conflict”. Therefore, the war in Ukraine is seen not as Russia’s unilateral and unprovoked intervention, but as an element of great power geopolitics from which Estonia as a small country needs to stay aloof. In their imagination, Estonia ought to detach itself from the Euro-Atlantic West since it is mistreated within both EU and NATO as a second-rank and insignificant country.

The attractiveness of this utopian imagery of a Switzerland-type of neutrality includes reincarnation of the old idea of Russia's neighbors as "bridges" and "communicators" between West and East, which in the light of Russia's aggression against Ukraine might be seen as a call for preserving a grey area of a security vacuum. The validity of the neutrality argument was undermined by Sweden's and Finland's decision to join NATO that "Koos / Vmeste" qualified not as a reactive response to Russia's invasion of Ukraine, but as the opening of the second front against Russia. Their only international interlocutor who shared this narrative was Johan Backman (Backman 2022) known as the most vociferous pro-Putin propagandist in Finland whose conspiratorial narrative is grounded in a stark anti-EU and anti-NATO standing, coupled with lambasting of the Finnish government as pawns that betray interests of their country.

This simplistic narrative is likely to aim at reaching ordinary Russian speakers whose abstract regrets about the war do not extend to sharing – at least partly – a sense of despair and shame for the atrocities committed by Russia in Ukraine (Ivanov 2022). This discursive positioning looks quite ambiguous: it implies, on the one hand, a soft distancing from the Russian official mainstream, yet on the other hand, a refusal to solidarize with the condemnation of Putin regime's military crimes. Such a manoeuvring results from a defensive search of a de-politicized niche that would prevent Estonian Russophones from being accused of playing a role of Putin's proxies and in the meantime would allow them to remain a legitimate part of the Estonian political scenery. Similar narratives might be seen in other countries with sizeable Russophone diaspora, including Germany.

A third narrative might be called *counter-normative* in the sense that it focuses on challenging the very model of Estonian nation state as ethno-centric and divisive, and on militating for a specific and autonomous Russian normative space with its own memory politics, language, religion and educational practices. The Russophone counter-normativity turns into a confrontational rhetoric towards Estonian authorities whose attitude towards those Russians who prefer to keep their identity, in the opinion of Ivanov and Peterson, resembles "genocide" (KOOS / Vmeste 2022b). The "Koos / Vmeste" group that proclaimed itself "Estonian patriots" dubbed the demolition of Soviet military monuments after the restart of the war "a provocation", and suggested all Estonians to learn from Russian speakers how to respect their history and identity.

By the same token, referring to the removal of memorial plaques commemorating the Great Patriotic War from the streets of Narva, Mikhail Stal'nukhin, a prominent member of the Center Party and of Estonian parliament, dubbed Estonian government "overt Nazis and fascists" since "they are fighting against those who fought against fascism" (Delfi 2022b). He was seconded by Filip Los', stage director of the Russian Theatre in Tallinn, who in the aftermath of the Russian intervention in Ukraine complained about Russophobia in Estonia. Both speech acts attracted public attention and resulted in dismissal of Stal'nukhin from the Center Party and Los' from the Russian Theatre, as well as from the Estonian Union of Filmmakers. However, their allegations against Estonian government were supported by some openly pro-Putin voices (Klenskij 2022) who speculated that the

removal of the Soviet tank from the outskirts of Narva attested to the rise of fascism in Estonia, and regretted that protests against the relocation was peaceful (Kaljulaid 2022). Similar allusions can also be found in other publications of Russophones residing in Estonia – for example, an article about a more robust introduction of Estonian language in the educational system was illustrated by a photo from a Nazi concentration camp on which incarcerated children were supposed to metaphorically visualize the contemporary generation of Russophone pupils in Estonian schools (Kurg 2022).

The counter-normative narrative extends to the whole spectrum of historical issues central for Estonia's relations with Russia. Ivanov and Peterson reached full consensus with Russian historian Nikolay Starikov (Starikov 2022) in whitewashing Russian imperial past, glorifying Peter the Great's war with Sweden, denying the Soviet occupation of the Baltic states and justifying deportations. In this and similar dialogues with Russian interlocutors (KOOS 2022e) "Koos / Vmeste" blamed Ukraine for the war and accused the Estonian government of dragging Estonia into a confrontation with Russia.

## Conclusions

This analysis may be concluded with three main points. First, pro-Kremlin and Putin-sympathetic narratives in Estonia are a combination of home-grown voices reflecting the state of minds within a significant part of the local Russophones and direct projections of Russian propaganda. This explains a hybrid nature of these narratives: many of them cannot remain within one of the above categories. Thus, arguments promoted as a business-like pragmatism at a certain point merge with conspiratorial thinking and the ensuing self-victimization, expose a predisposition to a counter-hegemonic normativity, and require communication with pro-Kremlin media in Russia.

Secondly, the war in Ukraine made many speaking positions quite movable and changeable. Yana Toom, for instance, had publicly renounced her earlier anti-sanction policy and admitted the fact of Russia's aggression against Ukraine, with the corresponding changes in the audience: if before the war she appeared at talk shows hosted by the staunchest Putin's propagandist Vladimir Solovyov, nowadays, as she said, "in my cell phone are calls from [an oppositional – Author] Dozhd' TV and invitations from the Khodorkovsky channel" (Toom 2022a).

Third, from this analysis one may conclude that "pro-Russian" stance in Estonian political context functions as a floating signifier: it is contextual, polysemic, and open to multiple meanings. For instance, Toom's claim that the Estonian government operates "in a tandem with Putin" (Toom 2022c) is meant not only to detach herself from semiotic associations with the Russian regime, but also to build an alternative imagery portraying her opponents as allegedly trying to divide the Estonian society as much as the Kremlin wishes.

Based on that, it would be fair to conclude that Russia's intervention in Ukraine significantly modified the extant speaking positions within the Russophone diaspora in Estonia and created new ones. The narratives reshaped by the war differ from each other in terms of their content and arguments, and also in terms of their key audiences that include Estonian authorities, European institutions, like-minded foreign interlocutors and Russian language media. Within this diverse discursive sphere there is an ample space for narratives borrowed from Russian mainstream media and adjusted for local consumption, as well as for those that have been locally produced yet tied with a broader semiosphere of the "Russian world".

### **Acknowledgments**

Previous version of this article was presented and discussed at the workshop "Russia Loyalists in the Time of War: Still a Romance?" held at the University of Tartu and co-organized with the Fletcher School of Diplomacy on September 1, 2022.

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