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One Country, Two Polarised Audiences: Estonia and the Deficiency of the Audiovisual Media Services Directive

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Abstract

This article argues that until recent times, the Estonian media policy has mainly been interpreted as an economic issue and it did not account for the strategic need to build a comprehensive media field to serve all groups in society. This has happened despite the fact the Estonian media policy is in line with the European Union (EU) media policy, which should ensure freedom of information, diversity of opinion and media pluralism. Findings of the Estonian case study show that despite these noble aims, Estonia has two radically different information fields: one for Estonian speaking audiences and one for Russian speakers. Events in Ukraine have added to the democratic media policy paradigm a question of national security. Now it is a challenge for the policy makers to unite polarised media fields and how to minimise the impact of Russian propaganda. On the EU level, one supportive measure could be a revision of the Audiovisual Media Service Directive.

Keywords

Estonia; media for minorities; public service broadcasting; Russian language media

Issue

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1. Introduction

To establish the background for this paper, a brief overview of Estonian population trends is useful. Before World War II, Estonia was a relatively homogenous nation-state; 88.1 per cent of Estonia's 1.3 million inhabitants were Estonians (Estonian Statistics, 2015). Estonian was the national language. The war led to drastic changes: from the 1940s onwards, after being incorporated into the Soviet Union, Estonia lost nearly one-fifth of its population due to mass repression, war activities and political exile. Mass immigration from the Soviet Union's member republics, especially from the Russian Federation, made Estonia's population multi-national in a few decades (Tiit, 2011). The newcomers were mainly Russians, Ukrainians and Belarusians, who spoke Russian. In the Soviet Union, the Russian language had the status of being the language of communication between and within different nations, mean-

ing that in practice Russian was used as the official language. The Soviet era, which lasted for 45 years, brought about the development of two language communities: Estonian and Russian. In 2014 from a total of 1.3 million people, 29.6% of the Estonian population has Russian as their mother tongue (Tammur, Äär, & Meres, 2015). The article confronts the issue of the differences of the media fields of the two languages and researches the consequences of the separation and discusses the possible reasons for the situation. Based on the collected data and analyses, the article makes concrete suggestions for the improvement of the European media policy.

Iosifidis (2013) argues that cultural policy theories understand media and communication from a national perspective and largely neglect the global element, whereas Manning (1999, p. 138) contends that one aspect of globalisation refers to the transnational regulatory systems and the diffusion of a liberal political ide-

ology and institutional forms. Iosifidis (2013) suggests globalisation processes, including market-liberalism and free trade policies, have ended up in a situation where the regulatory agencies shift away from public interest measures and normative principles towards more rigorous, yet narrow, economics-based assessments of market power. This is another reason for the emergence of competition policy as the preferred mechanism to manage issues in media and communication at the expense of sector-specific structure and content (Iosifidis, 2013). Van Cuilenburg and McQuail (2003) argue that the nature of public interest has changed and that new communication policies aiming to serve the public interest are biased towards economic values. Presently, the forces of economic rationality and globalisation have undermined the original national culture of public service broadcasters (Lowe & Martin, 2014). This change in media policy has put extra pressure on policy makers (Curran, 1997; Harcourt, 2005), especially when discussing the remit and funding of public-service broadcasting (Picard, 2002). Set by the Estonian Public Broadcasting Act (2007), one of the obligations of Estonian Public Broadcasting (ERR) is “to meet the information needs of all sections of the population, including minorities”. Today, ERR broadcasts in Russian on one radio channel and one daily TV news programme, and thus has arguably enabled ERR to fulfil its obligation towards the minority language audience. Debates consider possible broader offerings, such as a Russian language TV channel, mainly as an economic issue (Ajustrust Konsultatsioonid, 2007). This output aimed to serve 29.5 per cent of the Estonian total population (1.3 million) who declare that their native language is Russian (Estonian Statistics, 2015). In addition, 16 per cent of Russian-speaking people claim they do not understand Estonian at all (Lauristin, Vihailemm, Ainsaar, & Heidmets, 2011). However, as Jufereva and Lauk (2015, p. 63) state, “Russian-language media are not typical minority media which aim to maintain the language and cultural traditions of a minority, since Russian is the official language spoken by millions right across the border, and satellites make a variety of Russian television channels available”.

There are positive examples of cross-border television that is progressive with cultural consequences (Hesmondhalgh, 2013), but the separation of Russian-speaking audiences from the Estonian information field caused by foreign Russian channels creates many challenges for Estonian society. Gitlin (1999) argues whether democracy requires a public or a set of publics, a public sphere or “separate public sphericules”. The latter are possible, but according to the Habermasian theory of the public sphere, these sphericules must also have a higher communication space or sphere, otherwise there will be isolated “islands of different groups” in society. There is the argument that if there are no ongoing negotiations among members of

different groups, media can act as a facilitator. Media policy should be developed to support these communication processes and to secure media stakeholders’ adequate performances. Jõesaar, Jufereva and Rannu (2014) argue the development of Russian-language media in Estonia after regaining the country’s independence can be seen as a market failure in an important sector of everyday life. According to Integration Monitoring, 50 per cent of Russian speakers cannot follow media (print, online, radio and television) in Estonian because of an insufficient knowledge of the language (Vihailemm, 2011). Data from studies (Jõesaar, 2014; Saar Poll, 2014; Seppel, 2015) show that linguistically different population groups are in different information fields. These information fields are separated not only by linguistic but also national borders. Any argument must admit that the language division has its roots in the Soviet era, when the non-native population settling in the USSR’s republics consumed mostly pan-Soviet media. The establishment of liberal media principles in re-independent Estonia ended undemocratic supervision and gave media independence.

2. Challenges of the Small Market

One of the prerequisites to the aforementioned change was economic independence subjected to free market principles. While media companies targeting an Estonian language audience were able to emerge, the situation for the Russian-language media in the Estonian free market, due to the smaller target audience, proved disadvantageous. Interests of Russian speakers are mainly served by Raadio 4, the Russian language public-service radio channel. The limited size of the target audience, around 350,000 people, makes broadcasting in the Russian language an unprofitable activity for commercial broadcasters; therefore, there are no private nationwide television programmes in Russian. The amount of viewers of national or local Russian language broadcasts is insufficient to rouse the interests of advertisers. In addition, cross-border cable and satellite TV offer fierce competition, making Russia’s TV channels accessible to the Russian-speaking audience in Estonia. This however does not fulfil the duties of a democratic media system. Information and debate on the development and functioning of Estonia’s society could only come from domestic media. When the availability of creative resources, market conditions and an economic atmosphere are not favouring commercial media, this kind of market failure should be balanced by public service media (Croteau & Hoynes, 2001; Lowe & Nissen, 2011). As already mentioned, ERR has a limited Russian language output. The situation will change after ERR receives extra funding from the state budget for its third TV channel, Russian language ETV+, which will be launched in autumn 2015. After more than two decades of political debate

around the need for a Russian language TV channel (Jõesaar et al., 2014), the ground-breaking political decision was not made on the basis of the recognition of the minority language group's information needs, but was driven by the events in Ukraine and increasing wave of Russian propaganda. In the summer 2014, Estonia was dragged into a conflict situation, which Lonsdale (2004) and Snow (2003) describe as an information war, one declared by Russia on the Western world. Therefore, the issue now is not only about the enhancement of the media system in a democratic society serving all population groups, but also the recent events that have put this issue into the national security domain. Furthermore, the problem of how to handle Russian propaganda and how to avoid its influence on citizens is an EU wide responsibility. In Estonia and in other Baltic states, the influence of Russian propaganda on the Russian speaking audience is a major concern. There is no mutual understanding about the role and possible impact of Russian language television programmes, yet Russian television channels do enjoy significant popularity among Russian speaking audiences (Saar Poll, 2014; Seppel, 2015). How, by whom and to what extent programmes in the EU members states for language minorities are created is a political issue, which is influenced by internal and external security questions, overall economics and EU media policy. The overall aims of the Pan-European media policy are to preserve cultural diversity and safeguard media pluralism. The main European legislative document, the Audiovisual Media Services Directive (AVMSD) and its predecessor The Television Without Frontiers Directive, does not take into account country-specific circumstances, such as geopolitical location, size of the national media market, economic conditions and the cultural and historical contexts. However, these are important factors, which have a strong influence on media development and performance. In countries

with insufficient resources, a market-driven media system is incapable of presenting a full range of political and economic interests in the public domain, especially for language minorities.

3. Broadcasting in Estonia: Two Isolated Information Spheres

From the 29th of July to the 5th of August, 2014, the research company Saar Poll OÜ conducted a national public opinion study (Saar Poll, 2014). In the form of telephone interviews, 1000 people aged 15–74 were surveyed, of whom 505 were Estonians and 495 were Russian speakers. For both groups, the proportional random sampling method was the selection process. Saar Poll conducted the interviews in either Estonian or Russian. To compensate for the differences that arose in the process of comparing the results of the questionnaire and the statistical model, the outcome was weighed across the socio-demographic indicators. In compiling the model of socio-demographic indicators, data from the population register was used, as it was provided on 30.01.2014. The study was commissioned by the Estonian Open Foundation. The topics of the survey were current events, following news and the media, and the importance of different sources of information for the residents of Estonia. One of the research questions of the study was to compare the media worlds of Estonians and Russian speakers.

Results show that Estonia has experienced challenges in providing pluralistic and reliable content for society as a whole, especially for the Russian-speakers and that the frequency of following the news among Estonians and Russian speakers is relatively similar (Figure 1). As expected, there are differences in the sources of information that Estonians and Russian speakers consider important for following current events (Figure 2).

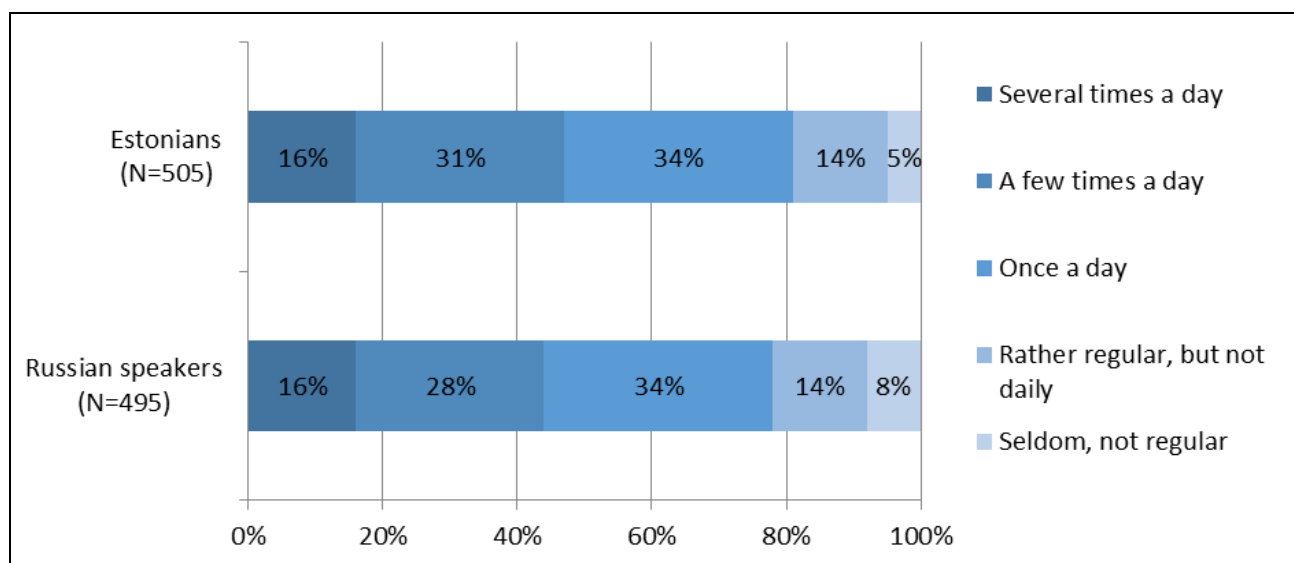


Figure 1. Frequency of following the news. Source: Saar Poll (2014).

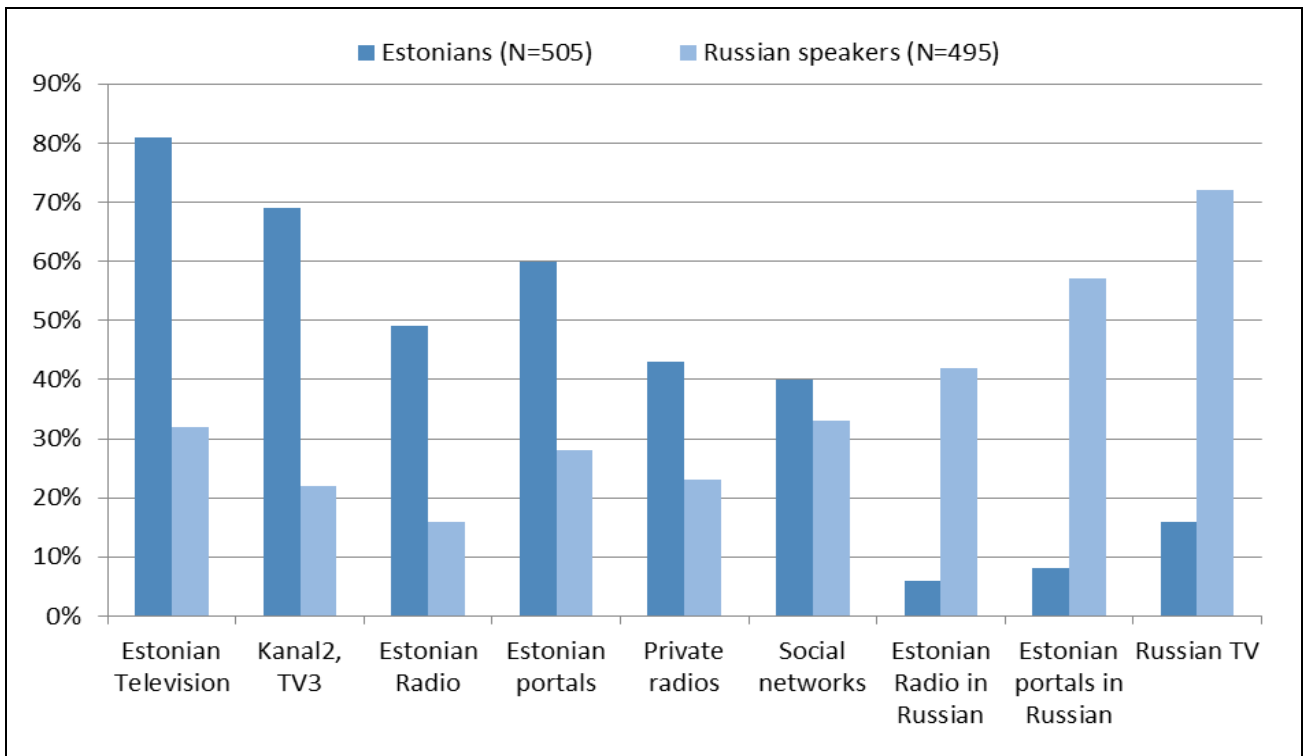


Figure 2. Importance of the media channels among Estonians and Russian speakers. Source: Author’s calculation based on Saar Poll (2014).

Television is the prime source for both Estonians and Russian speakers. But, whereas Estonians consider Estonian Television to be the main source of information (81 per cent of respondents consider it very important or rather important), Russian speakers look Russian state television channels (72 per cent of respondents consider it very important or rather important).

Thus, it is possible to argue that the EU media policy aiming to guarantee media pluralism and diversity needed for the development of democracy has failed those member states, in which a significant proportion of the population is strongly attracted to the non-European information field.

The Saar Poll study (2014) also asked participants who, in their opinion, was responsible for shooting down the Air Malaysia flight over eastern Ukraine. A large share of respondents did not know how to respond to the question (40 per cent of Estonians and 47 per cent of Russian speakers). This is evidence of how, regardless of ethnicity, significant proportions of population have difficulty forming an opinion based on the information that they have. Among those respondents with an opinion, a distinct difference is present (Figure 3):

- Estonian respondents stated that either the Russian government (34 per cent of respondents) and/or the Ukrainian separatists (31 per cent of respondents) were responsible.
- Russian speaking respondents primarily stated the government of Ukraine was responsible (38 per cent of respondents).

Another market specific issue is the control of the concentration of media ownership (Doyle, 2002). In Estonia, control over market dominance and measures to minimise the risk caused by the dominant players are absent. Consequently, Russian state channels hold a dominant and almost monopolistic position among Estonia’s Russian-speaking audience (Figure 4).

The conclusion is that Estonia has experienced challenges in providing pluralistically reliable content for the Russian-speaking part of society. The result indicates that a significant proportion of the Russian-speaking audience is not inside the national internal information sphere, but is in the Russian state information sphere. Therefore, in Estonia, two radically different information fields exist: one is in line with information provided and shared by free and independent European journalism and the other is in favour of Russian state propaganda. Paradoxically, the legal framework established by the AVMSD guarantees the existence of both. The EU media regulation is aimed to be universal and it does not take into account market-specific aspects. The AVMS Directive should help to achieve the objectives of the EU. The Directive should ensure freedom of information, diversity of opinion and media pluralism, but as shown earlier the Directive has failed to be an efficient tool to protect EU citizens against disinformation from third-party countries, which is disseminated with the aim of gaining political influence over member states’ citizens.

The EU media policy is not solely responsible for the situation, because it leaves much of the decision making power to the member states. Estonians have cho-

sen liberal and minimalistic media regulation. The positive outcome of the media policy is that Estonia's press freedom index is high (Freedom House, 2013). On the negative side, the media offering to the Russian-speaking audiences is insufficient. Due to market failures, the Estonian private sector is unable to serve language minorities with pluralistic media content. Suc-

cessive governments have paid little attention to this issue and have shown only moderate desire to grant the necessary funds for the ERR; for which reason ERR has been unable to fulfil its remit to serve minority interests. Today, the situation has changed, but it is evident that it will be hard for the ERR at once to rectify deficiencies of the past two decades.

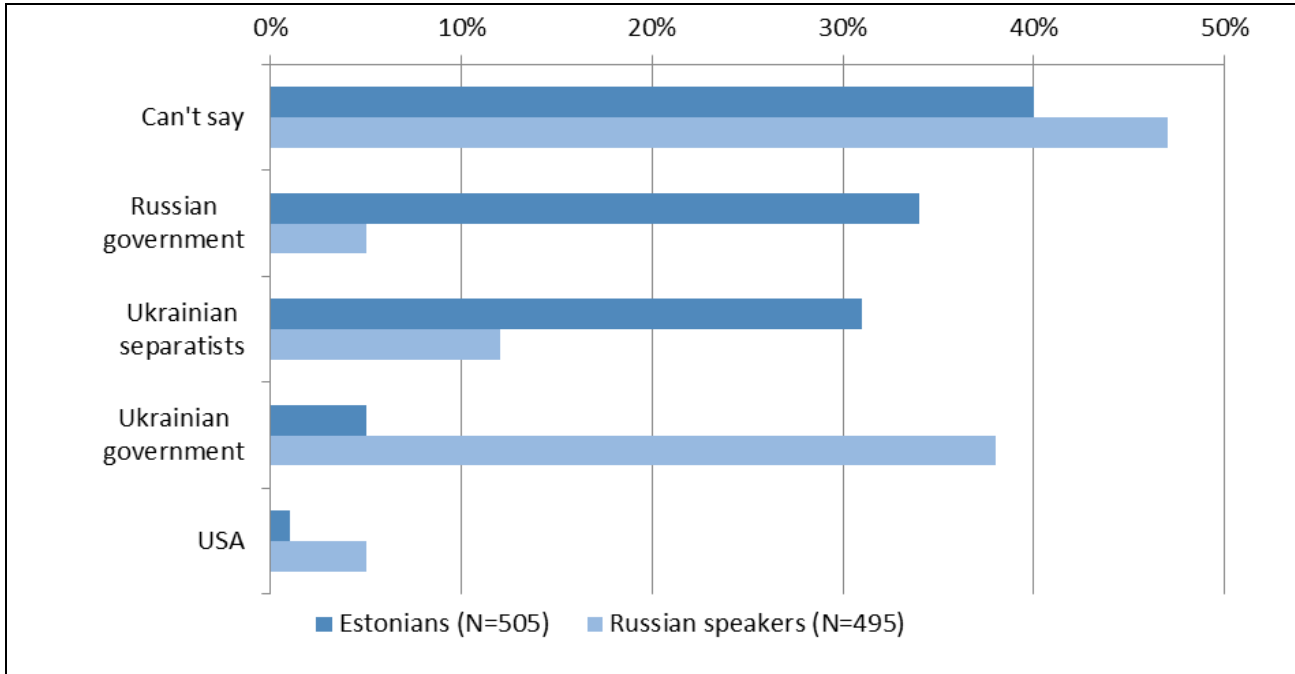


Figure 3. Response to the question: In your opinion, who is responsible for shooting down the Air Malaysia plane? (N = all respondents. Since each respondent could give more than one answer, the sum of percentage can be over 100). Source: Saar Poll (2014, Figure 19).

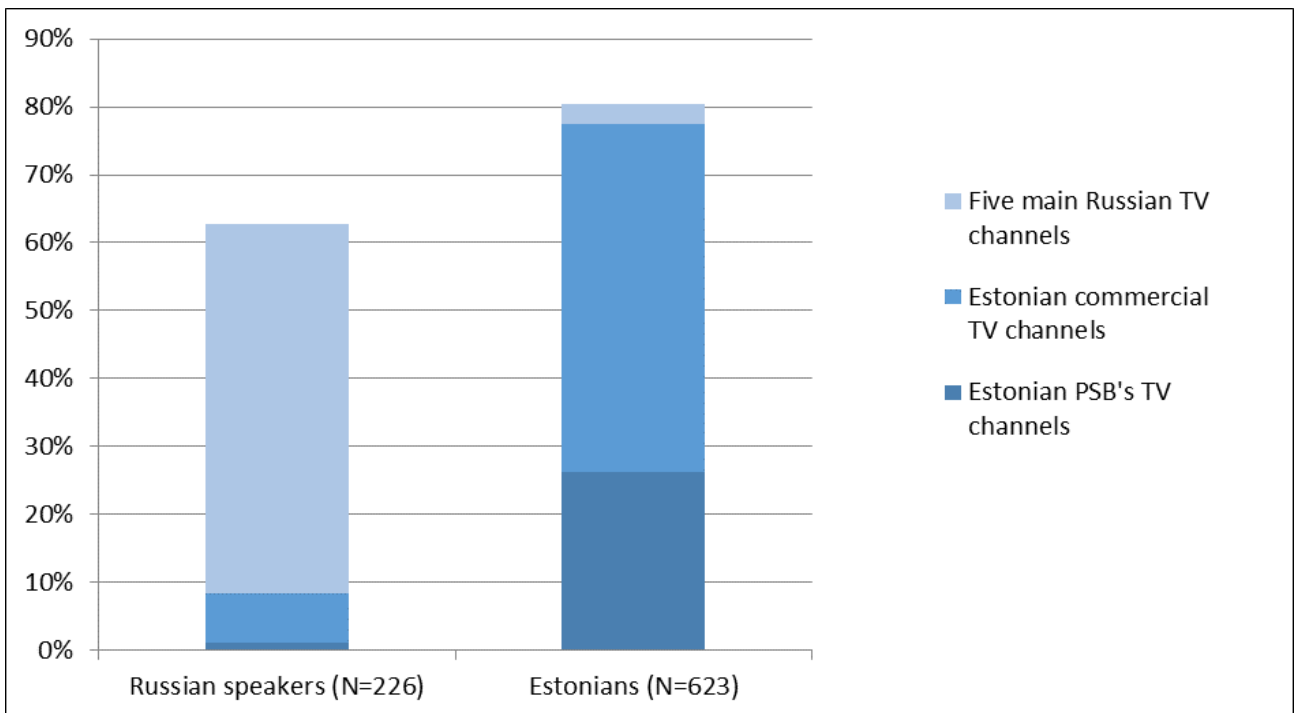


Figure 4. Average weekly share of viewing in Estonia in 2014. Age group 4+, Estonians and Russian speakers. Source: Author's calculations based on TNS Emor data (2015).

This article argues that the Estonian government's "idealisation" of market forces, which is supported by the EU's media policy and driven by a common market ideology, has limited the offering of quality local content and does not take into account media companies' actual abilities to provide a large range of media services for all of society.

4. Conclusions

In conclusion, the AVMSD should be revised to prevent unfair competition that stems from third-party countries. In addition, tools should be developed to avoid undue media concentration and to compensate for market failures. The unfair competition posed by the rebroadcasting of Russian television programmes should actually go under competition law, but it is extremely difficult to take any action against third-party country broadcasters on that legal basis. In case competition law is hard to implement, other measures should be targeted to reinforce the Estonian audiovisual media sector; in particular, public service media should be developed. Additional financial resources should help the ERR to make the transition from a traditional public service broadcasting (PSB) company into a public service media company, introducing new innovative services on all platforms (Ibrus & Ojamaa, 2014) and to better serve the interests of the Russian-speaking population. On the EU level, there are no binding mechanisms dictating the minimum funding level a member state should guarantee for the PSB. There are no EU financial instruments, as there are, for example, solidarity funds for infrastructure development dedicated to the enhancement of the public service media. Decisions on the remit, funding model and funding level of PSB are left to a member state.

Without the support of the EU's strongly binding legal instruments, Estonia's PSB would lack the funding required to achieve the same powerful and legitimate position as Western European and Nordic PSBs (EBU, 2015). Under these circumstances, instead of the European Commission's concerns of possible violations of the state aid regulation in the context of overfunding PSBs (European Commission, 2009), there should be legal instruments to ensure that PSBs are not underfunded. In cases of underfunding, it is clear that PSB remits might not be fulfilled, as citizens' rights to receive democratic and pluralistic content are not protected.

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Conflict of Interests

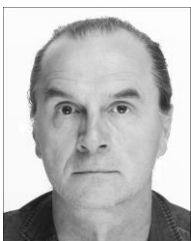
The author declares no conflict of interests.

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