

LSE MEDIA POLICY PROJECT

One Country, Two Information Fields: Estonia as the Battleground for the Information War

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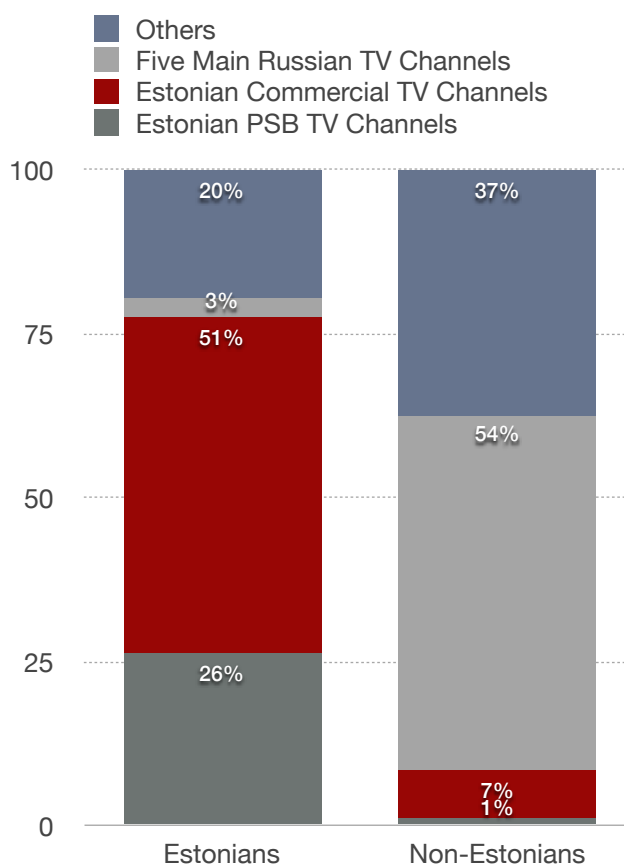
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The AVMS Directive should help to achieve the objectives of the European Union (EU). The Directive should ensure freedom of information, diversity of opinion, and media pluralism. The question is whether the Directive is also an efficient tool when disinformation from third countries is disseminated with the aim of gaining political influence over the member states' citizens.

The EU's liberalisation of media policies and its content quality bias towards economic efficiency has resulted in a situation where, in some small national markets, the most profitable broadcasting business models are based on the re-broadcasting of Russian state-controlled TV programs and sales of advertising these channels. The EU's aim of securing free movement of capital and services has in reality ended up supporting the dissemination of Russia's propaganda. Re-broadcasters of Russian TV channels are selling commercial airtime on Estonian market and the money they earn will leave Estonia, thus weakening the Estonian audiovisual industry. These actions can be seen as politically motivated price dumping in the advertising market.

This business model is supported by the Russian state and serves Russia's political agenda. Due to unfair competition and market failures, the Estonian private sector is not able to serve language minorities with pluralistic media content. Ruling governments have paid little attention to this issue and possess only a moderate desire to grant the necessary funds for Estonian Public Broadcasting (ERR); this has not enabled ERR to fulfil its remit to serve minority interests. This text 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, limits quality local content and does not take into account media companies' actual ability to provide a large range of media services. Without the support of the EU's strongly binding legal instruments, Estonian public service broadcasting lacks the funding required to achieve the same powerful and legitimate position as Western European and Nordic public broadcasters. In these circumstances, instead of the EU Commission's concerns of overfunding of



Average weekly share of viewing in Estonia in 2014.
Age group 4+. Estonians and non-Estonians.

PSBs, and looking for possible violation of the state aid regulation, there should be EU legal instruments to ensure that PSBs are not underfunded. In cases of underfunding it is clear that PSB remits might not be fulfilled and minorities' rights to receive democratic and pluralistic content are not protected.

First Baltic Channel

(Первый Балтийский канал (ПБК))



- Licensed by Ofcom UK as Mir Baltic
- Registered in Latvia
- Re-broadcasts Russia's ORT with "window" of local news
- Owned by Russian government

Should we be concerned about this situation?

The answer lies in the results of a public opinion survey that was commissioned by the Open Estonian Foundation¹, which included questions on the importance of different sources of information for residents of Estonia.

Concerning types of media, television is the preferred media choice for both Estonians and non-Estonians, but when following current events, the sources of information considered important by Estonians and non-Estonians are different:

- For Estonians, Estonian Television (PSB) is their main source of information, with 81% of respondents considering it very important or rather important.
- For 72% of non-Estonian respondents, the most important sources of information are Russian (state) television channels (e.g. PBK, RTR Planeta Baltic, NTV Mir or Ren TV Estonia).

The study participants were also asked who, in their opinion, was responsible for shooting down the Malaysian passenger airplane in the Eastern part of Ukraine. Among both Estonians and non-Estonians a large share of respondents did not know how to respond to the question (40% of Estonians and 47% of non-Estonians). This is evidence of how, regardless of ethnicity, a very large proportion of people have difficulty forming an opinion based on the information that they

have. Among those respondents with an opinion, a distinct difference is present:

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

The findings of the survey indicate that two radically different information fields exist in Estonia: the Estonian language promotes European values, while the Russian language promotes "Putin's values". Paradoxically, the legal framework established by the AVMSD guarantees the existence of both.

In conclusion, the Audiovisual Media Services Directive should be revised to prevent unfair competition that stems from third countries. Also, 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 programs should actually go under competition law, but it is extremely difficult to take any action against third countries broadcasters on that legal basis. The Creative Europe program cannot provide a permanent solution to the problem of Estonia's uncompetitive production and broadcasting industries, although it might offer some short term relief. Any long term solution should ensure that the legal framework, and conditions for the use of state aid, guarantees sufficient funding of PSB. ^{LSE}

¹ SaarPoll (2014) Current events and different sources of information. Tallinn http://oef.org.ee/fileadmin/user_upload/Current_events_and_different_sources_of_information_ED__1_.pdf