

# Tackling media distrust among audiences in Latvia and Estonia:

## Recommendations for Latvian and Estonian media professionals and media policymakers

How does the wider social, cultural and political context shape people's attitudes towards media and journalism?

Jānis Juzefovičs, Anastasija Tetarenko-Supe, Mihhail Kremez

### Summary

A qualitative study by Rīga Stradiņš University (RSU) in spring 2025 explored beliefs about media and journalism among audiences in Latvia and Estonia. Through participants' personal stories about their own lives, society, politics, as well as media and journalism, researchers examined how broader social, cultural, and political contexts shape people's beliefs about media and journalism. Many perceive media and politics as intertwined, with journalism serving political interests – a view particularly common among Russian-speakers. Their distrust of Latvian and Estonian media often stems not only from their geopolitical sentiments but also from resentment over the ethnic and language policies of the Latvian and Estonian governments. Overall, the media are seen as driven by political and commercial motives, prioritising profit over public service. Economic struggles and feelings of marginalisation further fuel anti-establishment and anti-media sentiment. Building on the qualitative data, in early 2026, audiences in both countries were surveyed to explore the distribution of popular beliefs about media and journalism. Insights from both the qualitative study and survey research underpin recommendations aimed at strengthening public trust in journalism.

### Context

In recent years, growing distrust and a cynical attitude towards media and journalism have been spreading more rapidly among media audiences in Latvia and Estonia. It is not only political identities and ideological leanings but also social identities, experiences, and perceptions vis-à-vis the wider social world that shape people's beliefs towards media institutions. To properly understand how people make sense of media, we must first understand how they make sense of their own day-to-day lives and the social, cultural, and political context within which they live. Studying these processes through a non-media-centric and open-ended approach has helped us develop recommendations for media professionals and policymakers on overcoming media distrust among audiences in Latvia and Estonia.

### Methodology & Findings

To understand how the beliefs that people in Latvia and Estonia hold about media and journalism are shaped by the wider social, cultural and political context, during April-May 2025, 15 study participants in Latvia and 15 study participants in Estonia were invited to write four short essays on their own life, Latvian or Estonian society, politics, and media and journalism. Researchers at Rīga Stradiņš University then selected fragments from these essays and asked study participants to comment on them further during individual qualitative interviews.

Drawing on the thematic analysis of both essay texts and interview texts, researchers have identified the dominant narratives people employ to talk about media and journalism and how these narratives are informed by those they use to talk about their own life, society and politics. Later, in February 2026, researchers conducted a survey to assess how widespread these narratives are among audiences in both countries (see Graph 1 and Graph 2).

# Beliefs about media and journalism among audiences in Latvia (%)

In Latvia, freedom of speech does not exist. It is not possible to freely express one's views about different topics.

In Latvia, freedom of speech exists. Everyone can freely express their views on different topics.

Family language	Fully agree	Rather agree	Rather agree	Fully agree	These issues are not important to me	Hard to say
Latvian	12.5	23.2	37.6	15.8	3.7	7.2
Russian	38.6	26.0	17.3	7.2	2.5	8.4
Latvian and Russian	29.2	26.4	23.0	6.4	3.7	11.4

Media in Latvia are under government control.

Media in Latvia are politically independent.

Family language	Fully agree	Rather agree	Rather agree	Fully agree	These issues are not important to me	Hard to say
Latvian	19.9	31.1	28.0	5.1	4.2	11.7
Russian	31.9	40.7	8.4	6.7	3.8	8.4
Latvian and Russian	34.4	31.4	9.8	6.3	4.9	13.2

There are forbidden, taboo topics in Latvian media, which journalists avoid discussing.

There are no forbidden topics in Latvian media; journalists are free to discuss any subject.

Family language	Fully agree	Rather agree	Rather agree	Fully agree	These issues are not important to me	Hard to say
Latvian	21.3	35.3	22.6	4.4	3.5	13.0
Russian	43.5	34.9	11.0	3.4	1.9	5.3
Latvian and Russian	36.7	27.1	13.1	3.6	4.7	14.9

Latvian media devote too much attention to the coverage of the war in Ukraine.

Latvian media cover the war in Ukraine to a sufficient extent.

Family language	Fully agree	Rather agree	Rather agree	Fully agree	These issues are not important to me	Hard to say
Latvian	18.9	19.9	28.6	19.2	2.6	10.9
Russian	36.6	15.9	18.7	7.7	3.7	17.5
Latvian and Russian	36.8	16.1	21.7	9.3	3.7	12.5

Latvian media exaggerate threats to Latvia in relation to the war in Ukraine.

Latvian media provide adequate coverage of threats related to the war in Ukraine.

Family language	Fully agree	Rather agree	Rather agree	Fully agree	These issues are not important to me	Hard to say
Latvian	14.0	15.9	33.7	17.7	2.6	16.2
Russian	38.2	18.7	18.5	6.7	1.8	16.0
Latvian and Russian	32.3	20.5	15.0	8.1	5.3	18.8



Funded by the European Union  
NextGenerationEU



RSU

**Latvian media are one-sided in their coverage of the war in Ukraine; “one truth” dominates.** **Latvian media provide different views on the war in Ukraine.**

Family language	Fully agree	Rather agree	Rather agree	Fully agree	These issues are not important to me	Hard to say
Latvian	10.2	28.7	29.1	9.0	3.6	19.3
Russian	37.7	24.3	13.2	5.1	4.3	15.4
Latvian and Russian	23.8	26.5	14.3	8.7	5.3	21.4

**The opinion of opposition political forces is not sufficiently represented in Latvian media.** **In Latvian media, the opinion of opposition political forces is represented to a sufficient extent.**

Family language	Fully agree	Rather agree	Rather agree	Fully agree	These issues are not important to me	Hard to say
Latvian	11.4	19.8	27.6	11.0	8.8	21.4
Russian	20.7	36.2	11.6	6.4	5.6	19.5
Latvian and Russian	22.6	20.5	13.3	5.2	14.1	24.3

**Latvian journalists provide information in line with the interests of the governing political forces.** **Latvian journalists provide information independently of the interests of the governing political forces.**

Family language	Fully agree	Rather agree	Rather agree	Fully agree	These issues are not important to me	Hard to say
Latvian	18.5	28.4	22.2	7.0	5.1	18.8
Russian	40.3	29.0	13.0	2.2	1.3	14.2
Latvian and Russian	33.4	25.8	13.2	2.9	5.5	19.3

**Latvian media do not sufficiently represent the problems of ordinary people.** **Latvian media represent the problems of ordinary people to a sufficient extent.**

Family language	Fully agree	Rather agree	Rather agree	Fully agree	These issues are not important to me	Hard to say
Latvian	24.1	29.2	24.6	7.3	2.7	12.0
Russian	34.5	31.4	20.2	2.7	0.8	10.5
Latvian and Russian	41.1	26.0	12.2	6.3	2.5	11.9

**Latvian media contribute to the formation of negative attitudes towards the Russian language and culture.** **Latvian media, when expressing views about the Russian language and culture, defend national interests.**

Family language	Fully agree	Rather agree	Rather agree	Fully agree	These issues are not important to me	Hard to say
Latvian	15.1	18.5	27.7	15.6	6.3	16.8
Russian	56.3	16.9	6.6	5.5	3.9	10.9
Latvian and Russian	41.5	21.3	11.4	5.8	3.6	16.3

Latvian media divide society; they set Latvians against Russian-speakers.

Latvian media unite society; they show what Latvians and Russian-speakers have in common.

Family language	Fully agree	Rather agree	Rather agree	Fully agree	These issues are not important to me	Hard to say
Latvian	16.2	20.4	26.2	11.6	5.1	20.5
Russian	46.2	27.6	8.5	2.2	1.2	14.3
Latvian and Russian	39.1	20.6	12.4	6.6	2.5	18.9

Latvian media create exaggeratedly loud, screaming, disturbing headlines to attract attention.

Latvian media create neutral, informative headlines that reflect the actual content of the article.

Family language	Fully agree	Rather agree	Rather agree	Fully agree	These issues are not important to me	Hard to say
Latvian	32.4	31.4	15.4	3.9	4.4	12.5
Russian	40.7	29.0	11.2	4.0	1.8	13.2
Latvian and Russian	39.4	22.7	13.3	4.0	4.9	15.7

There is too much negative, bad news in Latvian media.

Latvian media balance positive and negative news in accordance with what is happening in the country and around the world.

Family language	Fully agree	Rather agree	Rather agree	Fully agree	These issues are not important to me	Hard to say
Latvian	21.7	31.2	23.1	6.5	3.2	14.2
Russian	27.9	27.8	26.3	4.4	4.5	9.2
Latvian and Russian	29.4	26.3	20.8	4.7	3.6	15.3

During the Covid-19 pandemic, Latvian media were one-sided; "one truth" dominated.

During the Covid-19 pandemic, different views were provided in Latvian media.

Family language	Fully agree	Rather agree	Rather agree	Fully agree	These issues are not important to me	Hard to say
Latvian	31.8	23.0	21.8	6.9	3.6	12.9
Russian	31.3	28.2	13.9	2.8	5.1	18.8
Latvian and Russian	38.8	19.6	10.6	7.1	5.3	18.7

# Beliefs about media and journalism among audiences in Estonia (%)

In Estonia, freedom of speech does not exist. It is not possible to freely express one's views about different topics.

In Estonia, freedom of speech exists. Everyone can freely express their views on different topics.

Family language	Fully agree	Rather agree	Rather agree	Fully agree	These issues are not important to me	Hard to say
Estonian	9.5	25.3	34.8	19.9	4.3	6.3
Russian	31.7	30.1	15.7	10.5	4.9	7.1
Estonian and Russian	27.3	31.4	19.9	12.7	2.2	6.6

Media in Estonia are under government control.

Media in Estonia are politically independent.

Family language	Fully agree	Rather agree	Rather agree	Fully agree	These issues are not important to me	Hard to say
Estonian	10.0	30.2	30.6	14.4	4.7	10.1
Russian	27.2	37.6	15.6	10.3	1.2	8.1
Estonian and Russian	13.5	27.4	34.2	8.9	2.1	14.0

There are forbidden, taboo topics in Estonia media, which journalists avoid discussing.

There are no forbidden topics in Estonian media; journalists are free to discuss any subject.

Family language	Fully agree	Rather agree	Rather agree	Fully agree	These issues are not important to me	Hard to say
Estonian	11.4	30.0	30.6	11.6	5.1	11.3
Russian	31.7	30.0	8.8	3.0	1.2	25.2
Estonian and Russian	19.3	32.3	18.6	7.2	6.1	16.5

Estonian media devote too much attention to the coverage of the war in Ukraine.

Estonian media cover the war in Ukraine to a sufficient extent.

Family language	Fully agree	Rather agree	Rather agree	Fully agree	These issues are not important to me	Hard to say
Estonian	21.5	18.5	31.9	17.1	3.8	7.2
Russian	42.5	19.3	12.9	11.5	3.3	10.5
Estonian and Russian	29.1	19.4	27.4	8.7	5.1	10.3

Estonian media exaggerate threats to Estonia in relation to the war in Ukraine.

Estonian media provide adequate coverage of threats related to the war in Ukraine.

Family language	Fully agree	Rather agree	Rather agree	Fully agree	These issues are not important to me	Hard to say
Estonian	14.8	22.5	31.2	15.0	3.8	12.7
Russian	40.1	17.7	13.8	14.8	1.9	11.8
Estonian and Russian	27.6	15.8	28.2	12.0	5.9	10.6



Funded by the European Union  
NextGenerationEU



RSU

**Estonian media are one-sided in their coverage of the war in Ukraine; “one truth” dominates.** **Estonian media provide different views on the war in Ukraine.**

Family language	Fully agree	Rather agree	Rather agree	Fully agree	These issues are not important to me	Hard to say
Estonian	6.8	28.6	35.5	11.0	4,7	13,4
Russian	16.9	22.4	32.6	5.1	3,1	20,0
Estonian and Russian	15.5	29.2	28.5	6.4	1,5	18,8

**The opinion of opposition political forces is not sufficiently represented in Estonian media.** **In Estonian media, the opinion of opposition political forces is represented to a sufficient extent.**

Family language	Fully agree	Rather agree	Rather agree	Fully agree	These issues are not important to me	Hard to say
Estonian	8.8	20.2	32.1	12.8	7.8	18.3
Russian	16.6	23.5	26.1	9.0	1.3	23.5
Estonian and Russian	4.3	25.0	25.5	5.8	7.4	32.0

**Estonian journalists provide information in line with the interests of the governing political forces.** **Estonian journalists provide information independently of the interests of the governing political forces.**

Family language	Fully agree	Rather agree	Rather agree	Fully agree	These issues are not important to me	Hard to say
Estonian	14.6	27.1	26.0	10.0	6.0	16.3
Russian	36.9	22.7	20.0	3.0	6.3	11.2
Estonian and Russian	22.4	22.7	22.3	6.4	5.7	20.5

**Estonian media do not sufficiently represent the problems of ordinary people.** **Estonian media represent the problems of ordinary people to a sufficient extent.**

Family language	Fully agree	Rather agree	Rather agree	Fully agree	These issues are not important to me	Hard to say
Estonian	22.6	30.1	24.7	10.8	3.1	8.7
Russian	23.7	37.7	17.9	11.0	4.8	4.9
Estonian and Russian	30.0	27.9	21.5	7.9	5.5	7.3

**Estonian media contribute to the formation of negative attitudes towards the Russian language and culture.** **Estonian media, when expressing views about the Russian language and culture, defend national interests.**

Family language	Fully agree	Rather agree	Rather agree	Fully agree	These issues are not important to me	Hard to say
Estonian	7.2	19.6	31.7	13.1	7.2	21.2
Russian	27.9	32.9	20.5	8.7	0.7	9.4
Estonian and Russian	17.4	30.4	23.0	11.8	3.0	14.4

Estonian media divide society; they set Estonians against Russian-speakers.

Estonian media unite society; they show what Estonians and Russian-speakers have in common.

Family language	Fully agree	Rather agree	Rather agree	Fully agree	These issues are not important to me	Hard to say
Estonian	8.1	18.9	33.6	11.6	6.0	21.8
Russian	36.4	25.7	25.5	3.8	0.7	8.0
Estonian and Russian	28.9	26.0	19.3	9.5	1.4	14.8

Estonian media create exaggeratedly loud, screaming, disturbing headlines to attract attention.

Estonian media create neutral, informative headlines that reflect the actual content of the article.

Family language	Fully agree	Rather agree	Rather agree	Fully agree	These issues are not important to me	Hard to say
Estonian	31.5	37.7	15.4	2.1	3.7	9.5
Russian	41.5	18.2	13.2	7.5	1.9	17.8
Estonian and Russian	34.7	31.5	12.7	4.3	6.1	10.8

There is too much negative, bad news in Estonian media.

Estonian media balance positive and negative news in accordance with what is happening in the country and around the world.

Family language	Fully agree	Rather agree	Rather agree	Fully agree	These issues are not important to me	Hard to say
Estonian	22.8	33.2	26.3	4.3	2.9	10.3
Russian	27.6	32.3	15.5	9.2	3.6	11.9
Estonian and Russian	19.0	19.4	26.0	10.8	1.4	23.3

During the Covid-19 pandemic, Estonian media were one-sided; "one truth" dominated.

During the Covid-19 pandemic, different views were provided in Estonian media.

Family language	Fully agree	Rather agree	Rather agree	Fully agree	These issues are not important to me	Hard to say
Estonian	33.5	23.6	20.7	7.5	3.6	11.0
Russian	23.5	29.8	13.0	10.0	1.2	22.5
Estonian and Russian	17.8	24.6	18.9	6.9	3.9	27.9



Funded by the European Union  
NextGenerationEU



RSU

## Conclusions

- Audiences in both countries, and Russian-speakers in particular, see media and politics as one field: journalism is not seen as autonomous from the political field, but subjected to political instrumentalisation.
- It is not only their geopolitical leanings, different from the government's position and views of the ethno-linguistic majority, but also their resentment over the government's ethnic and language policies that make Russian-speakers reject Latvian/Estonian politics and, by extension, Latvian/Estonian media.
- Along with political instrumentalisation, it is commercial logic seen as explaining the functioning of Latvian/Estonian media. Media are perceived as oriented towards the maximisation of profit.
- The economic hardships that one faces create the feeling of being left at the margins of society – this, in turn, feeds anti-establishment sentiments and subscription to the anti-media discourse.
- Experiences with media and journalism during the Covid-19 pandemic shape the ways audiences make sense of media today during the geopolitical crisis.

Read more about the project on the [Riga Stradiņš University website](#).

## Recommendations for media professionals

- When reporting on crises such as the war in Ukraine and the Covid-19 pandemic:
  - Prioritise accuracy, context, and solutions over fear-driven, speculative, sensationalist coverage.
  - Strengthen public understanding and resilience rather than fuel fear, panic, confusion, and fatigue.
- Eliminate clickbait and misleading headlines; ensure headlines reflect the content accurately.
- Balance negative news with solution-oriented, explanatory, and inspiring stories.
- Instead of overly reproducing the political, official agenda and voices:
  - Scrutinise those in power: along with news reporting, invest in investigations, analysis, debates, and commentary.
  - Broaden the range of perspectives and voices – experts, NGOs, business, and ordinary citizens – presented.
  - Not exclude but engage with minority, oppositional, or alternative narratives and voices by analysing, contextualising their claims, and, if necessary, exposing misinformation and manipulation.
- Continuously monitor and assess the diversity of voices and opinions presented, especially in the public media.
- Encourage closer collaboration between editors and journalists producing content in Latvian/Estonian, and those producing content in Russian.
- Use journalism to build mutual understanding among socially and ideologically divided audiences.
- Avoid amplifying divisive, offensive political rhetoric; provide the necessary context and counterinterviews.
- Communicate openly about media operations, journalistic processes and editorial decision-making to enhance media literacy and understanding of the work of media and journalists.

E.g.

- How are media funded, and how is editorial autonomy preserved?
- How does public media allocate its funding, and how effective is this expenditure?
- Why do private media organisations ask to be paid money for the content?
- How are various editorial decisions made?
- Is self-censorship an issue at your media organisation? How do you deal with it?
- How does journalists' work differ from the work of social media bloggers?
- Invest in sustained, trustworthy relationships with audiences to reinforce credibility and the understanding of media work.
- Demonstrate the impact of journalism on policymaking, the accountability of those in power, and public life more generally, to highlight its democratic value.



Funded by  
the European Union  
NextGenerationEU



RSU



# Recommendations for policymakers

## To the Ministry of Culture:

- Through media policy initiatives, provide support to media organisations that prioritise the production of such content, which is in line with the recommendations provided to media professionals above.
- Through media literacy campaigns, projects, and other initiatives, promote:
  - understanding of how the media work (e.g., funding, editorial autonomy, selection of information sources, fact-checking, journalists vs social media bloggers);
  - understanding of how social media content is produced (e.g., commercial, political interests of bloggers);
  - dialogue between journalists and their audiences, transparency of media work (e.g., “open editorial meetings”, a special editor position aimed at building a relationship with audiences).

## To the PSM Council, PSM Board, and the PSM ombudsman:

- Prioritise the production of such content in the public media, which is in line with the recommendations provided to media professionals above.
- Invest in the development of public media – society relationships, promotion of transparency (e.g., regular audience feedback programme on the radio, “open days”, “public media week”).
- Conduct regular, systematic research of the diversity of voices and opinions offered in the public media (e.g., representation of political position vs opposition, different social groups).

These recommendations have been prepared as part of the Scientist Grant ‘Making Sense of Media: A Non-Media-Centric and Open-Ended Approach to the Study of Media-Related Experiences and Perceptions’ (No. RSU-ZG-2024/1-0007), which is carried out under the project ‘RSU Internal and RSU with LASE External Consolidation’ (No. 5.2.1.1.i.0/2/24/1/CFLA/005). The project is funded by the European Union Recovery and Resilience Facility and the state budget of the Republic of Latvia.

The views and opinions expressed are, however, those of the author(s) only and do not necessarily reflect those of the European Union or European Commission. Neither the European Union nor the European Commission can be held responsible for them.



Funded by  
the European Union  
NextGenerationEU



RSU