

# LANGUAGE PROFICIENCY AND INTER-ETHNIC RELATIONS

## FACTSHEET

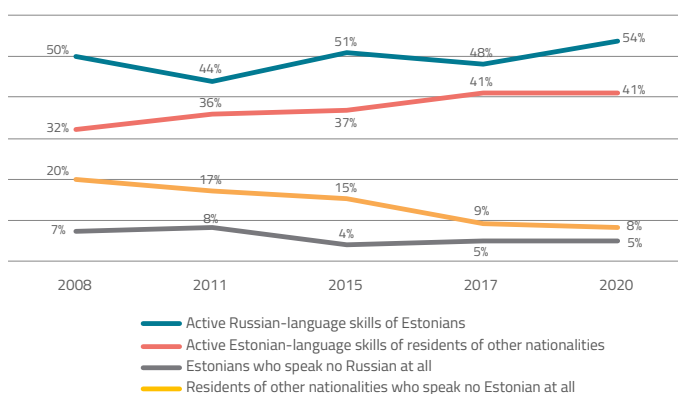
### ESTONIAN AND RUSSIAN LANGUAGE PROFICIENCY OF ESTONIAN RESIDENTS

The results of the Monitoring the Integration of Estonian Society 2020 (EIM 2020) confirm that the Estonian language is increasingly valued in Estonia.

Compared to 2008, the general Estonian language proficiency of residents of other nationalities has improved. It's positive that the share of people whose language proficiency is active has increased to 41% (from 32% in 2008): they understand and speak Estonian, and write in it. The share of residents who don't speak any Estonian has also clearly decreased (from 20% in 2008 to 8% in 2020).

On average, Estonians rate their Russian proficiency as somewhat better (54% speak it fluently or actively) than people of other nationalities rate their proficiency in Estonian.

**Figure 1. Active Russian proficiency of Estonians and active Estonian proficiency of residents of other nationalities (responses "I speak fluently" and "I understand, speak, write"; also the variant added in 2020) and lack of language proficiency in 2008, 2011, 2015, 2017 and 2020, %.**



Source: EIM 2008, 2011, 2015, 2017, 2020

The (Estonian and Russian) language proficiency of Estonian residents differs significantly according to regions. For instance, only one-fifth of Ida-Viru County residents of other nationalities had active Estonian skills in 2020.

Half of Tallinn residents of other nationalities speak Estonian, and this indicator has improved considerably more than in Ida-Viru County when compared to 2008 (35%).

The Estonian language proficiency of people of other nationalities is strongly related to their age: young people speak Estonian better than older ones. In 2020, the share of those in this group who spoke Estonian was 62% among people up to 34 years of age and only 27% among people at least 65 years of age.

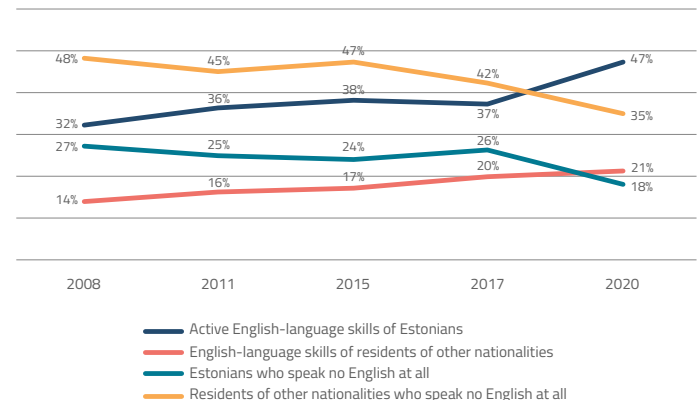
In the last 12 months, Estonian language proficiency has improved the most among people aged at least 65 (17 percentage points) and somewhat less among people at least 34 years of age (less than 10 percentage points). The situation with the Russian language proficiency of Estonians is the opposite: older people speak Russian better and there are fewer people who speak the language in the younger age group.

### ENGLISH LANGUAGE PROFICIENCY OF ESTONIAN RESIDENTS

English language proficiency has improved rapidly from 2008–2020, but the difference between the ethnic groups living in Estonia has remained similar: the number of people who understand, speak and write in English (active language skills) is almost twice as high among Estonians.

However, the share of people of other ethnicities who don't speak English has dropped to 35% in comparison with 2017 (42%), which is close to the same indicator of Estonians.

**Figure 2. Active English proficiency of Estonians and residents of other nationalities (native language, also responses "I speak fluently" and "I understand, speak, write") in 2008, 2011, 2015, 2017 and 2020, %.**



Source: EIM 2008, 2011, 2015, 2017, 2020

### LANGUAGE USE AT WORK AND IN FREE TIME

Estonians are using English as a language of work or studies more than Russian for the first time in 2020, and this trend is likely to get stronger. Estonians have been using Russian increasingly less since 2015. All Estonian residents use their native languages in their free time. This has remained unchanged from 2008–2020.

The use of another language – Russian or Estonian, respectively – during free time has decreased among Estonians and people of other nationalities alike over the years, including the use of Estonian among people of other ethnic groups, which has dropped from 50% to 33%.

Thus, Estonians and people of other nationalities communicate increasingly more with people in their own linguistic space and also spend their free time with them, but they also use other languages more in relation to their work and studies.

## INTER-ETHNIC CONTACT

Whilst the share of Estonians who communicate with speakers of other native languages is almost equal in the age groups of 15–34 and 35–64, it's the youngest age group (15–34) among residents of other nationalities that has the most contact with Estonians. This trend gives reason to hope that young people of other nationalities will integrate better with Estonians and that residents of different ethnicities will interact more with each other in the future. People of different nationalities interact closely with each other at work and at school and when they are each other's neighbours. There is considerably less contact across ethnic groups in families, during free time and on the Internet, although online communication increased considerably in 2020.

## CONTACTS AND LANGUAGE PROFICIENCY

There is a connection between the number of communication partners and Estonian language proficiency. The residents of other nationalities who don't speak Estonian have probably not interacted much with Estonians in the last six months, but residents of other nationalities whose language proficiency is active interact with Estonians in three areas of interaction on average. (According to the EIM, these areas of interaction are the workplace or school/university, family, friends, neighbours, free time and the Internet.)

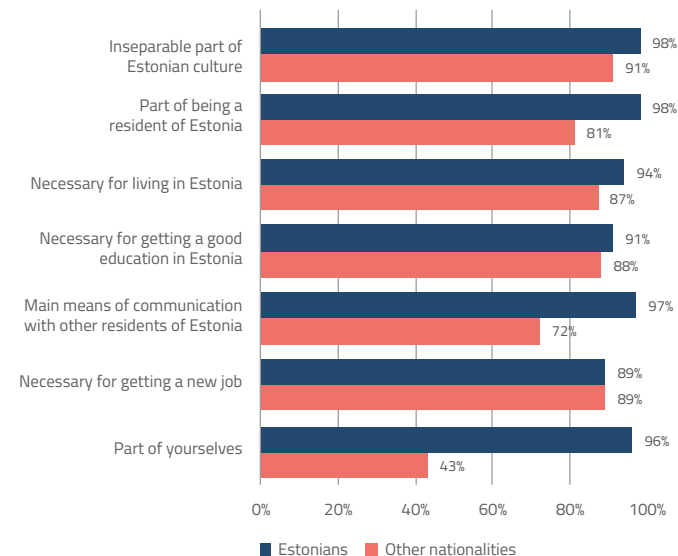
Estonians with active Russian skills interact somewhat less with residents of other nationalities: in at least two areas of interaction. Thus, the connection between Russian language proficiency and interaction with people of other nationalities is somewhat weaker.

## VALUING THE ESTONIAN LANGUAGE

People were asked within the scope of the EIM to name the reasons why Estonian is important to them. The Estonian language is important to Estonians (96%) because it is part

of themselves – the Estonian identity. Most people of other nationalities consider Estonian an important part of being a resident of Estonia. Although the residents of other nationalities consider Estonian less important as a language of communication that Estonians, they value the Estonian language as a tool almost equally to Estonians: they need it to get a good education and job, and to live in Estonia.

**Figure 2. Share of respondents who (strongly and somewhat) agree with the statement that the Estonian language is important to them for the given reasons, based on ethnic groups, %.**



Source: EIM 2020

In 2020, the understanding of Estonians and people of other nationalities of the importance of Estonian language proficiency in acquiring an education and getting a good job was very similar in all regions of Estonia.

## ATTITUDE TOWARDS SPEAKERS OF OTHER LANGUAGES

An analysis of people's attitudes towards different language groups indicated that in general, residents of other nationalities view people whose native language is Estonian more positively than Estonians view people whose native language is Russian. There are only a few percentages among residents of other nationalities who are averse to close contact with people whose native language is Estonian. At the same time, the attitude of Estonian residents towards close contact with people of nationalities different from their own has become more favourable in the last ten years (2010–2020) irrespective of the ethnic group. The share of residents of other nationalities who looked favourably on being neighbours with many Estonian language speakers was 58% in 2010 and 72% in 2020. Forty-six percent of Estonians don't have anything against many Russian speaking neighbours (only 23% in 2010).