

## Estonia and Russia through a Three-Way Mirror

### VIEWS OF THE POST-SOVIET GENERATION

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Twenty years after independence, Estonia has joined the European Union, NATO, and, most recently, the Eurozone. Yet the country continues to struggle in its relationship with its Russian-speaking minority, who constitute roughly one quarter of Estonia's population. Many who were not automatically granted citizenship in post-Soviet Estonia (those who were not citizens of Estonia before WWII or their descendents) resent the requirement imposed by the Estonian government that they pass language and civics tests in order to obtain Estonian citizenship.

Today, seven and a half percent of the population are not Estonian citizens and are consigned to a stateless status embodied in their "gray" alien passports. Language laws restrict many desirable jobs to those who can speak Estonian. Sharply divergent perspectives on Soviet history and World War II add more fuel to the simmering tensions: many Estonians view the Soviet Union as a hostile occupying force, which is hard to square with the Russian view that Soviet troops liberated Estonia from Nazi occupation.

Tensions came to a boil in the April 2007 Bronze Night incident – when the Estonian government removed a Soviet-era war monument and soldiers' remains from the center of Tallinn to a military cemetery. Protests by Russian speakers turned violent, leaving one protester dead, 153 injured, and about 800 detained by police. Estonia was then hit by a cyberattack and its diplomats were harassed in Moscow. For its part, the Russian government has routinely condemned Estonia for allegedly mistreating Russian speakers, perhaps as part of a larger effort to extend its soft power by representing itself as the defender of the rights of Russian-speaking minorities outside Russia.

Although relations have improved somewhat since the Bronze Night incident, Estonia has recently increased enforcement of its policy that Russian-language high

schools must provide at least 60% of instruction in Estonian, producing anxiety among many Russian-speaking teachers that could well spread outside the classroom.

In light of their central place in the tensions between Russia and Estonia, the views of Estonia's Russian speakers regarding relations between the two countries are of interest to policymakers. In particular, it is worth considering how younger members of this group feel toward Russia, Estonia, and relations between them, for it is possible that those who grew up entirely in the post-Soviet era are less prone to see the world through the prism of Soviet-era tensions and conflicts.

To better understand the younger generation of Estonia's Russian speaking minority, the Center for Strategic and International Studies (CSIS) surveyed ethnic Russians aged 16 to 29 in Estonia on issues related to their identity, attitudes toward Estonia and Russia, and their views on Soviet history. Those surveyed were at most nine years old when Estonia declared independence from the Soviet Union, and some were not yet born. It is especially instructive to simultaneously compare the views of young ethnic Russians to their peers in the ethnic Estonian population and also in Russia; accordingly, the same survey was given to these other two groups at about the same time.

By examining young people's views toward their home country and Russia through this "three-way mirror" (Russians, Estonians, and Estonian Russians reflecting on themselves and each other), we hope to identify grounds upon which Estonian officials can build a constructive policy for mitigating tensions, as well as identify areas to avoid.

## **Methodology and Data**

The CSIS survey project was conducted under the direction of Sarah Mendelson, who left the organization last year to take a position in the U.S. government. Prior to the survey, the researchers conducted focus groups with ethnic Russians in Estonia, which they used to prepare the survey. The survey was pretested in both the Russian Federation ("RF") and Estonia. The Estonian part was prepared in both Estonian and Russian.

The survey in Russia was carried out by the Levada Analytic Center, which undertook a nationally representative probability survey sampling 1016 residents of the RF aged 16-29 between November 25 and December 8, 2009.

The survey in Estonia was carried out by Saar Poll, which surveyed 1003 ethnic Estonians and 1005 ethnic Russians from December 3, 2009 to January 7, 2010. A special effort was made to oversample non-citizens (with gray "alien" passports) who constitute 338 of the final Estonia sample. The remaining 667 ethnic Russians in the Estonia sample are Estonian citizens with regular "blue" passports.

The main aims of the surveys were to compare the views of young Russians living in Estonia with those of their peer ethnic Estonians and RF residents, compare the views of gray and blue passport holders within the Russian-speaking communities in Estonia, and see if citizenship status is related to political and other attitudes.

The survey covered a wide range of topics, including trust in political institutions and specific leaders; views of the Bronze Night incident and its aftermath; views about Estonia's citizenship policies, reports, and experiences of discrimination toward Russians in Estonia; attitudes toward Europe, the United States, and other countries; and understandings of Soviet history.

In this policy memo, we limit ourselves to presenting the responses to questions about Estonia, Russia, and relations between them. From the data, we compare views across ethnic groups (Estonians vs. Russians), countries (Estonia vs. Russia), and citizenship (among ethnic Russians in Estonia). Accordingly, we present response distributions for four groups: RF residents, ethnic Russian non-citizens of Estonia (gray passport holders), ethnic Russian citizens of Estonia (blue passport holders), and ethnic Estonians.

### **Views of Countries**

We showed respondents a list of nine countries and asked them to indicate which of the following terms best describes the relationship of each country to the respondent's country: enemy, rival, neutral country, partner, or ally. We included Russia among the countries in the Estonian survey and Estonia in the Russian survey.

About 50% of young Estonian adults perceive Russia as an enemy of Estonia, while 22% see Russia as a rival (see **Figure 1**).\* Although they are less likely than Estonians to see Russia as essentially hostile, about 50% of Estonian Russians nonetheless do see Russia as either an enemy or a rival, and only 25% as a partner or an ally (differences by passport type among ethnic Russians were not statistically significant). Within Russia, 29% sees Estonia as an enemy or rival while most see Estonia as a neutral country or find it hard to say.

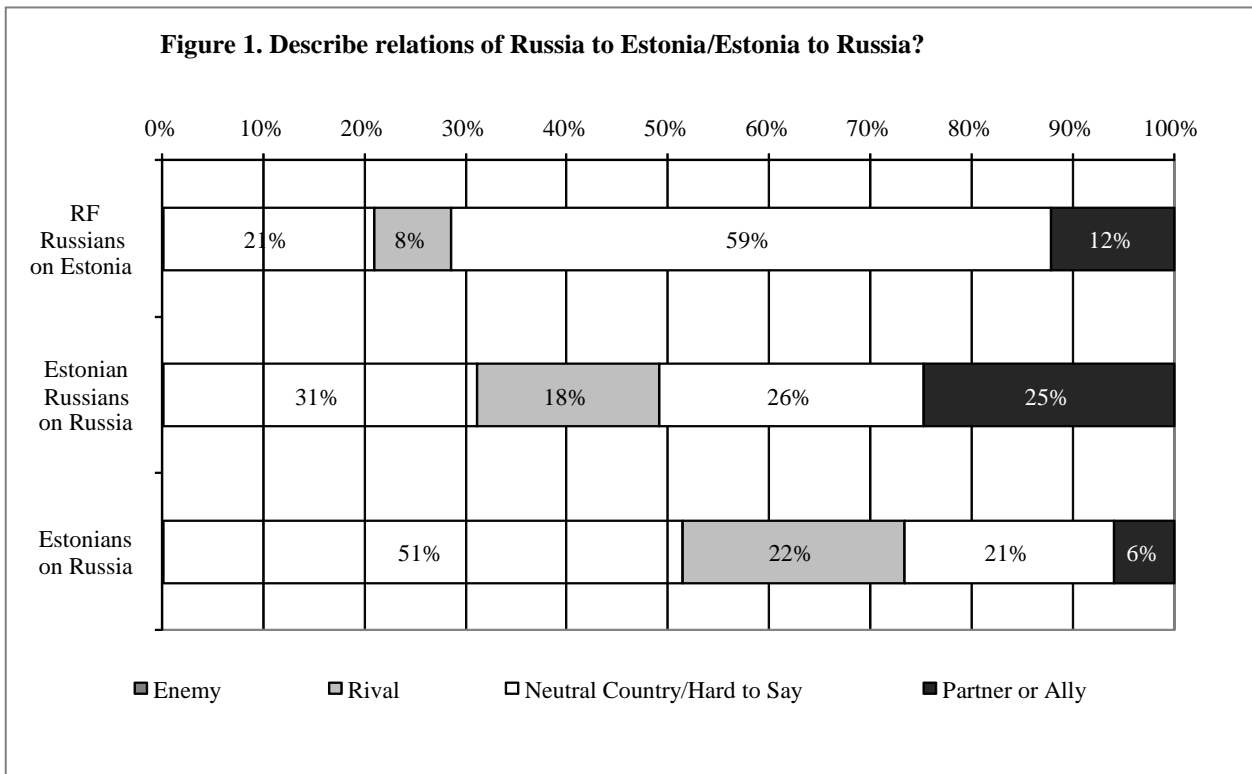
To gain more insight into how Estonians and Russians view both countries, we asked whether they agree or disagree with five phrases describing Russia, then asked whether the same phrases describe Estonia. The statistics show that nearly 9 out of 10 Estonians agree that Russia is a "threat to its neighbors" (**Figure 2**). Only half as many Estonian Russians agree and only one-third as many RF residents agree. If Estonian Russians are "in-between" the views of Estonians and Russians on many topics, they stand out in terms of their tendency to view Russia as having a strong economy; gray passport holders are particularly likely to endorse that view (80%), compared to 71% of blue passport holders, only 39% of RF residents, and 30% of Estonians.

Estonian residents, regardless of nationality and citizenship, agree by large margins that Russia is a superpower: in fact, they are more likely than RF residents to agree. All four groups concur that Russia is a "corrupt" country, while noteworthy minorities of Estonians (14%) and RF residents (9%) see Russia as weak.

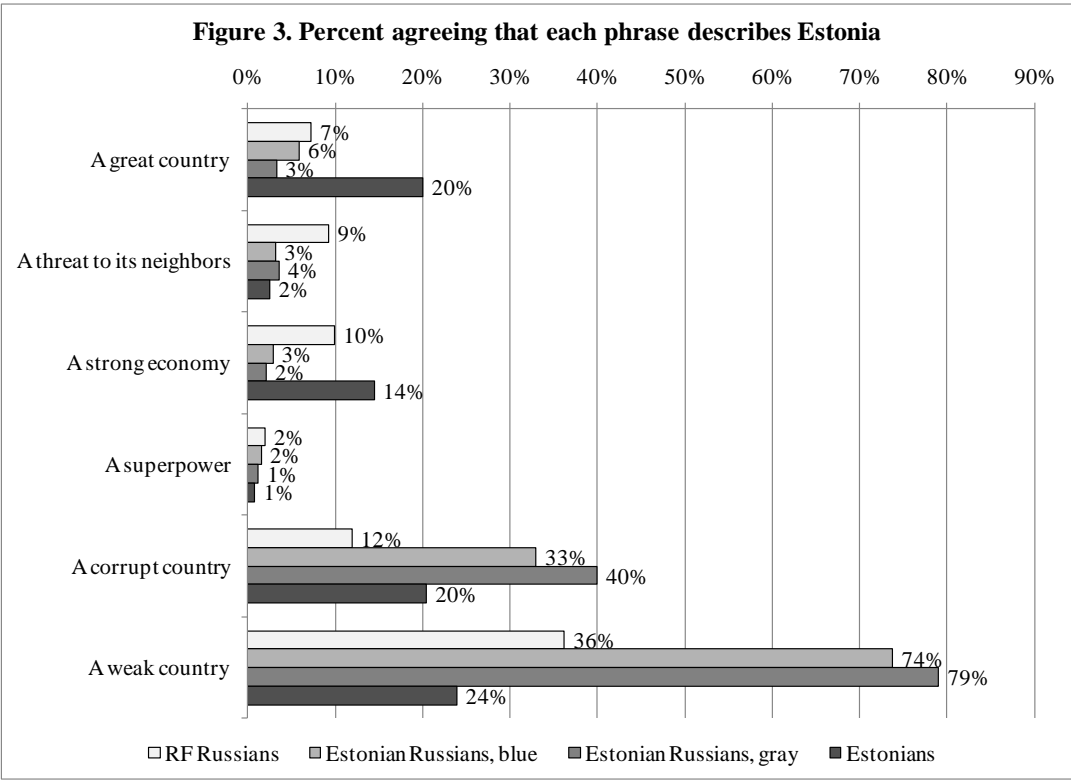
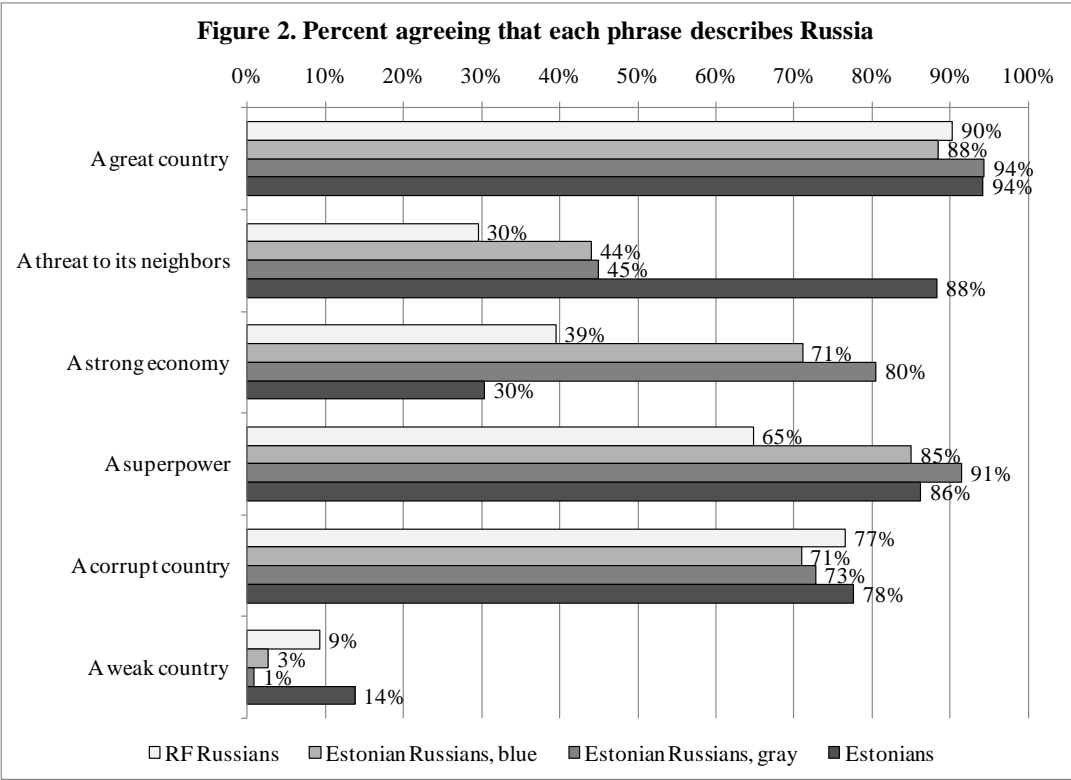
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\* All chart data is from surveys by the CSIS/Levada Analytic Center, 2009-2010.

**Figure 1. Describe relations of Russia to Estonia/Estonia to Russia?**

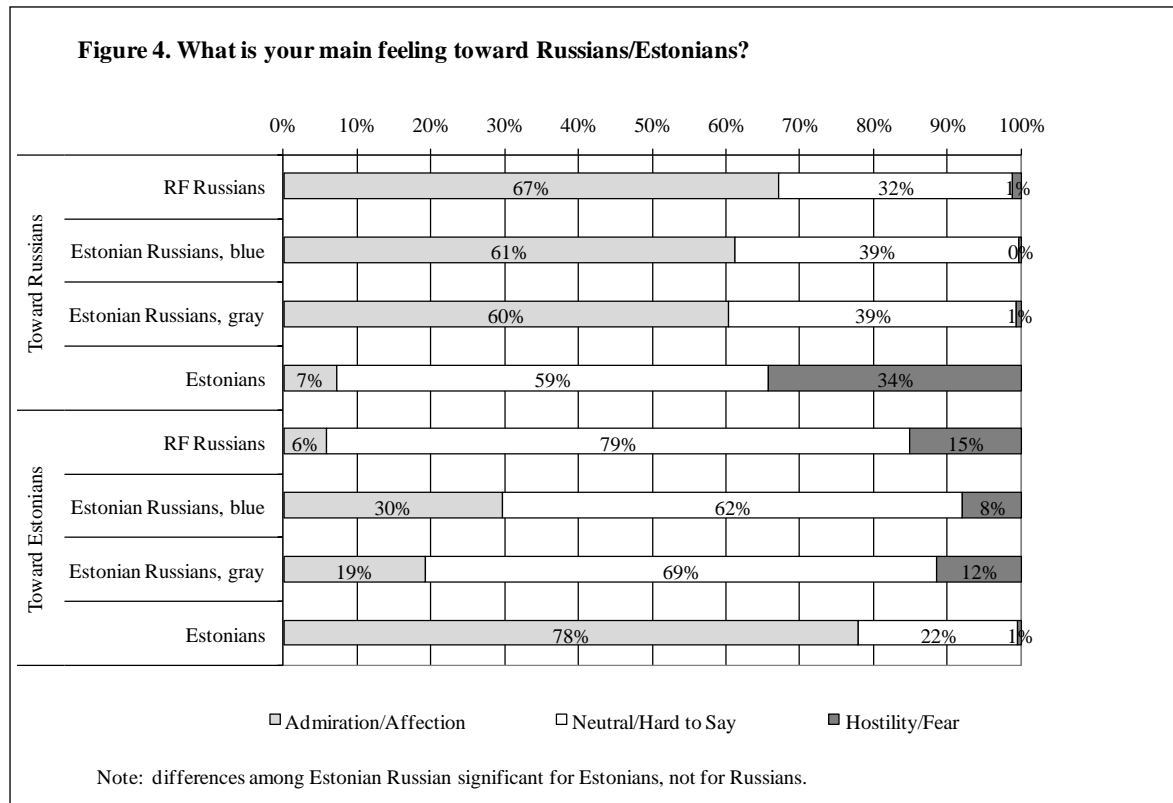


In contrast, few respondents in any group see Estonia as a threat to its neighbors (and, unsurprisingly, even less view it as a superpower) (Figure 3). Perhaps more surprisingly, all four groups are much less likely to link “a strong economy” to Estonia than to Russia, with Estonian Russians particularly unlikely to agree. In fact, Estonian Russians generally take a dim view of their country: between one-third and two-fifths agree Estonia is a corrupt country (compared to 20% of Estonians and 12% of RF residents), and three-quarters or more agree that Estonia is weak. By these measures, Estonian Russian young adults hold more critical views of Estonia and more favorable views of Russia than do their peers in Russia. Estonians clearly perceive Russia as a threat, but they also see Russia as a superpower with a strong economy. It should be noted, though, that the survey was conducted in Estonia at the end of a significant economic downturn in both Russia and Estonia. Real GDP growth in Estonia in 2009 dropped to -13.9%, and at the start of 2010 unemployment had reached 19%. Harsh economic times could be one reason why Estonians and Estonian Russians were downbeat on the economy.



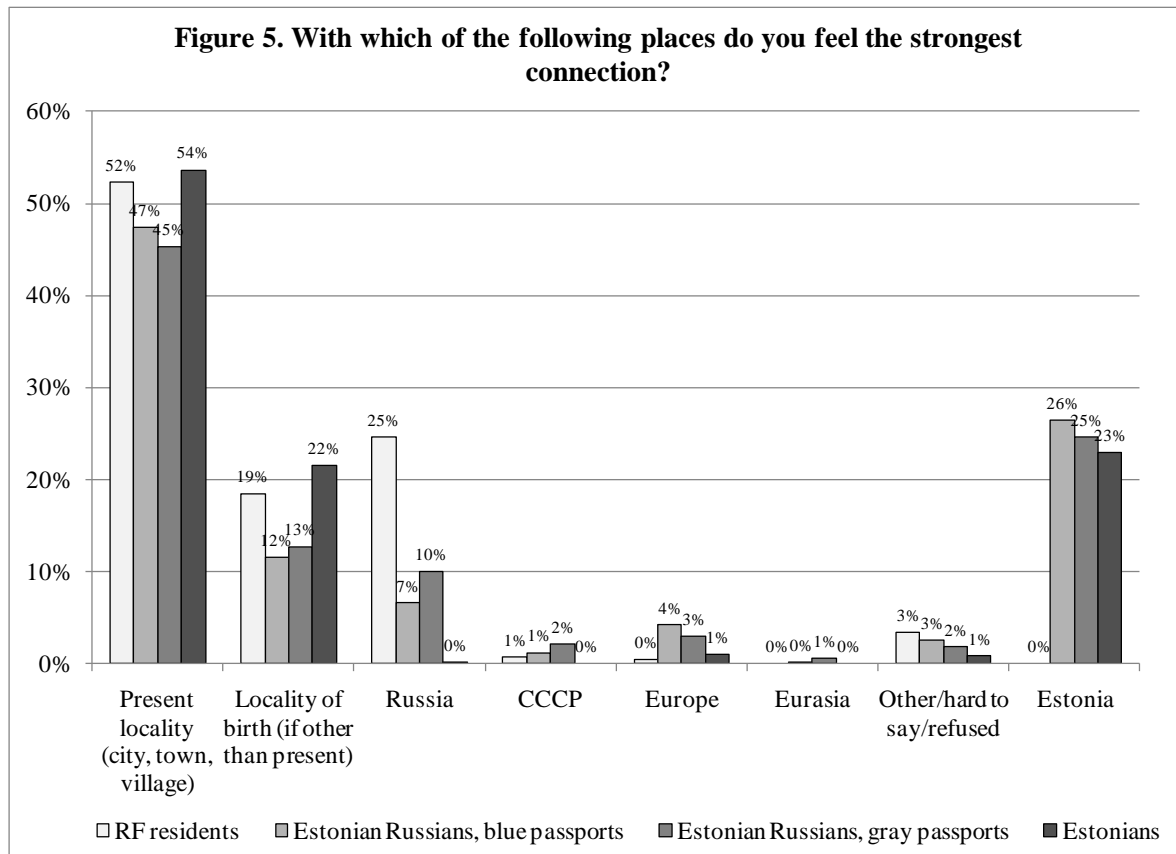
### Views of Russians and Estonians “As People”

How Russians and Estonians view one another and themselves “as people” provides a different perspective on relations between the two groups than how they view each other’s countries. We asked respondents to indicate which of the following words best characterizes how they feel about nine ethnic, religious, or national groups, including Russians and Estonians. The words were: admiration, affection, neutrality, hostility, or fear. Majorities among all three Russian groups view Russians in positive terms, though substantial numbers also view them neutrally or find it hard to say (**Figure 4**). Estonians are unlikely to view Russians with admiration or affection (7%). One-third of them openly declare hostility or fear in regard to Russians. While this is less than a majority, it also stands out as the strongest negative opinion of another group. Although only 6% of RF residents express positive feelings for Estonians, the vast majority are neutral or find it hard to say; only 15% view them negatively – less than half the number of Estonians who view Russians negatively. Estonian Russians are also largely neutral toward Estonians, though as many as 30% (among naturalized ethnic Russian citizens of Estonia) view them with admiration and affection. The Estonians are even more likely to express admiration or affection for their own people than the Russians are. These results suggest that the negative views of Estonian Russians toward their country have not hardened into negative views regarding the Estonian people, while there is more of a tendency among Estonians to express negative feelings about Russians.



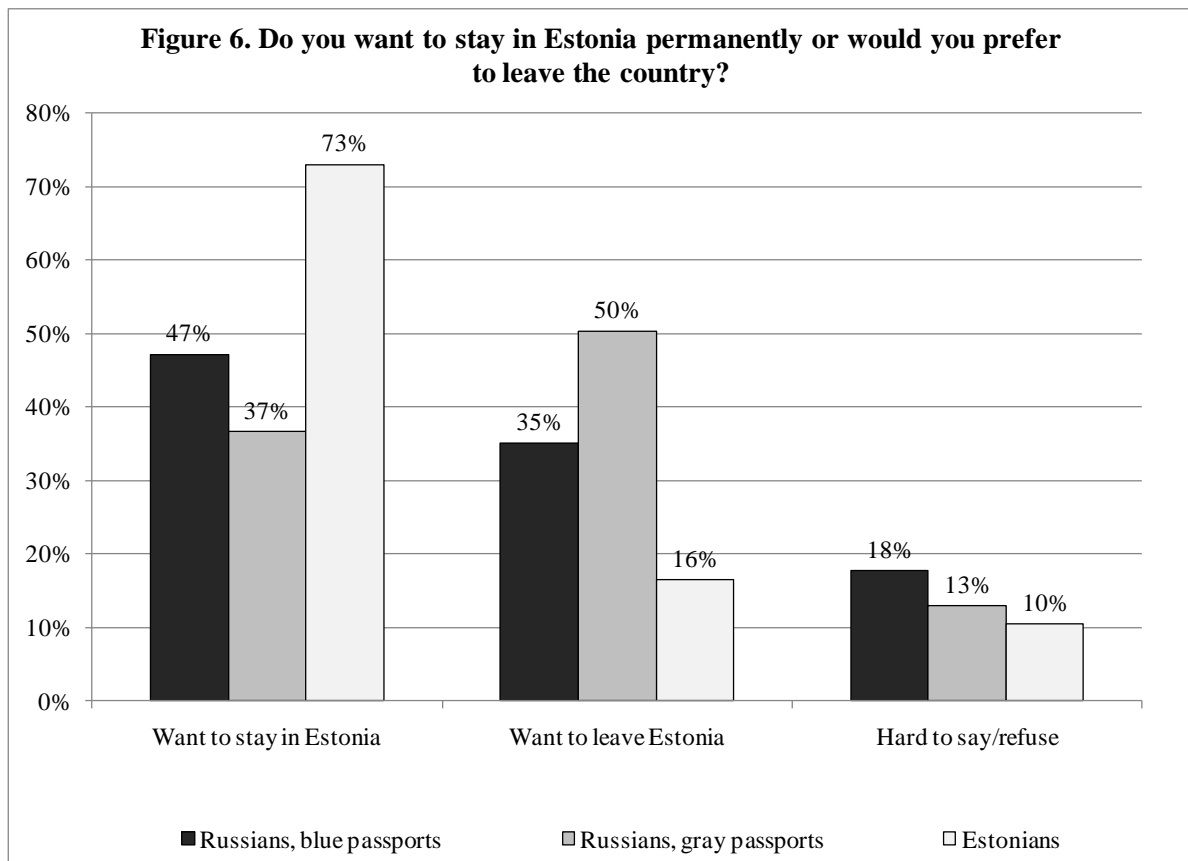
## Place Identification

Another question related to how Russians and Estonians feel about their respective countries is how strong a sense of “place identification” they have for Russia and Estonia. We asked respondents to indicate the strength of connection they feel to a set of places. In all four groups, the model response for the strongest connection is their present locality (city, town, or village), with RF residents and Estonians choosing this option in somewhat greater numbers than Estonian Russians (Figure 5). Evidently, space identification tends to be localized, first and foremost, in both countries. About one-quarter of residents in each country feel the strongest place identification with their own country – with no significant differences by ethnicity or passport in Estonia. The number of Estonian Russians who say they identify most strongly with Russia is low, and few in any group identified most strongly with the USSR, Europe, or Eurasia. In fact, if we combine the categories of “strongest” and “strong” connections, we find that Estonian Russians are much more likely to express a strong identification with Estonia (70% of blue passport holders and 64% of gray passport holders) than with Russia (28% regardless of passport). By these measures, ethnic Russians in Estonia are considerably more likely to identify with Estonia than with Russia, despite their generally critical images of Estonia as a country and more positive views of Russia.



### To Stay or to Move?

Another key measure of how one views one's country of residence is whether one wishes to stay there permanently or "vote with one's feet" by leaving. We asked our respondents if they want to stay permanently in their current country of residence or move to another country (Figure 6). About three quarters of Estonians want to remain in Estonia and only 16% definitively want to leave. About half the Estonian Russians who acquired Estonian citizenship wish to stay there permanently, compared to only 37% of gray passport holders. Half of the latter want to leave the country, versus only 35% of blue passport holders. However, while many Estonian Russians, particularly gray passport holders, may want to leave Estonia, Russia is not typically their preferred destination: among those who say they prefer to leave Estonia, only 17% of blue passport holders and 28% of gray passport holders say they would even consider moving to Russia. Young adults living in the RF are not particularly eager to leave either: 77% of them want to stay permanently, which is statistically indistinguishable from the percentage of ethnic Estonians who want to stay permanently in Estonia.





## Conclusion

Our findings generally confirm what most observers would expect: young ethnic Russians and Estonians hold divergent views on Russia and Estonia. But there are some subtle signs that the situation is not beyond reconciliation. Mutual suspicions and fears about each other's countries are muted when it comes to people, a promising sign. In fact, ethnic Russians living in Estonia have complex views toward the two countries. While they think more highly of Russia and rather dimly of Estonia -- even compared to RF residents -- they nonetheless are more likely to view Estonians positively than negatively. They are also much more likely to express strong place identification with Estonia than with Russia (and are not likely to want to move to Russia).

Unfortunately, other survey topics not examined here paint a less optimistic picture for the prospects of reconciliation of the post-Soviet generation in Estonia. Views are sharply divided on key aspects of Soviet history, the Bronze Night events, and Estonian language and citizenship policies. Clearly, these strongly divergent views reflect the legacy of World War II, Soviet occupation, and Estonian policies since independence in 1991. The polarized responses of cohorts who are too young to remember much or any of the Soviet period underscores that the post-Soviet divide will not simply resolve itself with the passing of older generations. Different perspectives have been passed along and continue to divide the post-Soviet generation. The survey data shows that the ethnic Russians in Estonia are, by their own choice, there to stay. This makes it all the more important for the Estonian government to find new approaches to overcome the cognitive divide between ethnic Estonians and Russians.