



## **Weekly Briefing**

### **Estonia social briefing:**

### **The phenomenon of mass vaccination and a record on the Mother**

### **Tongue Day**

### **E-MAP Foundation MTÜ**

#### **China-CEE Institute**

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## The phenomenon of mass vaccination and a record on the Mother Tongue Day

In a very surprising socio-anthropological twist, ‘togetherness’ can be speculatively described as one of the most distinct qualities of Nordic people. This is in the contrast to the obvious – people of the North, in general, are not talkative and prefer enjoying plenty of privacy. However, when it comes to a difficult period – be it a war, an occupation, or, for example, a pandemic – a Nordic nation’s ‘togetherness’ or ‘cohesiveness’ always pops up to save the people. Indeed, every person counts, and everyone’s positive impact makes a difference.

The beginning on March had indicated that the so-called British strain of COVID-19 was spreading domestically in the Republic of Estonia<sup>1</sup>, and it was only a matter of time that the Government would decide to announce the lockdown and aim at mass vaccination. **On 21 March**, the vaccination cycle was finished for **34 per cent** of the country’s population, and, figuratively speaking, it was only the end of the beginning. In the meantime, a message that the Government was receiving from the cluster of professionals who were/are on the front-line of the crisis – the family doctors – was not a happy one. Estonian general practitioners who get the first call from a person who is unwell noted that “the pace of vaccination is not what it should be”<sup>2</sup>. Apart from underscoring the problem of vaccine shortages, the idea expressed was also interlinked with the readiness of family doctors to be directly included in the process of mass vaccination to get the whole thing speeded up to the required level. For example, Ruth Kalda, a family doctor of the *University of Tartu Institute of Family Medicine*, spoke on the status quo from her professional position:

The actual situation is that vaccines are only made available in certain regions. [...] [T]he Health Insurance Fund has only designated [Estonia’s second largest city] Tartu as a high-risk area once – in January when family medicine centres got the chance to order the Pfizer/BioNTech vaccine. [...] [T]he city has two risk group patient lists one of which was assigned 36 doses in a situation where the lists have a total of 600 people. [...] We have been

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<sup>1</sup> Loora-Elisabet Lomp, ‘Estonia to be locked down in fear of British strain’ in *Postimees*, 9 March 2021. Available from [<https://news.postimees.ee/7196993/estonia-to-be-locked-down-in-fear-of-british-strain>].

<sup>2</sup> Loora-Elisabet Lomp, ‘Family doctors not happy with state vaccination strategy’ in *Postimees*, 8 March 2021. Available from [<https://news.postimees.ee/7196130/family-doctors-not-happy-with-state-vaccination-strategy>].

waiting for vaccines for risk groups for a long time, while there are family medicine centres in different parts of the country that have not received a single dose of vaccine.<sup>3</sup>

Is mass vaccination the only solution? It appears to be that, indeed, it is the case. Even though the country's coronavirus infection rate –  $R$  – is going downwards, having dropped to 1.05, it does not necessarily mean the same trend for mortality, which is likely to rise during the second half of March and the beginning of April<sup>4</sup>. Therefore, on 17 March, the Government arranged a comprehensive info-hour that was broadcasted for the population on TV and online, in the Estonian and Russian languages, where different office-holders and decision-shapers did their best to report on the situation, answer all sorts of questions from the viewers, and persuade people to get vaccinated<sup>5</sup>. As a result, in big numbers and via registering through the country's main e-governance platform, the elderly people were seen being vaccinated in *Maardu* (a part of Tallinn metropolitan area with more than 15,000 people), *Loksa* (a Harju county town of a bit less than 3,000 people), and *Lasnamäe* (the most populous suburb of Tallinn with about 120,000 residents) on 20-21 March<sup>6</sup>. Predictably, the organisation of the process was not an easy task – the social segment in focus were those people who “are not used to doing things online”; in a significant addition, the vaccination in the aforementioned three localities “require[d] medics to speak both Estonian and Russian”<sup>7</sup>. *ERR* reported on a typical personal recollection – of a 74-year-old man – who described how the whole process was arranged for him:

I have worked as a doctor myself. I kept my eye on coronavirus news and information and decided against it. When I heard from the media and my doctor that Pfizer was going to be administered in Lasnamäe, I got behind the computer and signed up.<sup>8</sup>

In numbers, by 21 March, 166,163 people received at least one dose of a vaccine, while 57,003 people got both doses, making the vaccinations total of **223,166 people** out of a bit more

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<sup>3</sup> Ruth Kalda as cited in Lomp, ‘Family doctors not happy with state vaccination strategy’.

<sup>4</sup> ‘Scientific council: The infection rate has dropped to 1.05’ in *ERR*, 19 March 2021. Available from [<https://news.err.ee/1608148729/scientific-council-the-infection-rate-has-dropped-to-1-05>].

<sup>5</sup> ‘В среду пройдет открытый инфочас на тему вакцинации от COVID-19’ in *Sotsiaalministeerium*, 15 March 2021. Available from [<https://www.sm.ee/ru/novosti/v-sredu-proydet-otkrytyy-infochas-na-temu-vakcinacii-ot-covid-19>].

<sup>6</sup> ‘Mass vaccinations to take place in Lasnamäe, Maardu and Loksa’ in *ERR*, 21 March 2020. Available from [<https://news.err.ee/1608149905/mass-vaccinations-to-take-place-in-lasnamae-maardu-and-loksa>].

<sup>7</sup> ‘Mass vaccinations to take place in Lasnamäe, Maardu and Loksa’.

<sup>8</sup> ‘Mass vaccinations to take place in Lasnamäe, Maardu and Loksa’.

than 1.3 million<sup>9</sup>. It must be noted that, in accordance with the EU's joint procurement deal on the vaccines, Estonia was placed with an initial request to receive 603,876 doses of the *Pfizer/BioNTech*, but, in March, it was reported that the country made an additional request to get 100,000 doses on the top of the preliminary order<sup>10</sup>. So far, the *European Center for Disease Prevention and Control* reported that Estonia is currently on **the fourth place in the list of vaccination coverage within the EU**.

On the societal side, however, what would be a positive story to report on, had we never had the pandemic? Most probably, it would be a decent material dedicated to the **Mother Tongue Day** in Estonia, which was celebrated on 14 March. Officially, it has its beginning from 1999, marking the birth of Kristjan Jaak Peterson (1801-1822) who is known as “one of the founding fathers of Estonian poetry” because he was the first to start writing his poetic works in the Estonian language<sup>11</sup>. It is known that Peterson himself was one of the most educated personalities of his time, being able to communicate in more than 10 languages, including some of the oriental vernaculars. In 2021, the day – *Emakeelepäev* as it is called in Estonian – had its usual dictation, scheduled for 15 March, with plenty of mini-contests within the event, including for the best entry from a non-native speaker<sup>12</sup>. The dictation's text was read out on the *Vikerraadio* channel, which has been running its annual Mother Tongue Day for 13 years in a row, having recorded 52,000 entries since then (to keep in mind that it is certainly not a mandatory procedure for a participant to make her/his submission after the dictation)<sup>13</sup>.

Needless to specify that such a day is of special significance for all Estonian speakers not only in the country but around the world as well, especially at many Estonian houses and institutions of higher education where the Estonian language is taught. As for the *Vikerraadio*-arranged dictation test, the radio channel kindly asked the prospective participants to take and then send photos of themselves in the process of “preparing for or undertaking the test”<sup>14</sup>.

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<sup>9</sup> ‘A third of elderly given at least one shot of vaccine’ in *ERR*, 21 March 2021. Available from [<https://news.err.ee/1608150016/a-third-of-elderly-given-at-least-one-shot-of-vaccine>].

<sup>10</sup> ‘Estonia requests additional 660,000 Pfizer/BioNTech vaccine doses from EU’ in *ERR*, 10 March 2021. Available from [<https://news.err.ee/1608136954/estonia-requests-additional-660-000-pfizer-biontech-vaccine-doses-from-eu>].

<sup>11</sup> ‘March 14th is the Mother Tongue Day in Estonia’ in *Estonian Institute*. Available from [<https://estinst.ee/en/emakeelepaeva-tahistamine-ule-ilma/>].

<sup>12</sup> ‘Annual Vikerraadio dictation marks Estonian language day, prizes to be won’ in *ERR*, 15 March 2021 (updated). Available from [<https://news.err.ee/1608137035/annual-vikerraadio-dictation-marks-estonian-language-day-prizes-to-be-won>].

<sup>13</sup> ‘Annual Vikerraadio dictation marks Estonian language day, prizes to be won’.

<sup>14</sup> ‘Gallery: Estonians across the world participate in language day test’ in *ERR*, 15 March 2021. Available from [<https://news.err.ee/1608142822/gallery-estonians-across-the-world-participate-in-language-day-test>].

Remarkably, the requested images were sent not only from every corner of Estonia, but also from Germany, France, Norway, the Republic of Korea, and other places. Most probably, trying to build on such a success, the country's Ministry of Foreign Affairs announced that on **13 April**, "the very first virtual forum for Estonians around the world will be held"<sup>15</sup>. Eva-Maria Liimets, the Minister of Foreign Affairs, elaborated on the idea:

I am sincerely pleased with the feedback from the survey of Estonians living abroad, which confirms the desire to maintain a strong connection with their homeland and contribute to the progress of Estonia. The survey also revealed the concerns of Estonians living abroad, which the Ministry of Foreign Affairs can take into account when planning activities related to the diaspora. [...] It is especially important for us that Estonians living abroad also participate in the virtual forum and share their thoughts and experiences. I am convinced that trust-based co-operation with global Estonians will contribute to the achievement of the future goals and international success of Estonia.<sup>16</sup>

As for this year's Mother Tongue Day, by the end of the contest, it was reported that more than 10,000 people took part in the test, setting a new record<sup>17</sup>. These are types of positive records that the country badly needs to report on. The society is clearly over with the pandemic.

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<sup>15</sup> 'The Ministry of Foreign Affairs is organising a virtual forum for global Estonians' in *Välisministeerium*, 22 March 2021. Available from [<https://vm.ee/en/news/ministry-foreign-affairs-organising-virtual-forum-global-estonians>].

<sup>16</sup> Eva-Maria Liimets as cited in 'The Ministry of Foreign Affairs is organising a virtual forum for global Estonians'.

<sup>17</sup> 'Gallery: Estonians across the world participate in language day test'.