Language proficiency is important from the perspective of improved chances of getting a better education, employment and social position. From society’s perspective, strong language skills amongst residents of different national backgrounds mean higher levels of integration. Although Estonians and people of other nationalities often live in different language spaces and primarily encounter each other at the workplace or public sphere, a slowly increasing need for English language, and more accepting attitudes towards other languages, unites all Estonian residents.

**Estonian language proficiency amongst people from other nationalities is improving**

The data from the Monitoring of Integration in Estonian Society 2017 shows that Estonian language skills of people from other national backgrounds have improved to some extent. 41% of residents from other nationalities aged over 15 years consider themselves as active Estonian speakers (have a good command or understands, speaks and writes), half have passive language skills (understand and speak a little, or understand a little but does not speak), and a tenth have no command of Estonian. People feel most comfortable at reading and understanding verbal speech (71% and 69% respectively). The highest reduction in the proportion of people with no command in Estonian in comparison to 2015 has taken place in Ida-Virumaa (30% in 2015, 22% in 2017).

**Self-assessed Estonian language proficiency amongst residents from other nationalities 2011-2017, % (Monitoring of Integration in Estonian Society 2011, 2015, 2017)**

Importance of English is on the rise, but the key to trust between different nationalities lies more with the knowledge of Estonian language

English language proficiency varies greatly across nationalities. 37% of Estonians have an active proficiency whilst almost quarter do not have any command in English – these indicators are respectively 19% and 44% amongst residents from other nationalities. Whilst the proportion of Estonian residents who see English as a potential mutual communication language (less than a third) has increased multiple times within the last decade, English does not yet reach a level of status where it could be considered as a language that unites different nationalities. Language proficiencies and language-related attitudes amongst Estonian residents show that Estonian language still has this status in the society.

Language proficiency can be dependent on the level of need to speak other languages at work or leisure time. Almost all respondents require their native language at work or at school, however 42% of Estonians also need Russian language in employment whilst 50% of respondents from other nationalities require Estonian at work, i.e. almost two thirds of people in employment and in formal education. In employment, Estonians

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**FACT SHEET**


Russian proficiency amongst Estonians has remained largely at the same level as in 2015, although there has been a slight increase (from 9% to 15%) of those who cannot write in Russian. Slightly less than a half of Estonians deem themselves to be active Russian speakers, an almost equal proportion of Estonians consider their Russian language skills as passive, and 5% of Estonian respondents do not have any command of the Russian language. 21% of Estonians are fully proficient in Russian.
require English language at an almost equal level to Russian (39%), and English proficiency is required at work by 30% of residents of other nationalities.

A differentiation of the youngest age group of other nationality residents is most visible by their English language needs in employment or at school: 72% of them deem it necessary, whilst this is the case for less than half of their counterparts over the age of 25. The perceived necessity for English language amongst residents from other nationalities under the age of 25 even exceeds the equivalent need by Estonians in the same age group. Such tendency may be demonstrative of the growing importance of English for people from other nationalities.

Knowledge and use of other languages is more prevalent in regions where people are in more frequent contact with other nationalities. Estonians living in Ida-Virumaa have a higher than average Russian proficiency and other nationalities living outside Tallinn and Ida-Virumaa have better proficiency in Estonian. Disparities between Russian language requirements at workplace, skills available amongst young Estonians to match these requirements, and an equivalent situation with English language amongst young people from other nationalities, reveal that there is a need for both groups to make more effort than previously to learn relevant languages to maximise their chances in the labour market.

In general, attitudes amongst people in Estonia have become more mutually considerate. On the one hand, less Estonians think that proficiency in Estonian should be compulsory for residents of other nationalities, on the other hand, the role of Estonian language is perceived as important in increasing trust between different nationalities. Openness towards other languages is growing with mutual communication: the more contact and communication there is between Estonians and residents from other nationalities, the more tolerant and open they are towards other languages.