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Improving communication with migrants for crisis
preparedness: lessons learned from COVID-19

Research Report Latvia

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Executive summary

The society in Latvia can be characterised as multiethnic and multicultural, where a large proportion of inhabitants don't use the official language as their primary one. The communication measures implemented during the Covid-19 pandemic provide an excellent opportunity to research the intercultural crisis communication in Latvia.

The present study has been developed within the project "Improving Communication with Migrants for Crisis Preparedness: Lessons Learned From COVID-19", which covers Estonia, Finland and Latvia. The study focuses on effective translation practices and policies, which can provide a quick response to the Covid-19 crisis and future emergency situations in disseminating relevant information among migrant communities.

The study shows that there were several flaws in the way government addressed communication with linguistic minorities and foreigners in Latvia. Even though there was a consensus by the public administration that information should be provided in three languages - Latvian, Russian and English -, resources were not always available to provide translations promptly, especially in the beginning of pandemic. Moreover, human and financial resources were not sufficient for Covid-19 related communication activities in Latvia generally, indicating that the government did not fully understand the importance of efficient communication measures in the times of crisis. Translations and adjustments of official information in media, non-governmental, business and academic sectors were done by these organisations themselves, as they needed to provide information in their communication channels immediately.

At the same time, several good practices and recommendations have been identified in this research, which can serve as a basis for future emergency situations in order to disseminate relevant information among migrant communities. Experience gained during the Covid-19 pandemic creates a good foundation for more efficient communication activities in future crisis.

1. Multilingual landscape

Historically, the society in Latvia has been multiethnic and multicultural. At the end of the 19th century, the main ethnic groups in Latvia were Latvians (68.3%), Russians (12.2%), Germans (7.1%), Jews (6.4%) and Poles (3.4%).¹ In 1935, the main ethnic groups in Latvia were the same, but the proportion of ethnic Latvians had increased to 77%.² During the Soviet period, the ethnic composition of inhabitants changed due to the immigration from other Republics of the Soviet Union. In 1989, the share of ethnic minorities had increased to 52% and the main groups were Russians (47.5%), Belarusians (6.3%), Ukrainians (4.8%), Poles (3.2%), Lithuanians (1.8%) and Jews (1.2%). Currently, in 2022 ethnic Latvians account for 63% of inhabitants and the largest ethnic minorities are Russians (24%), Belarusians (3%), Ukrainians (2%), Poles (2%) and Lithuanians (1%).³

The number and share of foreigners living in Latvia has increased steadily over the last 20 years. In 2022, 62.6 thousand foreign citizens lived in Latvia, making up 3.3% of the total population. The largest groups are citizens of Russia (2.1%), Ukraine (0.3%), Lithuania (0.2%), Belarus (0.1%), India (0.1%) and Uzbekistan (0.1%).⁴ Since the start of the war in Ukraine, at least 36.6 thousand people from Ukraine have registered to receive support in Latvia, but the exact number of people arrived in Latvia is unknown.

After the restoration of independence in 1991, the language policy in Latvia has aimed to create a monolingual society with Latvian as the state language. The language policy is described in several policy documents. The preamble of the Latvian Constitution (Satversme) emphasizes that Latvia is a democratic, legal, socially responsible and a national state that protects fundamental human rights and respects national minorities. Article 114 of the Latvian Constitution (Satversme) stipulates that national minorities have the right to preserve and develop their language, ethnic and cultural identity.

Furthermore, Latvia's "National Development Plan for 2021-2027" emphasizes the importance of a unified national identity and extensive use of the Latvian language in

¹ 1897 Russian Empire Census, http://demoscope.ru/weekly/ssp/rus_lan_97_uezd_eng.php?reg=1727

² Statistics Latvia, 1935 Latvia Census, <https://www.csb.gov.lv/lv/statistika/statistikas-temas/iedzivotaji/tautas-skaitisana/meklet-tema/186-ceturta-tautas-skaitisana-latvija-1935-gada>

³ Statistics Latvia, Table IRE010, 2022

⁴ Statistics Latvia, Table IRV010, 2022

building a cohesive society. It aims to increase the sense of belonging to the Latvian society, Latvian and European cultural space, to promote the use of the Latvian language, to strengthen cooperation between various groups of the society, to reduce tensions and prejudices, as well as to create a democratic information space.

Additionally, Guidelines for the Development of a Cohesive and Civically Active Society for 2021-2027 aim to create a national, solidarity-based, open and civically engaged society, the existence of which is based on the democratic values and human rights specified in the Latvian Constitution (Satversme), the Latvian language and the Latvian cultural space.

Finally, the Official Language Law stipulates the Latvian language as the official language in Latvia. The law aims to ensure the maintenance, protection and development of the Latvian language, to increase influence of the Latvian language in the cultural environment of Latvia in order to promote a more rapid integration of society and the integration of members of ethnic minorities into the society of Latvia, while observing their rights to use their native language or other languages.

The Latvian language proficiency is regarded as a cornerstone of integration policy in Latvia. The legislation is rather strict regarding the official and, in certain cases also, private use (e.g., in media, events etc.) of foreign languages in Latvia. Considering the large size of Russian minority living in Latvia, language policy has caused several heated discussions over the last decades, covering topics such as bilingual education for the ethnic Russian minority, language of instruction in higher education and most recently - the use of the Russian language in the working environment. In 2012, constitutional referendum on the amendments to the Constitution of the Republic of Latvia was held, proposing Russian as the second official language. 71% of registered voters participated in the referendum and $\frac{3}{4}$ voted against the proposed changes⁵.

At the same time, the latest data from 2017 about the use of languages at home show that 60.8% of people living in Latvia communicate at home in Latvian, 36.0% in Russian and 3.2% in other languages. In Riga, the capital city of Latvia, the proportion is 43.0%, 53.5% and 3.5% respectively⁶.

⁵ <https://www.cvk.lv/lv/tautas-nobalsosanas/par-grozijumiem-latvijas-republikas-satversme-2012>

⁶ Statistics Latvia, 2022, <https://stat.gov.lv/lv/statistikas-temas/izglitiba-kultura-zinatne/izglitibas-limenis/preses-relizes/1911-608-latvijas?themeCode=IZ>

Considering the multiethnic and multicultural nature of the Latvian society on the one hand, and the legal requirements and policy directions concerning Latvian language and integration policy on the other, this research focuses on effective translation practices and policies, which can provide a quick response to the current Covid-19 crisis and future emergency situations in disseminating relevant information among migrant communities.

The resulting guidelines for communicating essential multilingual information to migrants will not only contribute to a faster recovery from the current crisis, but could also be adapted and scaled to address future emergency situations in the Baltic Sea Region.

2. Covid-19 pandemic in Latvia and related communication challenges

Covid-19 pandemic in Latvia started in March 2020. The first patient was diagnosed in 2 March 2020 and the number of cases started to accelerate after 8 March 2020. The government declared a state of emergency on 13 March 2020, which ended on 9 June 2020. During the first wave, the highest number of people infected reached 211 persons in 23-29 March 2020. The second wave of the pandemic started in September 2020 with the beginning of the new school year. A state of emergency was reinstated on 9 November 2020 and lasted until 6 April 2021. During the second wave, the number of infected persons went up to 7071 in 4-10 January 2021. The number of infected persons skyrocketed during the third wave at the end of 2021. The highest number of cases was registered in February and March 2022, reaching almost 70 thousand infected persons. However, the number of persons who died was much lower than in previous waves. In total, 916 thousand Covid-19 cases and 5.9 thousand deaths from Covid-19 have been reported in Latvia.⁷

Surveys done during the first Covid-19 wave in spring 2020 show that the Latvian population was satisfied with the communication activities addressing the Covid-19 pandemic. In April 2020, 86% of population evaluated the government's efforts to inform

⁷ Covid-19 website, 2022, <https://covid19.gov.lv/en/node/16387>

society as “good”⁸. In May 2020, 66% of Latvian speakers and 51% of Russian speakers positively valued the availability of communications and services of public administrations. 63% said that the official information is trustful, while 28% claimed the opposite.⁹ The language spoken by a person turned out to be an important factor pointing to the problem of reaching the Russian-speaking community.¹⁰

During the second Covid-19 wave, the share of people evaluating the communication efforts by the government as sufficient dropped to 65% in December 2020. It was higher among the Latvian speaking population (70%) than the Russian speaking population (58%), again illustrating the information gap between the communities.¹¹

The vaccination programme in Latvia started on 28 December 2020 with the medical staff vaccination. First vaccines for priority groups of the general population became available in February 2021. However, the vaccination programme progressed rather slowly due to logistic issues and a waiting attitude from the general population. At that time, 29% of Latvia's population had decided to vaccinate immediately against Covid-19, whereas 30% were reluctant to be vaccinated¹². As a result, in May 2021 30% of older people were vaccinated in Latvia, while the same indicator in European countries on average was 75%.¹³

In September 2022, 37% of the population were vaccinated. Among Latvians, the share was 42% and among other ethnicities, only 29%, as they were more reluctant to vaccinate.¹⁴ The share of people who had not taken a decision on vaccination was higher among Russian speakers than Latvian speakers (31% and 15% respectively), while the share of people rejecting vaccination was the same in both groups (14%). The differences

⁸ Latvian Public Broadcasting, 2020, <https://www.lsm.lv/raksts/zinas/latvija/iedzivotaji-uzteic-informetibu-par-covid-19-bet-nopel-ekonomikas-glabsanu.a359086/>

⁹ University of Latvia, 2020, <https://www.szf.lu.lv/par-mums/zinas/zina/t/59998/>

¹⁰ Latvian Public Broadcasting, 2020, <https://www.lsm.lv/raksts/zinas/latvija/28-iedzivotaju-netic-oficialajai-informacijai-par-covid-19.a359519/>

¹¹ SKDS Research Centre, 2020,

https://www.mk.gov.lv/sites/mk/files/media_file/dec_skds_covid_12_2020.pdf

¹² Latvian Public Broadcasting, 2021, <https://eng.lsm.lv/article/society/society/only-29-of-latvians-will-take-first-chance-to-get-a-covid-jab-survey-says.a395380/>

¹³ Latvian Public Broadcasting, 2021, <https://eng.lsm.lv/article/society/health/vaccinated-population-in-latvia-differs-from-rest-of-europe.a405851/>

¹⁴ Statistics Latvia, 2022, RIG101

between the share of vaccinated Latvian and Russian speaking seniors were even higher. There are several possible reasons for this difference, including the use of different media channels (seniors use less internet) and a lower trust in the government.¹⁵ According to previous studies, the Russian community in Latvia often feels isolated and unwanted by the government. *“Another layer of perception is closely connected with the influence of a deep-rooted Russian narrative that no one can be trusted—neither the Latvian nor the Russian or any other media or government”* (p. 216).¹⁶

Sending out a newsletter or personalized letter in Russian was proposed to reach the Russian speaking population, especially seniors, but this idea could not be implemented due to requirements of the Official Language Law (in short – people should first express a request to receive any official information also in other languages than Latvian).¹⁷ This case was analysed by the Ombudsman’s Office of the Republic of Latvia. They concluded that the current legislation complies with the Constitution of Latvia and suggested that municipalities could create registers with residents that wish to receive information not only in Latvian, but also in foreign languages. Additionally, they pointed out that there are other tools that can be used to reach citizens in foreign languages, including posters in public spaces or, for example, hallways of multi-residential buildings, where information would be available in both Latvian and foreign languages.¹⁸

A newsletter in Russian was distributed in one of the biggest cities in Latvia – Liepāja -, where a register was created for people who wished to receive such material.¹⁹ Another good practice was a joint video message by the deputies of both the governing and the opposition factions of Riga City, and city officials responsible for health care. It was

¹⁵ Latvian Public Broadcasting, 2021, <https://www.lsm.lv/raksts/zinas/latvija/kapec-cittautiesi-latvija-kutrak-vaccinejas-pret-covid-19-peta-aizliegtais-panemiens.a429217/>

¹⁶ Struberga, S., and Ž. Ozolina. 2022. Crisis Communication and Resilience: Are Russian and Latvian Speakers in the Same Boat? *Social Sciences* 11: 216. <https://doi.org/10.3390/socsci11050216>

¹⁷ Latvian Public Broadcasting, 2021, <https://www.lsm.lv/raksts/zinas/latvija/kapec-cittautiesi-latvija-kutrak-vaccinejas-pret-covid-19-peta-aizliegtais-panemiens.a429217/>

¹⁸ Ombudsman’s Office of the Republic of Latvia, 2021, https://www.tiesibsargs.lv/wp-content/uploads/migrate_2022/content/vest_kuzmins_vakc_info_minorit_val_21_05_2021_1625212325.pdf

¹⁹ Latvian Public Broadcasting, 2021, <https://www.lsm.lv/raksts/zinas/latvija/kapec-cittautiesi-latvija-kutrak-vaccinejas-pret-covid-19-peta-aizliegtais-panemiens.a429217/>

produced in three languages – Latvian, Russian and English, urging the residents of Riga to get vaccinated against Covid-19.²⁰

By March 2022, the share of vaccinated population had increased to 66% for the general population, 68% among Latvians and 65% among people of other ethnicities, closing the gap between Latvian citizens of various ethnicities.²¹

Research on strategic communication regarding Covid-19, which was implemented in 2020, outlines the ethnic dimension of the government's communication²². It claims that there was a consensus that crisis communication should be provided in three languages - Latvian, Russian and English. However, resources were not always available to provide translations promptly (the research stresses that human and financial resources were not sufficient for Covid-19 related communication activities generally), which restricted the availability of official information for Russian speakers and created additional work for journalists working in Russian-speaking media. Epidemiologist Jurijs Perevoščikovs was mentioned as a good example by giving interviews for Latvian and Russian media speaking fluently in Latvian and in Russian thus becoming an equally known authority in both communities.

An important aspect is the differences of the information sources used by Latvian and Russian speaking communities. According to a survey done in October 2020, the most popular source of information regarding Covid-19 for both Latvian and Russian speakers was information provided by the Centre for Disease Prevention and Control of Latvia. For Latvian speakers it was followed by government press conferences and interviews of government officials and specialists in media. At the same time, Russian speakers relied more on information published in online media (delfi.lv, rus.delfi.lv, lsm.lv) and followed the information displayed in supermarkets and shopping centres.

²⁰ Riga City, 2021, https://www.riga.lv/en/article/riga-city-council-officials-call-riga-residents-vaccinate-latvian-russian-and-english?utm_source=https%3A%2F%2Fwww.google.com%2F

²¹ Statistics Latvia, 2022, RIG101

²² Strategic communication activities in Latvia concerning the Covid-19 were analysed in a research project "Life with COVID-19: Evaluation of overcoming the coronavirus crisis in Latvia and recommendations for societal resilience in the future" (2020-2021) led by Riga Stradins University and involving researchers from University of Latvia, Rezekne Academy of Technologies, Vidzeme University of Applied Sciences, as well as the Institute of Electronics and Computer Science.

The dissemination of information in Russian was considered positively by society and media. Data from a survey done in October 2020 showed that 78% of population had a positive opinion on the fact that government and institutions published information in Russian and only 5% had a negative opinion. Not surprisingly, the share was higher among Russian speakers and reached 96%, while 68% of Latvian speakers had a positive opinion and 24% did not have an opinion on the matter.²³

3. Data collection procedures and methods

The research is based on 8 interviews conducted from January to April 2022. The interviewees represent government institutions (1 person), universities (1 person), NGOs and experts in the field of integration (3 persons), businesses (2 persons) and media (1 person). 7 interviews were done online via Zoom, recorded and then transcribed/summarised. 1 interview was conducted in a written form.

The information about interviews is given in Table 1.

Table 1. Details of the interviewees

| Sector represented | Organisation represented | Acronym | Name and title of interviewee | Date of the interview |
|--------------------|--------------------------|---------|--|-----------------------|
| Government | State Chancellery | VK | Zane Berķe, Deputy director of Latvian State Chancellery's Department for Communication | 10.01.2022. |

²³ Bērziņa, I., Krūmiņš, G., Buholcs, J., Dāvidsone, A., Silkāne, V., Zaķis, Z., Kleinberga, V., Rožukalne, A., Tīfentāle, A., Savicka, V., Freimane, G., Grūzītis, N., Mežzīle, S., Murinska, S., Šapale, S., Aņisimova, A., Andžāns, M., Sedlenieks, K., Palkova, K., ... Žabicka, A. (2020). Projekta papildu rezultāts Nr. 34: Priekšlikumi par optimālākajiem dažādu sabiedrības grupu informēšanas veidiem un kanāliem, viltus ziņu novēršanu, balstoties uz COVID-19 izplatības mazināšanai noteikto ierobežojumu periodā veiktā informatīvā un metodiskā atbalsta novērtējumu. Rīga Stradiņš University, <https://science.rsu.lv/en/publications/projekta-papildu-rezult%C4%81ts-nr-34-priek%C5%A1likumi-par-optim%C4%81l%C4%81kajiem->

| | | | | |
|--------------|--|----|---|-------------|
| Universities | Turība University | TU | Imants Bergs, Vice Rector for Study Development and International Cooperation | 01.02.2022. |
| NGO | Foundation Make Room Europe | MR | Miks Celmiņš, Director | 17.01.2022. |
| NGO | Association I Want to Help Refugees | HR | Evija Strupiņa, Member of the Board | 18.01.2022. |
| NGO | Expert | DP | Sigita Zankovska- Odiņa, The head of the Dialogue Platform | 21.04.2022. |
| Business | An international company employing more than 1000 employees in Latvia | EV | Internal Communications Specialist | 24.01.2022. |
| Business | SEB Global Services in Riga and Vilnius | SE | Mārtiņš Panke, Communication Officer | 11.04.2022. |
| Media | Delfi RUS Latvia | DE | Anatolijs Golubovs, Editor | 18.01.2022. |

Publicly available documentary evidence was collected from the institutions interviewed.

In addition, 3 on-site focus groups with migrants living in Latvia were organised on 28 and 29 June 2022. In total, 34 persons took part in the workshops, 13 persons in the 1st workshop, 13 persons in the 2nd workshop and 8 persons in the 3rd workshop.

The focus groups took place in Riga and the participants were invited from the Latvian language courses for migrants provided by the NGO Creative Ideas. One of the

workshops was conducted in English (with 13 participants) and two workshops were conducted in Russian (with 21 participants).

During the focus groups, participants were asked the following questions regarding the communication related to COVID-19:

- Where did you receive information about COVID-19?
- In what languages did you use information about COVID-19?
- Was the information sufficient and timely?
- Did you use the official site covid19.gov.lv?
- Did you receive COVID-19 related information from NGOs (for example, in Facebook)?

The national composition of the participants were as follows: 10 Russian citizens, 10 Ukrainian citizens, 5 Belorussian citizens, 3 citizens of India, 2 citizens of Tajikistan, 1 citizen of Kazakhstan, 1 citizen of Morocco and 1 citizen of Cameroon. The participants of the focus groups cover the main nationalities residing in Latvia. Although they are not a representative sample, the opinions they expressed gave us a valuable insight into the lessons learned from COVID-19 related communication with migrants living in Latvia.

4. Findings

4.1. Obstacles/challenges in communicating with linguistic minorities (with examples from stakeholders)

Even though the satisfaction with information provided in the outbreak of the pandemic was considered good and sufficient by the general public, especially during the first wave, surveys show that people, who don't use Latvian language as their main language of communication, were less satisfied with the communication activities implemented by the state. Later, a lower vaccination rate among Russian speakers compared to Latvian speakers confirmed the gap based on language spoken²⁴ (data are presented and discussed in the second section of the research).

In the focus groups with migrants conducted within this project, migrants said that generally the information was sufficient and timely provided. However, they said that the information was distributed bit by bit and "the big picture" often was missing. Also, these

²⁴ There are no specific data about other minorities and foreigners in this regard.

focus groups involved migrants that are taking part in Latvian language courses, thus covering the part of migrant community that has certain knowledge of Latvian language and are actively trying to improve their skills.

Previous research has analysed the use of various information channels to receive information about Covid-19. While Latvian speakers relied much on official announcements (government press conferences, interviews with official and specialists), Russian speakers more often used online media (delfi.lv, rus.delfi.lv, lsm.lv) and information displayed in supermarkets and shopping centres.²⁵ The interviews conducted within this project confirm these conclusions. Migrants watched international and local news, searched for information online in Google, used Delfi RUS, LSM in English (Latvian National Broadcasting), LETA (Latvian information agency), the official site covid19.gov.lv, the websites of the Office of Citizenship and Migration Affairs and the Centre for Disease Prevention and Control. They also used social networks, such as Facebook, the EU website Re-open EU and the hotline for COVID-19 related questions. Radio was used less. Migrants also relied on information, which was available in public spaces, for example, in the shopping centres. Moreover, information provided by local municipalities was conceived as useful.

Based on the interviews conducted within this project, we provide an analysis of four cases – the covid19.gov.lv website, rus.delfi.lv website, communication activities by NGOs working with migrants and communication activities by universities and companies that have a high share of foreign students (in case of universities) or employees (in case of companies).

The Covid-19 information website

The Covid-19 information website (<https://covid19.gov.lv/>) and Covid-19 helpline 8345 became operational on March 24. The website, which is maintained by the State

²⁵ Bērziņa, I., Krūmiņš, G., Buholcs, J., Dāvidsone, A., Silkāne, V., Zaķis, Z., Kleinberga, V., Rožukalne, A., Tīfentāle, A., Savicka, V., Freimane, G., Grūzītis, N., Mežzīle, S., Murinska, S., Šapale, S., Aņisimova, A., Andžāns, M., Sedlenieks, K., Palkova, K., ... Žabicka, A. (2020). Projekta papildu rezultāts Nr. 34: Priekšlikumi par optimālākajiem dažādu sabiedrības grupu informēšanas veidiem un kanāliem, viltus ziņu novēršanu, balstoties uz COVID-19 izplatības mazināšanai noteikto ierobežojumu periodā veiktā informatīvā un metodiskā atbalsta novērtējumam. Rīga Stradiņš University, <https://science.rsu.lv/en/publications/projekta-papildu-rezult%C4%81ts-nr-34-priek%C5%A1likumi-par-optim%C4%81l%C4%81kajiem->

Chancellery, provides information in Latvian and a certain amount of information is also available in Russian and English. *"It was clear from the very beginning that the website should be not only in Latvian, but also to some extent in Russian and English, as it's about public health that concern everyone"* (VK). The Covid-19 helpline provided consultations in Latvian, Russian and English.

The website has been a popular source of information. From March 2020 until January 2022, it had 11 million unique page views and there have been days with 200 000 users per day. The site had more than 2.5 million views of the information in Russian and around 1 million views of the information in English²⁶.

The main aim of the website is to provide quick information as soon as there were new decisions. Communication specialists of the State Chancellery were following closely the decision-making process (participating in working groups, government meeting etc.) to be able to publish the information as soon as possible. Often, they were also approaching ministries and asking for clarifications. Unfortunately, communication department lacked human resources to expand the information on the website. They had funding to employ a full-time editor-in-chief only for 6 months and in this period website provided more extensive information. When funding finished, only the most important pieces of information were published.

Translations on the website are provided by outsourced translators, while shorter texts are translated by organisation's communication specialists themselves. Translations usually are provided within one day by the outsourced translators, but can be arranged also in a few hours, if necessary. The State Chancellery selects texts that are more important and should be translated to Russian and English.

However, in the onset of crisis the situation was challenging regarding the availability of information in foreign languages. As noted by NGOs working with migrants, *"When the pandemic started, we got a lot of questions, because information was available in Latvian and Russian, but to much less extent in English. The information in foreign languages was published with delays. The State Chancellery did not respond fast to our request at first, they could not provide English translations immediately, but this has been resolved recently."* (MR)

²⁶ Google Analytics data provided by the State Chancellery, 24 March 2020 - 9 January 2022.

Similar comments were received by the businesses. A representative of a large company employing more than 900 people and using English as the working language said: *"In Latvian, the information was always available fast, but the translation in English came much later, which meant that we had to translate ourselves (SEB)"*.

Finally, many migrants interviewed within this project said that they know the official Latvian COVID-19 website, but it did not have sufficient information in foreign languages, and it was not always provided timely. Some people mentioned that the website was not promoted enough and not that many people knew about it. This shows that even though the website has been a very popular source of information, it could have been more promoted among ethnic minorities and migrants. Also, it might be the case that the unavailability of timely information in foreign languages in the first months of the operation harmed its popularity among minorities and migrants, as they did not check the website later, when translations became available promptly.

RUS Delfi

RUS Delfi (<https://rus.delfi.lv/>) is the main online media used by Russian speakers in Latvia. RUS Delfi stress that the state does not have sufficient instruments to communicate with the Russian audience in Latvia. *"There are not many media working in Russian. There used to be news in Russian in LTV1 but disappeared. LTV7 is planning to be broadcasted only online which means they will lose Russian-speaking audience. We were too optimistic [regarding integration]. And indeed there are no visible problems until crisis comes."*

When the Covid-19 crisis took off, Delfi RUS realised that Russian speakers are not getting sufficient information regarding Covid-19. *"It seems that government was missing resources to communicate with Russian audience. Normally they are not specifically approached, as they supposedly know and use Latvian language. Looking back at the [vaccination] newsletter case, what is more important – that we all read in Latvian or that people don't die?" (DE)*

Delfi RUS has a large audience, at some points it was even 350 000 users per month. Their problem was to receive information promptly and in Russian. As the official translations came with a delay, it was faster for them to take the information in Latvian, translate it and publish. However, most of their publications are not based on translations. They write original articles in Russian, so that it's easy to read, it's understandable and sounds natural. They were lucky that there are Russian speaking epidemiologists, such as Perevoščikovs and Trojanskis.

During the last 2 years, Delfi RUS has written about 5000 items – news, explanations, interviews with immunologists, articles about vaccines and reports from Latgale. Also information was taken and translated from the Latvian Delfi version. 80% of workload was devoted to Covid-19 by gathering materials, translating and educating their audience. But they feel that it was mostly the work of private media in this case. Luckily, they had resources to do it, as their audience grew, but they are disappointed that support from government was missing. At some point they were approached by the State Chancellery and they realised that both organisations don't have resources, specifically, experts and translators that could provide more information in Russian. *“Government could not finance translators or journalists that would cover this topic better, even though it was obvious that there is significant problem in Latvia. Finally, we got funding from the European institutions.” (DE)*

Despite the sceptical attitude of government, they believe that it is possible to approach Russian speakers in Latvia. However, there's a need to raise the question of integration: *There is an argument that Russians are not getting vaccinated because they are belonging to Russia's informative space. However, it's not the case because Russia is also urging people to get vaccinated. So, the problem is deeper. People don't believe in the state, because their relationship with state has been harmed many years ago. There's no talk about integration policy at all. But then similar situation will repeat. (DE)*

Communication activities implemented by NGOs working with migrants

When the pandemic started, NGOs working with migrants, refugees, asylum seekers and persons with alternative status got a lot of questions, because information was available in Latvian, but to much less extent in other languages, especially English. They started informative activities in their channels to help overcome fear and disinformation.

NGOs “Make Room Europe” and “I Want to Help Refugees” started distributing information, first in English and Hindi, and then in cooperation with translators of NGO “Shelter “Safe House”” - in Turkish, Dari and Arab languages. Also, external voluntary (online) translators were involved. Finally, some information was translated to Tigrinya language, as a translator was available. The translators contracted by the NGO “Shelter “Safe House”” mostly are not professional translators, they are people who know these languages as native languages or have learned them. In Latvia professional translators for these languages mostly are not available. The focus of the translation was to provide basic information as fast as possible.

Regarding the information channels, websites, Facebook and WhatsApp, but also personal communication was used. A special Covid-19 section was created and updated on the website integration.lv, managed by the NGO "Shelter "Safe House"". Materials were also distributed in cooperation with several universities that have foreign students.

Links are available here:

- Make Room Europe: <https://makeroomeu.com/vaccination/>
- I Want to Help Refugees: <https://gribupalidzetbegliem.lv/vaccination-against-covid-19/>
- Shelter "Safe House": <https://www.integration.lv/lv/covid-19>

It was more difficult to reach refugees, asylum seekers and persons with alternative status. *"Some people of the target groups can't read. Experience shows that it's difficult to reach the target group. They should be reached in person instead of Facebook."* (HR).

NGOs acknowledge that it was difficult to follow the flow of information. It changed so fast, that sometimes it was challenging to translate and disseminate to the target group in time, before the norms change again. A member of the "Make Room Europe" team followed the government press conferences and the meetings of the Cabinet of Ministers. The information was distributed right after the government press conferences on Thursdays, they did not wait until the information was published on the official website.

As mentioned before, in the first months of the pandemic NGOs expressed their concerns about the availability of official information in English and Russian, later the situation improved. "I Want to Help Refugees" noted that LSM (Latvian Public Broadcasting) made good summaries regarding the restrictions with references. Information about vaccination was used also from international sources as the message in Latvian was rather restricted - "go and vaccinate".

However, not all migrants are in contact with NGOs. For example, none of the migrants participating in the focus groups conducted within this research knew or were following on Facebook or other social media these NGOs. *"NGOs filled the vacuum to provide information in foreign languages for their target groups. Question is if those who are not in the sight of specific NGOs reached info in foreign languages?"* (DP)

NGOs expressed their concern about informing migrants living in Latvia. "We have to work a lot with public media content in English and Russian. Foreigners want to read the

local media, but the only thing we can promote is the English version of the LSM. But it needs more than 3 articles per day. Foreigners want to know what is happening in the country.” (MR)

Also, not everyone uses electronic media. Older people don't use internet, therefore written information is relevant for this group. However, as mentioned before, the legislation prevents information in foreign languages to be sent if the person has not requested it. *“Language issue is not new, it has been a discussion for a very long time, regarding health, cancer screening, security. Why we still don't reach those who are not Latvian speakers? At this point we have to decide, if we focus on promoting public integration, or public safety and health, which is more important now.”* (DP)

Communication activities implemented by universities and companies

During the research we interviewed a private university with more than 3500 students, of which 25% are foreigners, and a private company that has over 900 employees, of which 10% are citizens of other countries than the Baltics. Additionally, one private company with more than 1000 employees provided answers in written form. Both companies use English as a working language.

The university stressed the unavailability of official information in foreign languages at the beginning of the pandemic, which made them do the translations themselves. Also, the regulations changed so fast that it was difficult to follow. Furthermore, one regulation affected another and sometimes contradictory regulations were put in place. Therefore, university passed to students only the most important information in a simple language.

Additionally, government introduced support measure for foreign students, but the applications had to be made in Latvia, which created them additional workload. *“The work of the international department turned from routine work of student admission, registration at the university to technical support to students. They were writing applications, documents in Latvian for foreign students.”* (TU)

University had to sort other issues as well. There were problems with vaccinating foreign students, as they needed a personal code issued by Latvia to do that, but not all of them had it. Secondly, the procedure to acknowledge a vaccination certificate issued abroad could be very long (even 2.5 months) and during that time students couldn't study face-

to-face, even though they were vaccinated. Moreover, in such complicated cases information availability in foreign languages is very important.

In the university, English is used as the main language of communication with foreign students (also when communicating with Russian-speaking students). Materials are translated by the International Department. There is an outsourced translator at the marketing department that translates longer messages. They managed to create and send out messages in one day after the changes were announced by the government.

During the crisis university realised that e-mails are not a sufficient channel of communication. They used all info channels - web page, posters, social networks, internal network, personal meetings in dorms. Panic started in the dormitories as students couldn't get to their home countries. *"I went to the dormitories to talk to the students, to calm them down, reassuring that this pandemic is not the first nor the last. We put posters, talked to students in person. In such an emergency, meeting and talking was important. Explaining is necessary, sending a letter is not enough. Some of the foreign students are abroad for the first time so they need more support."* (TU)

The private companies had similar experience with translations and channels of communication. SEB sent out emails and organised various meetings and webinars with experts who offered solutions and replied to questions that employees had. They also created a phone/online line for providing psychological support. Professional psychologists were working and providing consultations in English, Latvian and Russian. The other company used intranet and other internal comms channels.

The translations were done inhouse by the communication specialists themselves, who already have competences to communicate fluently in English. SEB communicated only in English and the other company provided some information also in Russian for employees' convenience.

The official information in Latvian was always available fast, but the translation in English was published with a delay, which meant that the companies had to translate themselves. The official Covid-19 website published news in English rather fast, after 1 day, but many times they needed to inform employees immediately.

From the government they would prefer to receive information in a more simple, less bureaucratic language. In addition, they would like to have ready info graphs, informative

materials explaining restrictions and guidelines, which could be printed and displayed in the workspace. This way they would not have to spend their resources in creating such materials. This is even more important for smaller companies that might not have resources to do such tasks themselves.

Being a large company, SEB had some specific questions regarding the regulation, but not always the specialists from government institution had answers to those specific questions. Also, it was sometimes difficult to reach these specialists by phone.

SEB already had guidelines from crisis communication. They learned from this experience and updated the guidelines. "For example, we realised that email is not always the best channel, as employees are getting many emails. Intranet could be a good additional channel, posters in common spaces and personal meetings are important as well." (SEB)

4.2. Good practices identified

Based on the interviews, we have identified several good practices.

The **Covid-19 information website, developed and maintained by the State Chancellery**, and the Covid-19 helpline 8345 became operational in the first weeks of the crisis and provided information in Latvian, and partly in Russian and English. Despite delays in translations in the beginning of the crisis, later translations have been provided within one day. The translations are mainly provided by a contractor (outsourced translation company), which can provide translation even in a few hours, if necessary. Short texts are translated also by State Chancellery's communication specialists themselves.

Considering the shortages mentioned in the interviews²⁷ we consider it an example with elements of good practice. The website became operational shortly after the onset of

²⁷ The main shortages, according to the interviews, are the lack of human resources to expand the information on the website (at some periods it had more information, at some less, depending on the availability of human resources), delays of publishing the translations (especially, in the beginning of the crisis), the website is less known among ethnic minorities and foreigners. One expert also mentioned that the interface is not successful.

crisis, it is updated regularly, and the changes are announced almost immediately. It collects information from various sectors and reaches large audience. Most important information is published in three languages and translations are available rather fast. The texts to translate to Russian and English are chosen based on the needs of the audience.

Seeing a void in the Covid-19 related communication with Russian-speaking audience in Latvia, **RUS Delfi implemented a large amount of communication activities**. During the last two years, Delfi RUS has written around 5000 items – news, explanations, interviews with epidemiologists, articles about vaccines and reports from Latgale. Also, information was taken and translated from the Latvian Delfi version.

Around 80% of their workload was devoted to Covid-19 by gathering materials, translating and educating their audience. They did not receive direct support from state to cover the subject better, but they got additional funding from European institutions.

Most of their work are original articles in Russian, so that it's easy to read, it's understandable and sounds natural. They outlined as a good practice the fact that there are Russian speaking epidemiologists in Latvia, such as Perevoščikovs and Trojanskis, who can speak with them in Russian. That improves communication with Russian speaking audience and also makes their work easier.

Communication activities provided by the NGOs working with migrants illustrate how grass-root organisations can successfully address the gaps in government communication regarding migrants, refugees, asylum seekers and persons with alternative status. NGOs joined their resources, shared tasks and distributed information to their target audience using various channels. In addition, information was displayed in a visually attractive way, by creating posters (examples are available: <https://www.facebook.com/makeroomglobal/>).

Information was prepared and distributed fast, right after the government press conferences on Thursdays. Informative materials were distributed using various media – Facebook, WhatsApp, email, websites. Questions were answered regularly, for example, Make Room Europe collected questions and provided answers twice per week - on Wednesdays and Sundays.

Also, personal meetings were held. For example, “I Want to Help Refugees” held personal meeting with groups that are difficult to reach - refugees, asylum seekers and persons with alternative status.

Migrant communities were involved in the dissemination of information. “I Want to Help Refugees” found several community leaders and advised them to make WhatsApp groups for their communities and distribute relevant information. Two groups were created that communicated in Arab and Dari languages. “Make Room Europe” involved foreign students, who distributed banners (printed on A4 paper) around the hostels, where many students live.

Successful cooperation was established also with several universities, who distributed materials created by the NGOs to their foreign students.

A video was created by “Make Room Europe” involving foreigners living in Latvia and urging people to get vaccinated (each person was speaking their native language and subtitles were added):

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=_cYC3A8rb1A&feature=emb_title

The **communication activities implemented by universities and companies** showed that private sector can successfully adapt to changing circumstances and provide support for their students and employees. They already communicated with their target group in English, so their main issue was to adjust the communication to the ongoing crisis.

According to Turība University, in a crisis, the information must be fast, simple and clear. The Cabinet of Ministers adopted the rules on Friday, by Saturday the University was already preparing and providing information to students. Only the most important facts were included in the messages so that they are easy to understand.

They used numerous information channels - web page, posters, social networks, internal network. Staff of university went to dormitories and talked to students to provide explanations and calm them down, especially in the beginning of the crisis. It was important to have these meetings because foreign students were overly concerned, having their families and support networks abroad.

Private companies established additional communication measures to support their employees as well. For example, SEB Global Services in Riga and Vilnius created a phone/online line for providing psychological support. Professional psychologists were

working and providing support in English, Latvian and Russian. They also organised workshops with various experts who offered solutions and replied to questions.

5. Summary

According to previous studies, migrants and members of ethnic minorities in Latvia were less satisfied with information provided regarding the Covid-19 pandemic. They also used different information channels than the local Latvian-speaking community relying more on online media and publicly displayed information, while Latvian-speakers used government press conferences and interviews of government officials and specialists in the media (at the same time, for both groups the most popular source was information provided by the Centre for Disease Prevention and Control of Latvia).

The gap in information was later confirmed with lower vaccination rates among Russian-speaking population in Latvia. However, the root of these differences is most likely deeper than the lack of information and includes low trust in the government, feeling of political isolation and other underlying factors.

Even though there was a consensus by the public administration that information should be provided in three languages - Latvian, Russian and English -, resources were not always available to provide prompt translations, especially in the beginning of the pandemic. Translations of official information in media, non-governmental, business and academic sectors were done by these organisations themselves, as they needed to provide information in their communication channels immediately. This resulted in inefficient spending of resources for translation.

Moreover, human and financial resources were not sufficient for Covid-19 related communication activities in Latvia generally, indicating that the government did not fully understand the importance of communication measures during the crisis. Consequently, the Covid-19 information website and other communication measures by the government (including the work of Latvian public broadcasters) were not as efficient as they could be due to lack of resources. At the same time, the experience of Covid-19 pandemic and the establishment of one-stop-shop website for crisis situations creates a good foundation for more efficient communication activities in case of another crisis.

According to the interviews, the state did not have sufficient instruments to communicate with the Russian audience. As a result, the lack of information for the Russian-speaking

community was filled in by private on-line media. However, not all Russian-speakers are active users of online content. For example, elderly were not reached by this channel.

A similar situation occurred in communication with migrants, where NGOs tried to close the gap of information. Their focus was to provide basic information in foreign languages as fast as possible, and it was mainly done in social media and through social networks. Also, community leaders were involved, and personal meetings were organised with specific target groups, for example, international students, refugees and asylum seekers.

Additionally, interviewees stressed that the regulations changed so fast that often it was difficult to follow the flow of information. Sometimes it was challenging to translate and disseminate news to the target group in time, before the norms change again. Furthermore, one regulation affected another and sometimes contradictory regulations were put in place.

Last but not least, several good practices were identified in this research, which can serve as a basis in future emergency situations for disseminating relevant information among migrant communities

6. Recommendations

Based on the interviews and discussions conducted within this study, we propose several recommendations for disseminating crisis information among ethnic minorities and migrant communities more efficiently.

- The government should recognise the importance of efficient communication with the local population, with ethnic minorities and migrant communities. Sufficient resources should be in place for communication activities in crisis situations.
- A single website should provide all information related to a particular crisis to reach various audiences. According to an expert interview within this research, a team of 10 people (including translators) could easily provide both official information and news in three languages.
- Translations of the most important official information should be done in-house and published simultaneously with Latvian texts, thus minimising the total costs of translations in all sectors.

- Official information should be available in a user-friendly language to make it accessible to a wider audience. Also easy language should be used, where only the main points are highlighted (this would also allow to reach seniors, migrants etc.).
- In previous studies, specialists mentioned Estonia, where government has a pool of communication specialists that can be contracted in case of crisis.²⁸ Similar approach could be used in Latvia.
- A glossary should be created covering the most important terminology in the main foreign languages used in public communication.
- Info graphs and informative materials could be created by the government explaining requirements. These materials could be printed and displayed in workspaces, schools, universities and public spaces.
- The public broadcasters should provide more information in foreign languages, namely, in Russian and English. Alternatively, this function could be implemented by private media with a public funding.
- Various channels of information should be used to reach different audiences (locals, ethnic minorities, migrants) based on their habits and preferences – on-line media, TV, radio, information on public displays etc.
- Local municipalities should more actively distribute information in Latvian, Russian and English, depending on the composition of their inhabitants.
- The most important and urgent information should be provided via SMS (especially for older people that don't use internet) or a mobile application.

²⁸ Bērziņa, I., Krūmiņš, G., Buholcs, J., Dāvidsone, A., Silkāne, V., Zaķis, Z., Kleinberga, V., Rožukalne, A., Tīfentāle, A., Savicka, V., Freimane, G., Grūzītis, N., Mežzīle, S., Murinska, S., Šapale, S., Aņisimova, A., Andžāns, M., Sedlenieks, K., Palkova, K., ... Žabicka, A. (2020). Projekta papildu rezultāts Nr. 34: Priekšlikumi par optimālākajiem dažādu sabiedrības grupu informēšanas veidiem un kanāliem, viltus ziņu novēršanu, balstoties uz COVID-19 izplatības mazināšanai noteikto ierobežojumu periodā veiktā informatīvā un metodiskā atbalsta novērtējumu. Rīga Stradiņš University, <https://science.rsu.lv/en/publications/projekta-papildu-rezult%C4%81ts-nr-34-priek%C5%A1likumi-par-optim%C4%81%C4%81kajiem->

- Government should (immediately) provide funding for NGOs working with migrants, as they have already established channels of information.
- Work with migrant community leaders should be strengthened to distribute information among the target group. This could be done via NGOs, but also via religious organisations, schools and other organisations.
- Special government consultants for large employers or training institutions could be established, as these organisations cover large groups of people (employees/ students). These consultants would be easy to reach, and they could provide answers to specific questions that such organisations have.