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Functions of Russian Theatre in Estonia – an Example of Hostility and Hospitality

This article explores the evolving functions of Russian Theatre in Estonia from World War II to 2025. It examines how the theatre has served as a tool of propaganda, cultural representation, entertainment, education, artistic autonomy and community building across different political regimes. The study highlights theatre's shifting role amid societal changes, especially following Russia's 2022 invasion of Ukraine, and its ongoing struggle to redefine its identity in a democratic Estonia.

Keywords: theatre sociology, functions of theatre, Russian Theatre in Estonia, war in Ukraine

Context and introduction

Russian touring theatre troupes have been visiting Estonia at least since the 19th century and several amateur groups operating in Russian have been established in Tallinn, Narva and some other places in Estonia.[1] In the 1920s and 1930s, the Riga Russian Drama Theatre from Latvia also gave regular guest performances in the Republic of Estonia, mainly in the capital city of Tallinn.[2] Narva City Theatre (with a permanent troupe from 1897 to 1902) was probably the first professional Russian-language theatre in Estonia.[3] Since several theatre makers escaped from Russia to Estonia after 1917, they revived Russian–language theatrical life also in their new home country. But only in 1934, on the basis of the two most consistent amateur troupes, a professional Russian Theatre was established in Tallinn and it

1 Rähesoo (2011), 35, 138–139, 215–216, Kerman (1993), 45–46, Tormis (unpublished).
2 Tormis (unpublished).
3 Kerman (1993), 45–48.

was officially incorporated into the Estonian theatre field. The theatre was among others affected by Soviet political repressions and World War II.[4]

After World War II, two professional theatres were opened in Estonia – Russian State Drama Theatre (named Russian Theatre in this article) in Tallinn in 1948, and Kohtla-Järve Russian Drama Theatre in Kohtla-Järve in 1952 (closed 1962). Currently, there are also other Russian-language private theatres and troupes operating in Tallinn like Russian Puppet Theatre, Kiseljus theatre, PUNKT, Mon reflects, etc. Not to mention numerous Russian amateur groups operating in different places.

When Russia started the full-scale invasion to Ukraine on the 24th of February 2022, the questions of the functions of Russian Theatre in Estonia were discussed publicly, the most extreme authors asking for the closure of the theatre.[5] It was not the first time that the functions of Russian Theatre have been questioned,[6] but this time the overall approach to Russian cultural and educational institutions is more systematic and political.

Nevertheless, the main aim of this article is to analyse and describe the historical and current functions of Russian Theatre in Tallinn, since the theatre has been functioning next to other Estonian state repertoire theatres almost 80 years and has offered performances in Russian for the relatively high number of Russian speakers living in Tallinn and the North-Eastern part of the country. Other Russian theatres in Estonia have had rather short existence or amateur backgrounds and less cultural impact to the representation of Russian culture and attracting audiences. In addition, this institution has been one of the three pillars of Russian identity next to Russian-speaking media and education.[7]

Estonian theatre researchers have not dealt with Russian theatre in great depth, because Estonian theatre has mostly been understood as Estonian-language theatre, and from this perspective, Russian theatre has belonged to a different cultural space. The authors of this article represent

[4] Русская сцена в Эстонии (1998).

[5] Annus (2024).

[6] Laukus (2007).

[7] In December 2022, Estonian parliament implemented a law that requires that all education in elementary schools and gymnasiums is given in Estonian (Põhikooli-... (2022))

the Estonian-language cultural space, and they treat their object of study as a cultural Other located in a liminal space between Estonian and Russian society.

The article is divided into four parts: first, the authors propose a typology of the functions of performing arts institutions, based on the theories of British cultural policy researchers Eleonora Belfiore and Oliver Bennett, Dutch theatre sociologist Van Maanen, and the pioneer of performance studies Richard Schechner. The second, third and fourth part of the article test these functions in three distinct historical periods: 1) Soviet time (from 1945 to the 1980s); 2) the period of transformation and independence (from the end of the 1980s up until 2022); 3) after the Russia's full-scale invasion to Ukraine (from February 2022 until May 2025).

Theoretical frame

The arts carry different functions and values. Hans van Maanen proposes to distinguish between individual and social functions of the arts but stresses how they mutually influence each other and that personal values are preconditions for the societal ones.[8] Consequently, aesthetic experience is heavily influenced by its contextual relationships as well as the cultural context of the "users"[9]. Van Maanen proposes four frames for contextualising theatrical event: 1) communicative frame, i.e. the encounter of performers and spectators, the performance itself, 2) organisational frame that is determined by the actual "time and place" of the event, 3) institutional frame, i.e. the relationship between different agents in the theatre system, and 4) social frame that positions theatre and culture in the value systems of audiences.[10] Thus one can assume that when the social frame changes, it also affects the institutional, organisational, and communicative frame of the arts.

[8] Van Maanen (2009), 199.
[9] Van Maanen (2004), 240.
[10] Van Maanen (2004), 246.

British cultural policy researchers Eleonora Belfiore and Oliver Bennett[11] claim that through western history up until now there are eight categories of social impacts of the arts and all of them are more or less still relevant: (1) corruption and distraction, (2) catharsis, (3) personal well-being; (4) education and self-development, (5) moral improvement and civilisation, (6) political instrument, (7) social stratification and identity construction, (8) autonomy of the arts and rejection of instrumentality. We argue that some of them have more impact on the individual level (i.e. catharsis, personal well-being) and some more on the societal (i.e. political instrument or social stratification and identity construction). Some of the categories of social impact, or functions, are usually realised at the communicative frame (catharsis, education and self-development) when others are more attached to the organisational and institutional frame (identity construction, autonomy of the arts), or even to social frame (moral improvement, political instrument).

Richard Schechner[12] focuses on the functions of a performance on a wider, cultural level. Having an anthropological viewpoint, he sees different games (play) and rituals as performances that could have the following functions: (1) to entertain; (2) to make something that is beautiful, (3) to mark on > or change identity, (4) to make or foster community, (5) to heal, (6) to teach, persuade, or convince, (7) to deal with the sacred and/or the demonic. Even though Schechner defines performance as a particular single event, an institution like a theatre that has to have a distinctive identity, a brand, can be seen as a "performance" with its own values, identity and functions that certainly define the essence of a particular performing arts institution. Like the categories proposed by Belfiore and Bennett, the functions proposed by Schechner can also be divided between individual and social. Sometimes they overlap, like for example in the case of healing that can be both personal but also experienced on the community level.

As the article focuses on analysing the functions of an art institution that has to fulfil the needs of a larger group of audiences and the social field

[11] Belfiore, Bennett (2008), 39.
[12] Schechner (2006), 46.

more generally, we propose, based on the aforementioned, the following functions of a performing arts institution:

- entertainment,
- education,
- building and fostering communities and integration in society,
- (political) propaganda,
- representation of culture/state/ideology,
- artistic autonomy.

Entertainment of audiences is one of the main goals of a performing arts institution. Entertainment is a broad concept that is usually connected to easy and pleasurable experiences. Van Maanen has distinguished between challenging, comfortable and decorative aesthetic experiences[13] and entertainment is mostly either decorative or comfortable. Entertainment as a relaxing activity promotes personal well-being (Belfiore, Bennett) and might even have a healing effect (Schechner).

As the authors above already mentioned, theater makers and performing arts institutions might also have educational ambitions when choosing certain texts, topics, approaches and aesthetics, or when creating challenging aesthetic experiences. It is especially relevant for young audiences, but for more mature spectators as well. Education in the broad sense also includes self-development, moral improvement and civilisation (Belfiore, Bennett), or persuasion (Schechner).

Theatre enables one to build and strengthen one's identity, put it under questioning, and offer new ways of understanding the identity. Performance as a collective art form is a place for building different kinds of communities – among creative teams and audiences, between performers and spectators, between the theatre and its audiences on a wider level and even with the society as such. Thus a performance might even have a healing effect (Schechner). But at the other end of identity construction and community building is social stratification (Belfiore, Bennett) that the elitist image of theatre and high ticket prices might also strengthen.

[13] Van Maanen (2009), 193.

Propaganda is understood here as a wider concept, i.e. when the aims of the art institution are determined from outside and are not necessarily art-specific. Propaganda can often be about the values the theatre is representing and there is some overlap with the function of representation. More specifically, political propaganda is more driven by political and social forces, for example, when theatre is an instrument for carving the interests of certain groups or people.

Every performing arts institution represents something, either a certain type of culture, state, or ideology. Often it is expressed through the name, the venue (the building or the lack of it), the repertoire, artistic staff (either on the payroll or as guest artists), values the institution is carrying and presenting through all the aforementioned characteristics.

Artistic autonomy means that the activity of theatre is driven only by theatre makers' or institution's aesthetic aims, which is manifested with the slogan *l'art pour l'art.* Artistic autonomy embraces the following successive functions: to make something beautiful (Schechner), catharsis (Belfiore, Bennett), corruption and distraction (Belfiore, Bennett), to deal with the sacred and/or the demonic (Schechner).

The aim of this article is to analyse how these functions have been performed by Russian Theatre in Estonia during different historical periods. We discuss the above-mentioned features in the order of their importance, drawing on theatre criticism and historiography, and interviews with Russian theatre executives.

Russian Theatre during the Soviet period

Russian language theatres in Estonia have served different functions during different political eras. Since the Russian-speaking population was relatively small (8%) in Estonia before World War II[14], there was not a sufficient audience base to maintain a full-scale professional theatre.

Russian language professional theatres were opened right after the end of the war as a representation of the Soviet Union, i.e., Soviet occupation,

[14] Eesti Entsüklopeedia.

and as tools of political propaganda. State Russian Drama Theatre (the name was preserved until 2005) in Tallinn opened its doors at the symbolic central location, Freedom Square in a former luxurious Art Deco cinema in 1948.[15] The first troupe of the theatre consisted mostly of the graduates of a course in GITIS (Russian Institute of Theatre Arts) who were sent to work in Tallinn, and only a few had any connection with Estonia.[16]

As theatre historian Lea Tormis has mentioned, since Russian Theatre was created from the top down as part of the official Russification policy, this fact influenced the status of the theatre in Estonian society ever since, despite the generally good reputation of Russian theatre internationally. Also, partly due to the establishment of Russian Theatre, the drama department of Estonia theatre, located in the building, was disbanded, leaving only one Estonian-language drama theatre left in Tallinn. The situation changed only in 1965 when the Youth Theatre was established.[17] One can assume that due to these and other traumatic events related to the aftermath of World War II, had an influence on theatre historian Kaarin Kask, who did not even tackle Russian Theatre among other institutions in her monograph titled *Estonian Soviet Theatre 1945–1965* (1987).[18]

In the 1940s and 1950s, theatre institutions in the Soviet Union served first of all as instruments of Soviet propaganda with the aim of bringing up the Soviet people, or as tools of Russification.[19] The ideological and educational functions were well embedded, and the mission of satisfying the interests of the masses were stressed as the fundamental basis of Soviet art. For the completion of the functions, socialist realism as the main artistic principle was implemented and a sharp line between socialist and bourgeois views was drawn.[20]

[15] The theatre replaced Red Flag Baltic Fleet Theatre that operated in Tallinn few years after the war and was first tarnsferred to St. Petesburg in 1948 and later closed. Rähesoo (2011), 278.
[16] Rähesoo (2011), 278.
[17] Tormis (unpublished).
[18] Since the book was published in 1987, in the winds of perestroika, the title on the front cover was just *Estonian Theatre 1945–1965*, without the word 'Soviet' like on title page.
[19] Rähesoo (2011), 278.
[20] Kask (1987), 120.

Russian Theatre was supposed to build up and foster Soviet identity and integrate locals from different parts of the Soviet Union into socialist society. One of the distinctive features of Russian Theatre during the period was the large-scale guest performances, usually spanning several calendar months in a row and conveying almost the entire current repertoire, in very different parts of the Soviet Union – from the big cities of Moscow and Leningrad to the cities of the Far North.[21]

Nevertheless, the variety of national cultures was accepted in Soviet theatres and sometimes even highlighted. Artistic directors of Russian Theatre often manifested in their public statements the importance of introducing Estonian drama and theatre to the Russian-speaking audiences but the plans were actually not fully realized. Thus, during the period, very few productions based on Estonian drama were staged and very few Estonian directors worked in the theatre. Over 30 years, out of 262 productions a total of 16 (or 6%) were Estonian plays (classical and contemporary).[22] Exceptionally, a well-known Estonian actor Rein Aren worked there (1973–1979) as well as Estonian scenographers Voldemar Peil (1971–1977) and Marianne Kuurme (1980–2009). Estonian directors like Voldemar Panso (1959), Kaarin Raid (1981) and Kalju Komissarov (1983) brought out a production. But overall, Russian Theatre worked in isolation from Estonian theatre and theatre makers. Since there was a considerable overlap in the repertoire of Estonian and Russian drama theatres, also new drama did not bring Estonian audiences to Russian Theatre.[23]

Providing entertainment for the Russian-speaking population in Estonia gained its significance for Russian Theatre after the Stalinist era. Entertainment did not include only comedies and musicals but first of all romantic love stories. Also the Estonian authors most often performed in Russian Theatre like Ardi Liives, Egon Rannet, Raimond Kaugver, etc. represented mostly this category.[24]

[21] Kekelidze (unpublished), 48–49.
[22] Laukus (2007), 23.
[23] Kekelidze (unpublished).
[24] Kekelidze (unpublished), 32.

There was very little artistic autonomy in the Soviet Union, since texts, new productions, and the whole repertoire of a theatre were controlled by different institutions and regulated by the central orders. The first two decades of the Russian theatre were rather unstable, since the artistic directors, who were also appointed to Tallinn by Moscow, did not stay in the position for long and returned soon to the capital or other bigger cities in Russia. According to the critics, the artistic level of the productions was volatile and mediocre. Russian Theatre gained more attention under the leadership of Vitaliy Chermenyov (1972–1981) when the artistic level improved and also Estonian-speaking spectators started attending the performances. The Russian theatre worked in isolation from the artistic developments in Estonia (so-called theatre renewal of the 1960s) and in Russia (Moscow, St. Petersburg).[25]

In conclusion, Russian Theatre in Estonia was established in the framework of hostile occupation as a political and educational tool. After the Stalinist era, the theatre started to serve the entertainment function for the growing number of Russian-speaking inhabitants. The difficulties of Russian Theatre, however, were linked to the volatile artistic level of productions, unstable artistic leadership and the deficit of educated and culturally interested spectators, since Soviet forced migration did not favour the growth of the aforementioned audience group either.[26] At the beginning of the 1980s, several theatre critics and directors started to discuss the potential new functions of Russian Theatre and the need for renewal[27] but the ideas were not implemented.

Russian Theatre before and after regaining state independence

As a result of the severe Russification policy, the number of Russian-speakers in Estonia had grown to 30% of the population in the 1980s.[28] Perestroika and glasnost of the 1980s influenced the ways Russian theatres

[25] Kekelidze (unpublished).
[26] Kekelidze (unpublished), Tormis (unpublished).
[27] Kromanov (1981), Siimer (1982), 203–204.
[28] Eesti Entsüklopeedia.

were functioning all over the Soviet Union, especially in the republics of it. In the context of transformations, Russian theatres acknowledged their "lack of dialogue" with the local culture and dramaturgy.[29] It was pointed out that Estonians have not developed a habit of visiting Russian Theatre[30] and the latter has constantly ignored the criticism towards this issue.[31]

When Estonia regained independence in 1991, the Estonian government decided to keep subsidies for all the state theatres[32] that had existed during the Soviet period. Like in other Baltic countries, maintaining a Russian theatre in a capital city can be seen as a decision of cultural policy. Like all the other theatres, Russian Theatre was also heavily influenced by the major economical, social and cultural changes that the whole Estonian society went through after the collapse of the Soviet Union and regaining independence – the audience numbers dropped around 50% at the beginning of the 1990s compared to the situation at the end of the 1980s.[33] But the seat occupancy rate in Russian Theatre was already 50–60% in the 1980s.[34] In this economically difficult situation, the theatre also started putting more emphasis on entertainment, staging more comedies and well-made plays to attract audiences.

But alongside entertainment, Russian Theatre also had another important function – providing a meeting place and through that fostering the community of Russian-speakers. The theatre was seen as the third Russian institution next to Russian schools and media that was maintaining the connection to Russian language, culture and identity. Especially at the beginning of the 1990s when travelling between Russia and Estonia became more complicated because of the visa requirements, Russian Theatre was sometimes called as "theatre in emigration,"[35] referring to the feeling that habitual communication with the motherland was cut off and Russian-speakers suddenly found themselves living in emigration.

[29] Калиш (1989).
[30] Тинн (1986).
[31] Vladimirova, Govoruško (1987).
[32] Saro (2010), 27.
[33] Saro (2010), 21.
[34] Laukus (2007), 31.
[35] Laukus (2007), 45.

But already during the first half of the 1990s, the management of the theatre stated that Russian Theatre should be integrated into Estonian society, being at the same time "the source of Russian culture" for the whole society.[36] The statute of the Russian Theatre from 2009 also stated that the main aim of the institution is to create opportunities for the development of the Russian theatre tradition and culture in the Republic of Estonia.[37] During the forthcoming decades, a lot of emphasis was put on staging Russian classics but only a few productions based on Estonian dramaturgy.[38] For example, only nine productions based on Estonian dramaturgy were staged between 1986–2006[39] and only four premiered between 2019 and 2023.[40] Russian Theatre even started to offer simultaneous translation into Estonian but this did not attract Estonian-language audiences either. The translation system installed in 1989 was out of order for the next ten years.[41] Therefore, the theatre was not been able to become the melting pot of two different cultures and social groups, nor was it able to create a local Russian-Estonian identity or deal with the relevant local issues, even it was marked as an aim in the statutes of the theatre from 2004: "to create a dialogue with the audience by addressing socially relevant and intriguing topics"[42].

Building and fostering the community of Russian-speakers in Estonia was achieved through culture and education, as well as through cultural education in theatre. As stated before, one of the main aims of Russian Theatre was staging Russian literary classics – that formed the backbone of Russian identity – but also new drama. Two productions that caused strong social resonance in the 1990s and 2000s illustrate the tendency well – *To Moscow! To Moscow!* (1994), an adaptation of Chekhov's *Three sisters*, and *The Idiot* (2000) by Dostoevsky. The actor playing the role of Myshkin was awarded the prize of the best male actor in this season.

[36] Kuznetsova (1994).
[37] Sihtasutuse Vene Teater põhikiri (2009).
[38] Laukus (2007), 76.
[39] Karja (2020), 100.
[40] Statistika.
[41] Laukus (2007), 67.
[42] Vene teatri põhikiri (2004). https://www.veneteater.ee/storage/_core/sa-vene-teater-pohikiri-1[2].pdf

Already the first Estonian constitution from 1920 introduced the cultural autonomy of all the different nationalities living in Estonia.[43] Therefore, maintaining Russian theatre in Tallinn was in line with other political decisions made after the regaining of state independence, since it enabled the preservation of Russian identity and culture. Thus the theatre that represented first of all the occupation and Russification during the Soviet period, acquired a new function in independent Estonia as the representation of Russian culture and the biggest national minority. Russian Theatre was an institution where one could see performances in Russian, created by Russian directors and actors who had studied in Russia. This meant that aesthetics and topics brought on stage were similar to other Russian, mainly provincial theatres, and the performances did not directly address local issues.[44] Due to the rather low artistic quality of performances, the theatre was not able to represent internationally highly valued Russian theatre aesthetics either. It is also worth mentioning that the location of the building of Russian Theatre – at the Freedom Square and next to the Tallinn City Council – bears highly symbolic representational meaning.

Soviet theatre censorship and the corresponding institutions were disbanded already by the end of the 80s and Estonian governments did not set any specific rules or aims for the state-founded theatres.[45] Thus it is hard to point out any kind of explicit propaganda by the state or by the theatre.

Based on that, one can assume that Russian Theatre has enjoyed full artistic autonomy, being free in choosing its repertoire, employees and artistic practices. However, Russian Theatre has been facing financial problems more than other state theatres throughout its history,[46] even though the state subsidy covered approximately 70% to 75% of the budget in the 21st century, being the most generous subsidy to a spoken theatre in Estonia.[47]

[43] Eesti Vabariigi põhiseadus (1920).
[44] Laukus (2007), 77.
[45] Saro (2010), 27.
[46] For example Repson, Korv (2007), BNS (2016), Rahahätta sattunud... (2018).
[47] Statistika.

Russian Theatre has four halls: Big stage (621 seats, the biggest drama stage in Tallinn), Small stage (70 seats), Mirror hall (60 seats) and Round hall (70 seats).[48] From 2004 to 2006 the building was renovated and got an expansion costing about 8.8 million Euros, but this investment was followed by the times of artistic and organisational confusion.[49] To fill up all the seats, the institution has to compose a repertoire that attracts different kinds of audiences "from cradle to grave". As the theatre has had a relatively big troupe (around 40 actors on the payroll) and a limited number of audiences (mainly the Russophones), there have been more than 30 different productions in the repertoire, which is a much higher number than in other state theatres in Tallinn or outside.[50] Thus, the deficit of audiences and income definitely set some restrictions on the artistic autonomy of the theatre.

Thus the main functions of Russian Theatre from the end of the 1980s up to 2022 were as follows: entertainment, preservation of Russian cultural identity and representation of Russian culture. Even though theatre makers themselves and sometimes certain critics raised questions about the functions of Russian Theatre in Estonia[51], the discussion never reached the wider public. The function often talked about, integration of Russian-speakers into Estonian culture and society, or integration of Estonian and Russian theatre cultures and audiences, was never actually aimed or achieved.

Russian Theatre after 2022

According to the latest census of 2021, 84,8% of people living in Estonia are Estonian citizens, 6% have Russian citizenship, 5% have no citizenship (they have a so-called grey passport), and 4,2% have other citizenships. 69.1% of people living in Estonia consider themselves Estonians by nationality, 23,7% are Russians, and 7,2% are of other nationalities. There is no possibility to

[48] Saali rent.
[49] Visnap (2009).
[50] Statistika.
[51] Visnap (2009).

mark yourself as Estonian-Russian in the census if one wishes. This could be the option for the people who have been born in Estonia, have Russian citizenship and who can speak both Russian and Estonian.[52] However, the latest Estonian Society Integration Monitoring 2023 shows that loyalty to either Estonian or Russian government is not dependent on whether one has Estonian or Russian citizenship or whether they can speak Estonian or not, since there are different subgroups of Russians with different values, political views etc.[53] Therefore Russians living in Estonia do not form a homogeneous group of people and among them are probably some who support Putin and some who do not.

When Russia's annexation of Crimea from Ukraine in 2014 had no impact on the status of Russian institutions in Estonia, then Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine in February 2022 stopped cultural collaboration with Russia and raised lively public discussions about the functions of Russian cultural institutions, incl. theatres in all three Baltic countries. It also meant that guest performances by theatres from Russia, as well as the well-known theatre festival Golden Mask (which expanded from Moscow to Tallinn in 2005), were cancelled.[54] In 2023, the Estonian government adopted a decree that does not allow the employment of people with Russian citizenship whose residence permit in the European Union was not issued before 2022, making it impossible to hire new Russian immigrants. On the other hand, Estonia has welcomed over 40,000 refugees from Ukraine, around 33,000 of them stayed in Estonia, and more than half of them live in the capital region, Harju County.[55] All these changes have also influenced the communicative, organisational, institutional and social frame, and the functions of Russian Theatre. Since it is too soon to analyse the new functions of the institution, we just map the topics emerging in discussions currently going on in Estonian media.

The ideological standing of Russian Theatre is currently the most discussed aspect and partly because of the actions of its employees. In

[52] Rahvastiku demograafilised ja etno-kultuurilised näitajad.
[53] Eesti ühiskonna lõimumismonitooring 2023.
[54] Kultuurisuhted Eesti ja Venemaa vahel. Kuidas suhtuda? (2022).
[55] Aasta sõjapõgenikke Eestis.

September 2022, the former creative head of Russian Theatre was dismissed because he published a post on Facebook claiming that "a rotten, stale Russophobia suddenly crept out of all the cracks" and compared this to the extermination of the jews during the Second World War.[56]

The management of the theatre changed through regular elections at the turn of 2023–2024. The new managing director Anne-Lii Päiv, former vice-director of the theatre, has repeatedly commented on the ideological standing of Russian Theatre, both in media and in personal communications, and among other issues condemning the war in Ukraine.[57] The current creative head, director Dimitri Petrenko was invited to the position from Latvia. Petrenko's mother tongue is Russian but he has worked mostly in the Latvian language and made only two productions in Russian before moving to Tallinn.[58] To the question, do we need a Russian language theatre in Estonia, he responded as follows: "... we do not have the right to serve only one part of society. It cannot be a community theatre. Our theatre must not work according to a national principle, but must, in my opinion, offer a repertoire that is appropriate for Estonia. If the theatre offers something that is topical – both artistically and in terms of content – language becomes secondary, I am sure."[59] Anneli-Lii Päiv and the new dramaturg of theatre Laur Kaunissaare, have also highlighted that the most difficult, but also the most important task of the theatre, is to interpret, and sometimes reinterpret, Russian culture.[60]

The ideological sentiment of a performing arts institution is represented best through its repertoire, which could also cause conflicts. Since February 2022, the repertoire of Russian Theatre has also been under close observation. Contrary to the expectations of the Russian-speaking audience, Estonian journalists and society expect the institution and its employees to tackle the war in performances and condemn the war[61] and

[56] Pihlak (2024).
[57] Päiv (2024a, 2024b) Päiv, Kaunissaare (2025).
[58] Raud (2024).
[59] Raud (2024).
[60] Päiv, Kaunissaare (2025).
[61] Kaugema (2024).

through that "to educate" its audiences about the current ideological conflict.

In 2025, a documentary performance *I Left Ukraine in 2022* premiered, performed by three actors who escaped from Ukraine and are currently working in Russian Theatre. Even though the theatre staged it to show its support to Ukrainian refugees, the performance has been accused of narrating the main points of the "Russian world", for example how the Ukranian state has forced more Ukrainian language in educational and cultural sphere (all the three actors come from eastern part of the country that traditionally has been more Russian speaking), escaping the country instead of going to the war (choosing life over death) and such.[62]

Considering that Estonia has accepted more than 30,000 Ukrainian refugees who mostly understand Russian, it is relevant to ask whether Russian Theatre should also see them as potential audiences.

Production of "The Gods", with two different ensembles – one Estonian-language and the other Russian-language – was staged in 2025. It is written by well-known Lithuanian playwright Marius Ivaškevičius and directed by Elmo Nüganen, also familiar to Russian audiences. The performance talks about the wife of a documentary maker who is killed by Russian troops in Ukraine.

"One of the important goals of Russian theatre is to open up: both to the Estonian cultural space and the local theatre scene, as well as to more audience segments in the Russian-speaking cultural space," comments Laur Kaunissaare.[63] Kaunissaare also stresses that Russian Theatre should tackle everyday issues and topics relevant to the Russophones living in Estonia. So far there have been only few performances of this type, which have introduced new aesthetic languages like documentary or physical theatre. The audience has received these types of performances with hesitation.

In 2024, the Ministry of Culture initiated an audience survey with the aim of getting a better overview of the profile of spectators attending Russian Theatre. In general, the audience does not differ much from visitors of the Estonian theatres, where women with higher education and

[62] Makarychev (2025).
[63] Kaugema, Kaunissaare (2025).

at least average income dominate. But the audience of Russian Theatre is clearly dominated by the age group 50 and older[64], even out of 170,000 Russophones living in Tallinn, only one third belong to the age group. It means that young and middle-aged Russophones tend not to attend the theatre.[65] Spectators of Russian Theatre mostly expect to see classical performances (30%), comedies (17%) and musicals or operettas (13%). Only 1% of respondents would like to see topical performances and 5% political performances.[66] Thus, the audience of Russian Theatre is mostly driven towards classics and entertainment.

In June 2025, the Ministry of Culture in collaboration with the management of the theatre changed the name of Russian Theatre to Südalinna Theatre[67] and the state budget was increased by 15%. Other changes will probably also follow.

Conclusions

"Russia's invasion of Ukraine has unleashed so many accompanying processes and changed the context, and due to that Russian Theatre cannot be immune to the changes. One has to come out of its parallel world,"[68] admits Kaunissaare. The history of Russian Theatre demonstrates how the change of a social frame (World War II, Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine) through the change of cultural context sometimes affects the institutional, organisational, and communicative frames of a theatre, and sometimes (Estonia regaining its independence) it has no explicit effect. In addition, the case study shows how individual and social functions of theatre intertwine, merge, and sometimes also contradict with each other.

Russian Theatre was established in the context of occupation and Russification, during turbulent times for Estonian society. At first, the main functions of Russian Theatre – political propaganda, representation

[64] Russian Theatre attendance and audience survey (2024).
[65] Kaugema, Kaunissare (2025).
[66] Russian Theatre attendance and audience survey (2024).
[67] *"Südalinna"* means "downtown" in Estonian. However, the name in English will be the Südalinna Theatre.
[68] Kaugema, Kaunissaare (2025).

of the state and ideology, education – were forced on the theatre by the central government. But in the longer run, the theatre has carried two main functions – entertainment and fostering the cultural identity of the Russian-speaking community. Therefore, the theatre has never fully integrated into Estonian society and culture, ignoring for example the aesthetic innovations taking place in Estonian or Russian theatres in Moscow or St. Petersburg. Being economically heavily dependent on their audiences, who have been dominantly interested in the classical theatre language and Russian authors or comedies, Russian Theatre has been rather conservative and relayed on Russian guest directors who often do not know the local sociocultural context, and vice versa – the few Estonian directors invited to Russian Theatre have no attachment to the local Russophone community. Therefore, the Russian-Estonian community building and integration have not taken place as expected. The latter is mirroring the general situation of disintegration that the Estonian society has gone through in the last thirty years. Developments in Russian Theatre also mirror the situation of Estonian theatres during the Soviet era, when the main function was also the preservation of national identity, which held back artistic innovation.

Paradoxically, the situation of Russian Theatre after February 2022 is somewhat similar to the situation in 1948. Because of the escalation of Russia's war in Ukraine, the theatre is forced to re-evaluate its functions and identity, but again, it is not so much bottom-up, but more a top-down activity.

Even though Estonia is a democratic country and cultural organisations have therefore high artistic autonomy, it is clear that Russian Theatre was hesitant in reacting to the changing political situation and is still struggling with accepting the changes. When all the other performing arts institutions in Estonia and neighbouring countries showed their support to Ukraine in different ways as soon as possible, Russian Theatre did it only in 2025. The performances that have taken a clear stand against the invasion of Ukraine, have had a mixed reception and left halls half empty. A big repertoire theatre that is dependent on the box office income has to balance between the taste of the audiences, but also consider cultural and social contexts, especially when the security of the state is under threat.

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Rusų teatro funkcijos Estijoje – priešiškumo ir svetingumo pavyzdys

Santrauka

Šiame straipsnyje nagrinėjama rusų teatro Estijoje kaita nuo Antrojo pasaulinio karo iki 2025 metų. Analizuojama, kaip teatras skirtingų politinių režimų laikotarpiu buvo naudojamas propagandos, kultūrinio atstovavimo, pramogų, švietimo, meninės autonomijos ir bendruomenės kūrimo tikslais. Tyrime pabrėžiama teatro vaidmens kaita visuomenės pokyčių kontekste, ypač po 2022 m. Rusijos invazijos į Ukrainą, ir jo nuolatinė kova dėl tapatybės apibrėžties demokratinėje Estijoje.

Reikšminiai žodžiai: teatro sociologija, teatro funkcijos, Rusijos teatras Estijoje, karas Ukrainoje