

Role of Russian Media in the Baltics and Moldova

DEMOGRAPHICS OF RUSSIAN SPEAKERS

The prevalence of Russian-language media in the Baltics and Moldova is not surprising given the large Russian-speaking populations of these countries. Latvia has the most Russian-speakers, with 85% saying they would understand all or most of a TV or radio broadcast in Russian, followed by Moldova at 81%. Estonia and Lithuania have fewer fluent Russian speakers – 65% and 59%, respectively.

The majority of Russian speakers in each country is 45 years of age or older and much smaller percentages between the ages of 15 and 29. The biggest exception is Moldova, where half of Russian speakers are under 45 and 22% are 15-29.

Russian speakers tend to be concentrated in urban areas, with vast majorities living in cities (81% in Estonia, 73% in Latvia, and 70% in Lithuania). Again, this is excepting Moldova, where only a slight majority (55%) are in urban areas.

USE OF RUSSIAN-LANGUAGE MEDIA FOR NEWS

Use of Russian-language media for news is by far the most popular in Moldova, where 69% of the general population (and 85% of Russian speakers) report its use. Numbers are somewhat lower in Estonia and Latvia (76% and 69% among Russian speakers, respectively).

In contrast, Lithuania, with the smallest percentage of Russian speakers overall, use is lowest at only 21% among the general population. Even among Russian speakers, however, only about a third (36%) say they turn to Russian-language media for news. In Estonia and Latvia, ethnic Russians make up a larger portion of the population (28% and 31%) and also of those using Russian-language media for news (53% and 44%). Moldova differs somewhat from the Baltics in this regard; although the share of ethnic Russians in the general population is only 4%, they have the highest level of Russian-language media use.

TV is the most often used media platform to get Russian-language news in all four countries. This is followed by internet and radio, which garner similar rates of weekly usage, although internet is slightly more popular in Moldova and Latvia while radio is more popular in Estonia and Lithuania. Social networks, SMS, and apps, lag somewhat behind. However, rates of new media usage to follow Russian-language news is much higher among youth.

IMPORTANCE AND TRUST IN VARIOUS MEDIA

Despite using Russian-language media for news and information, more respondents find domestic media important when they form opinions about current events than they do media from Russia or international (non-Russian Federation) media. Likewise, there is a higher level of trust in domestic media than in media from the Russian Federation. The exception to this is in Moldova, where the only about two in five respondents find domestic, Russian, or international (non-Russian Federation) media trustworthy.

Ethnic Russians in the Baltics are much more likely than the titular ethnicity to trust Russian media and less likely to trust domestic media. The majority in all three trust Russian media (as high as 81% in Estonia) while only a minority of those from the titular ethnicity do (26% in Estonia, which has the biggest gap between the two groups). Levels of trust in international media from outside of the Russian Federation tend to be low regardless of ethnicity.

Moldova differs somewhat in terms of ethnicity. Trust of Russian media is higher among Moldovans than among other ethnicities, but still low (46% compared to 21%). Other ethnicities are also slightly more likely to trust domestic media (46% compared to 40% among Moldovans).

USE OF MEDIA AND SUPPORT OF RUSSIA AND ITS POLICIES

In the Baltics, there appears to be no connection between watching Russian media and supporting Putin's policies. However, there is a connection between trusting what is broadcast on Russian media and support. Those who use and trust the information they get on Russian media are much more likely to support Russia's actions in Ukraine, Putin's domestic policies and Putin's international policies than those who use Russian Federation media but do not trust it. Those who use Russian Federation media but do not trust it have much more similar levels of support to those who do not use Russian Federation media at all. While support is slightly higher among non-trusting users than non-users, in most cases it is only between two and eight percentage points higher.

The trend in the Baltics is similar when respondents were asked their agreement with a number of statements, including whether the Russian Federation has the right to defend ethnic Russians outside Russia, whether Putin's leadership has strengthened Russia's standing in the world, whether Western countries are trying to weaken Russia, and whether it is a great misfortune that the Soviet Union collapsed. However, in most cases there tends to be a slightly larger gap in level of agreement between those who use Russian media and do not trust it and those who do not use Russian media at all.

Moldova is a different case altogether. There is a significant difference between those who use and trust Russian media and those who use it but do not trust it, with those who do not trust Russian media voicing a much lower level of support for Russia's policies. However, those that do not use Russian media at all have levels of support that are nearly identical to those who use and trust Russian media. It is likely that those who do not use Russian media are relying mostly on (and trusting) domestic Moldovan media, which tends to be pro-Russian Federation and has similar editorial biases.

World Poll Findings

Data from the 2014 Gallup World Poll from 12 Former Soviet Union countries show the vast majority of people living in former Soviet republics were following the news about the situation in Ukraine and Crimea very closely during the conflict in 2014 with more people finding Russian media as a more reliable source than western media. Majorities in most of Former Soviet Union countries supported Crimea joining Russia. More over people who used western media in addition to Russian media were even more likely to support Crimea joining Russia.

Programming Highlights

- The reach of “Current Time” is being amplified by RFE/RL’s DIGIM social media team, which engages Russian and global Russian-speaking audiences with a wide range of products, including new mobile apps on Apple and Google platforms.
- RFE/RL soon will expand the reach of “Current Time” with the launch of a daily six-hour Russian-language video program stream;
- New research: nearly two million in Russia are watching “Current Time” weekly on line;
- More than 500 Central Asia media outlets already have subscribed to RFE/RL’s Central Asia news wire service, launched in September in Russian and vernacular languages;
- VOA and RFE/RL programs now are carried on more than 120 television, radio and internet outlets in Ukraine;
- VOA’s Ukrainian Service now acts as a de facto Washington bureau for four major national television channels: Channel 5, First National TV, ICTV and Channel 24, including live weekly interactives and special reports for ICTV and First National TV. RFE/RL’s Ukrainian Service provides reporting from Europe for ICTV.
- RFE/RL, VOA television reach expands in eastern Ukraine;
- VOA Russian “Briefing” targets digital audiences with a 10-minute daily digital digest of short video reports hosted by an anchor and distributed via social media;
- BBG brokered a contract with PBS, funded by the State Department, to bring nearly 400 hours of high-quality U.S. public media content to Ukraine, Lithuania and Estonia.
- BBG transmission equipment is being delivered to Ukraine; this will allow Ukrainian television and radio to penetrate occupied territories;
- BBG trains journalists in Ukraine, Moldova.

U.S. International Media Ukraine/Russia Crisis Programming

Since the fall of the Yanukovich government in Ukraine in February 2014 and ensuing Russian aggression in Crimea and eastern Ukraine, BBG language services at Voice of America (VOA) and Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty (RFE/RL) have added or expanded more than 35 new programs on multiple media platforms in Russian, Ukrainian, and other languages to reach new audiences in Ukraine, Russia, elsewhere in the former Soviet space, and around the world.

The new and expanded BBG programs represent five broad lines of effort:

- Focusing programming to impact strategic audiences
- Expanding partnerships to reach audiences in local markets and inform the news agenda
- Moving resources to digital platforms to directly engage audiences
- Increasing research on the ground to better understand audiences and impact
- Utilizing BBG capabilities and expertise to meet unfilled strategic needs and opportunities

Current Time

BBG’s daily 30-minute Russian-language television news program, “Current Time,” launched in October 2014 and is a joint production between RFE/RL and VOA. It now is on the air in nine countries via 25 media outlets, and is available to digital audiences worldwide. The European version airs in Ukraine, Moldova, Georgia, Lithuania, and Latvia, with segments of the program airing in Israel. A Central Asia version airs in Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan and Kazakhstan. Weekend Current Time programs -- “Itogi” by VOA and “Nedelya” by RFE/RL -- are on the air as well.

In Russia, where placement on domestic stations is not possible, Current Time is available on NewsTube.ru, Russia’s largest news site.

“Current Time” also reaches Russian-speaking news seekers worldwide via digital platforms, including a website and YouTube channel, as well as web portals in the Baltic countries, Belarus, and in Azerbaijan.

Prime Time with Myroslava Gongadze

In September 2015, VOA and its partner, First National TV in Ukraine launched “Prime Time with Myroslava Gongadze,” a 26-minute weekly TV program featuring hard-hitting interviews with Ukrainian and American newsmakers. The program is designed to provide an increased understanding of U.S. foreign policy, particularly regarding Ukraine and Russia, and of Western perspectives on events and developments related to democratic reforms in Ukraine. The opening show featuring a wide-ranging interview with Ukrainian president Petro Poroshenko and topped national TV ratings in Ukraine, while generating significant media buzz and driving the news agenda in both Ukrainian and Russian-language media markets.

Radio Crimea Realities

In September 2015 RFE/RL Ukrainian, in partnership with the First Radio Channel of the National Radio Company of Ukraine, launched “Radio Crimea.Realities,” Russian-language radio programming that is broadcast by medium wave transmitters (549 kHz) in Ukraine to Crimea. RFE/RL programs air daily at 0835 and 1835 Kyiv time, and on Saturdays as well. Initial anecdotal reports confirm that the signal is strong in Crimea and that it also reaches portions of southern Russia, including the Krasnodar and Rostov regions.