

Lightning Country Snapshot Estonia

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Estonia: Crisis Science Communication Landscape

- Small, highly digital country with centralized crisis communication coordination
- Lead coordination by Government Office of Estonia
- Strategic Communication Unit monitors **public opinion & misinformation trends** (incl. social listening tools)
- In crises, citizens are directed to the national portal **kriis.ee** for verified information

Sectoral responsibility: **relevant ministries communicate evidence in their policy domains**

👉 Science communication during crises often relies on **government experts rather than formally embedded external scientists**

COVID-19 remains the most prominent recent case in Estonia where crisis science communication was actively coordinated at the central government level

- The Government Office played a key role in rapidly synthesizing scientific evidence and ensuring its broad dissemination through strategic communication efforts.
- **A Council of Science Advisors** composed of experts was established under the Government, which regularly prepared reports and analyses.
- Special attention was given to Ida-Viru County and Russian-speaking communities, where public trust was lower and people were more exposed to Russian information channels.
- As a result, the national vaccination campaign was strategically launched there first, based on public opinion monitoring that showed higher hesitancy compared to other regions.

One science communication success story

COVID crisis also triggered **innovative science outreach initiatives**

- University of Tartu campaign collecting citizens' questions and providing science-based answers
- Science explainer video series by Estonian Young Academy of Sciences
- Strong cooperation between **government, universities, media and civil society**

Key success factor:

Human-centred communication: listening first, then explaining science

This helped maintain relatively high overall trust in science in Estonia.

Crisis where communication was insufficient: COVID-19

However, several tensions weakened communication impact

Challenges

- Scientists sometimes communicated **via media before policymakers**, creating confusion about decisions
- Political leadership changes **trust gaps between scientists and government**
- Strong exposure to Russian information space, including promotion of Sputnik vaccine and discrediting western vaccines
- Public perceived **scientific uncertainty as disagreement or inconsistency**

Result: overall solid coordination, but **trust fragmentation and message timing issues reduced effectiveness**

Main actors responsible for communicating scientific evidence to the public during crises

Government Office / Strategic Communication Unit

- Coordinates national messaging
- Monitors public opinion and misinformation
- Directs crisis information flows

Line Ministries & Government Agencies

- Provide **domain-specific expert communication**
- Example areas: cyber security, animal diseases, health risks

Scientific Community & Universities

- **Advisory councils, public explainers, media engagement**
- Often **informal but influential communicators**

👉 Additional actor: civil society fact-checking initiatives such as Propastop monitoring hostile information operations.

Emerging Challenge: “Slow Science Crises”

Example: Onshore Wind Farms Debate

- Onshore wind farm development in Estonia has triggered strong debates among local communities, developers, and state authorities. No clear “right vs wrong” evidence narrative
- Noise & Health Concerns. Scientific data: no proven health impact; community experience: mixed perceptions, trust gap.
- Different Priorities – Government: climate & energy security; Communities: landscape & quality of life.
- Scientific explanations often arrive after polarization occurs.

Key Insight:

- Not a failure of science, but a crisis of communication timing and trust
- Lack of neutral trusted mediators
- Protest movements sometimes instrumentalize science arguments
- Long-term, polarized conflict between **different scientific interpretations and societal values**

Take away messages

- **Data $\neq$ trust**
- **Science alone $\neq$ value conflict resolution**
- **Early engagement $>$ late correction**



Take away messages

- **Prepare early.** Crisis science communication capacity must be built *before* a crisis, including trusted expert networks, clear protocols and audience insight tools.
- **Ensure strong central coordination.** Leadership from the Government Office of Estonia helped maintain coherent messaging but this must be combined with structured cooperation with universities and independent scientists.
- **Keep messages simple and consistent.** In crises, clarity matters more than volume. Conflicting evidence-based messages from different actors can quickly undermine public trust.
- **Communicate for different information environments.** Targeted outreach is essential when trust levels and media exposure differ across regions or language communities.
- **Address slow science conflicts, not only acute crises.** Long-term polarised debates for example on environmental issues can gradually erode trust in science and institutions if not actively managed.





Thank you!