


DIALOGUE CIRCLES
ACROSS ESTONIA
**REPORT**
**2026**

“Whatever tomorrow brings, I’ll plant another apple tree today.”

# Introduction

**WHAT IS A DIALOGUE CIRCLE?**
**A dialogue is a conversation that aims to deepen our understanding of a topic, of others and of ourselves. A dialogue circle is not about debating, reaching a decision or persuading anyone. It is about making room for different perspectives and recognising the value of personal experience.**

Geopolitical tensions and the anxiety that crises bring are calling for new forms of resilience. People's ability to cope, individually and together, their sense of belonging and their faith in the future are all being put to the test.

In spring 2026, around 500 people took part in dialogue circles across Estonia. They discussed how to cope with the changes and fears arising from the security situation, what helps them manage and how to strengthen society's resolve. The initiative coincided with the first drone incidents in Estonian airspace and the first emergency alerts warning people of an actual threat.

A total of 62 dialogue circles exploring the question "How can I cope?" were held in libraries, schools, youth centres, museums, village halls, workplaces, fire stations and sports clubs.

Trained volunteers facilitated the dialogue circles. This report draws on all the discussions, bringing together many voices to show how people across Estonia are experiencing and thinking about these difficult times.

The dialogue circles were based on Finland's National Dialogues (kansalliset dialogit) model,[1] which has two main aims:

1. to give people opportunities to come together and discuss important issues openly and constructively;
2. to draw on participants' experiences of challenges and opportunities to build a broader understanding of the topic that benefits the public sector and other stakeholders.

1 https://kansallisetdialogit.fi/en/

Estonia's dialogue circles are part of Borderland Dialogues, a wider partnership that promotes a culture of constructive discussion. Similar discussions are taking place in Finland, Latvia, Lithuania, Norway and Poland. All these countries are looking for ways to help people and communities withstand difficulties and keep society connected in uncertain times.

**The initiative was delivered by the Estonian Cooperation Assembly in partnership with the University of Tartu and the Estonian Government Office, with support from the Nordic Council of Ministers' Office in Estonia.**

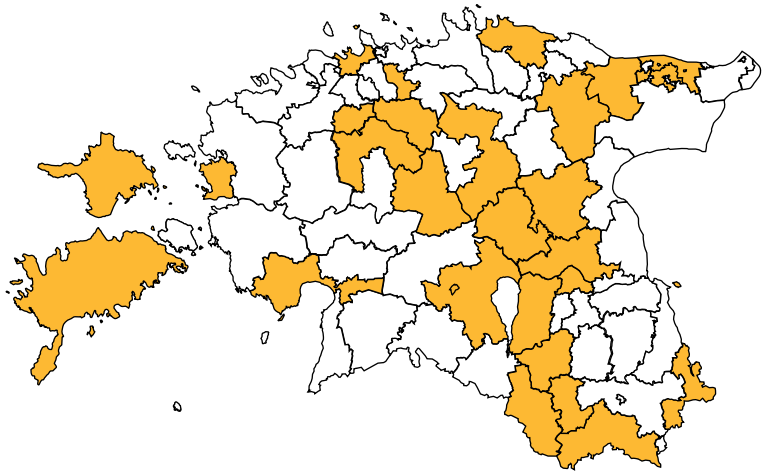
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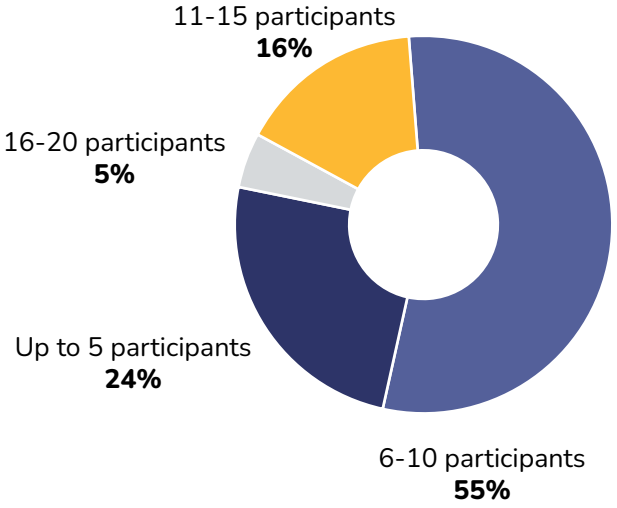
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## Dialogue circles in 2026

- 62 dialogue circles brought together 497 participants
- Discussions took place in every county in Estonia
- 37% of the circles were held in Estonia's four largest cities: Tallinn, Tartu, Narva and Pärnu
- 63% took place elsewhere in Estonia, in smaller towns and villages
- More than half the circles had six to ten participants
- Around a third were open to anyone who wished to attend



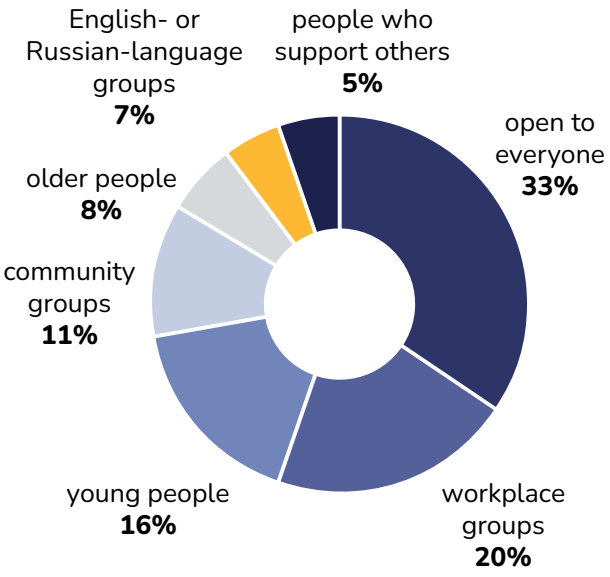



## Timeline

1. **December 2025 – April 2026**
   Preparation and training. Four training sessions were held for facilitators.

2. **February – May 2026**
   Dialogue circles. Volunteers facilitated the circles, and note-takers recorded the discussions. A total of 62 summaries were submitted for analysis.

3. **May – September 2026**
   Analysis and report writing. The notes were coded using MAXQDA qualitative data analysis software.



“Once you’ve said something out loud, you can overcome your fear. It gives you the strength to carry on.”

# SUMMARY

## What did the dialogue circles tell us?

**Participants discussed what helps them cope and maintain a sense of safety in today's uncertain world. Five recurring messages emerged.**

1

**Security concerns in Estonia are about more than war – they are about living with constant anxiety.**
For those who took part in the dialogue circles, war is no longer a distant geopolitical event; it has become part of the backdrop to everyday life. At the same time, the threat of war is not the only source of uncertainty: it is intertwined with financial pressures, worries about the future and the stresses of daily life.

- Security has both a physical and a psychological dimension.
- Anxiety grows both from visible signs of danger and from uncertainty about the future and what to do in a crisis.
- Society's resilience in a crisis depends not only on military equipment and infrastructure but also on people's sense of safety, trust and psychological resilience

"I realised how much we are affected by the war in Ukraine and by Estonia's proximity to Russia. It shows just how much anxiety we are holding inside."

2

**Feeling safe depends on more than defence capabilities – it also depends on trust, clear information and knowing what to do in a crisis.**
People want to know whether Estonia is prepared for crises. They also want to know what they can do themselves and what the government, local authorities, their communities and others around them are doing to prepare.

"The message about preparing for crises should be more about working together: we'll take care of this, you take care of that. A clear division of responsibilities could improve both preparedness and trust."

- Practical information that helps people act can reduce uncertainty.
- Clear responsibilities build trust and give people confidence to act.
- Community preparedness can complement national and local government action but cannot replace it.
- Being heard and knowing how others are preparing for crises helps build trust.

3

**Young people need more than crisis skills – they also need reasons to believe in their future .**
For young people, security concerns are intertwined with the pressures of school and exams, mental strain, and uncertainty about the future. Some feel unable to make major life decisions, or see little point in making them yet.

- Practical, age-appropriate skills for managing crises and coping with difficulties can give young people a greater sense of control and the confidence to act.
- Young people need to feel that their concerns are heard and understood.
- Discussions about crises and security must preserve a sense of possibility for the future: the feeling that young people can plan and build a life in Estonia.

"Many young people are putting their lives on hold because there's so much uncertainty. It's as if we've pressed pause on our lives."

4

**Psychological resilience starts with people, relationships and a sense of belonging.**
Participants repeatedly identified relationships, community, conversation and a sense of belonging as things that help them cope. Society's resilience in a crisis therefore depends not only on supplies, infrastructure and emergency plans but also on the ties between people.

- It is easier to prepare together than alone.
- Supporting connections between people is especially important where these do not develop naturally, such as in cities and apartment buildings.
- Culture, nature and the continuity of everyday life help people maintain a sense of meaning, belonging and emotional balance.

"There's such a need to get together ... Being together also gives people a sense of psychological security."

5

**People in Estonia want more conversation and less confrontation.**
People still want to discuss difficult issues but feel that talking to those who hold different views has become harder. The dialogue circles showed that a conversation facilitated in a way that helps people feel safe can reduce confrontation and help people understand one another.

- Being heard and having a say build trust across society.
- Hearing about other people's experiences helps participants see difficult issues from different perspectives.
- Talking can help people move from worrying to taking action.
- Alongside mental health and security, social cohesion is an important part of Estonia's resilience.

"We need these kinds of discussions, where someone helps us keep listening. They're invaluable."

## What can we do? Recommendations and proposals

**The dialogue circles suggest that psychological security should be recognised as an integral part of Estonia's resilience. People's readiness to cope with crises depends on a combination of factors: feeling safe, trust, practical skills, relationships, community, culture and opportunities to take action themselves. The report points to the following priorities:**

- **Make crisis preparedness practical for people.** Alongside information about threats, people must receive clear guidance on what they can do themselves, what others will do, and where and when help will be available.

- **Clarify how responsibility is shared.** Individuals, communities, local authorities and national government must understand their respective roles. Community resilience complements public services and systems; it does not replace them.

- **Support psychological preparedness alongside physical preparedness for crises.** Assessments of preparedness should look beyond knowledge and supplies to consider people's sense of safety, trust, sense of control and readiness to act.

- **Strengthen local communities and meeting places.** Libraries, community halls, youth centres, cultural institutions and other local meeting places can be important sources of information, social contact and mutual support, both in everyday life and during crises.

- **Create more opportunities for neighbours and communities to prepare together.** Cities and apartment buildings deserve particular attention. One option is a 'preparedness buddy' scheme, in which people work out with a friend, relative, neighbour or colleague how they would support each other in a crisis.

- **Make dialogue and listening a regular practice.** Well-facilitated discussions in a safe setting allow people to express concerns, get answers and hear different perspectives.

- **Support mental health where people live and meet.** Preventive and community activities can reduce loneliness and strengthen relationships and a sense of belonging before problems become more serious.

- **Pay particular attention to young people's confidence to act and hope for the future.** Practical skills in crisis response, first aid, assessing information and coping with difficulties should go hand in hand with opportunities to participate and have a say. Discussions about security must preserve the sense that young people have a future in Estonia.

- **Recognise culture as part of societal resilience.** Taking part in cultural activities, sharing cultural experiences and engaging in local cultural life help sustain belonging, identity, meaning and the familiar rhythms of everyday life. Access to these activities should be maintained during difficult times.

- **Recognise that people differ in their ability and resources to prepare for crises.** Information, activities and learning opportunities must be accessible to people of different ages and with different needs, including those who rely on other people's support or assistive devices in daily life.



**One idea connects all these priorities: society becomes resilient when effective public services and crisis preparedness, strong communities, and people's own ability to act reinforce one another.**




## Topics explored in the dialogue circles

**Participants were invited to share how the changed security situation had affected their daily lives, how they were coping and what helped them cope.**

Although the overarching question was "How can I cope?", facilitators could narrow the focus and make the topic more specific to their participants or local area. Most discussions focused on feeling safe, security, crises and coping with difficult circumstances. Questions included "What helps me feel safer?" and "How can I cope while supporting others?". Participants also discussed a sense of belonging and community spirit.

## How the material was analysed

**Two questions guided the analysis of the discussion notes:**

- **What are people concerned about, including in relation to the changed security situation?**
- **What strategies do people use to cope with uncertainty and the changed security situation?**

The material was examined using qualitative content analysis[2], supported by MAXQDA data analysis software. The researchers used open coding: they labelled passages to identify themes, guided by the two questions while also remaining open to other themes that emerged. Participants' experiences of taking part in the dialogue circles were analysed separately. The codes were then grouped into subcategories and broader categories.

Gemini Notebook was used as an additional tool to compare the themes identified through coding with the original material. AI tools did not replace the qualitative analysis: the researchers developed the categories, interpreted meanings and drew conclusions through their own work with the original material.

2 Ezzy, D. (2002). Qualitative analysis: Practice and innovation. Routledge Braun, V., & Clarke, V. (2022). Thematic analysis: A practical guide. Sage.

## Sources of concern: fears about the threat of war

- concerns about infrastructure, supplies and managing daily life during a crisis
- signs of a possible war
- fears for the safety of family, children and loved ones
- existential fear and the sense that the future could be cut short
- concerns about national preparedness

## Sources of concern: everyday life

- school-related issues
- financial security
- community, belonging and loneliness
- the future of the Estonian language and people

## Keeping informed and communication during crises

- clear information that helps people act
- keeping up with information and setting personal limits on news consumption
- communication outages and essential information during crises
- false information and assessing whether information is reliable

## Declining trust and growing divisions in society

- war as a factor that deepens divisions
- polarisation in society
- disappointment with cooperation with local authorities and opportunities to have a say
- the tension between defence spending and people's well-being
- feeling disconnected from the state


culture as a strategic source of support for resilience
maintaining emotional balance
Ways of coping
maintaining everyday routines
relationships and communication
nature, outdoor activities and gardening as sources of peace and hope
the role of employers
the gap between knowing that preparation matters and taking action
emergency supplies
water, heating and household self-sufficiency
personal skills and readiness to act
Practical preparedness: preparing for crises
the responsibilities of national government, local authorities and individuals
compulsory military service and military training as preparation for crises
preparedness as a way of life
family emergency plans and agreements on where to go and where to shelter
community preparedness and relationships between neighbours
past experiences of crises and historical memory
local institutions as potential resilience hubs
staying in Estonia or leaving the country if war breaks out
being truly heard
The value and experience of taking part in dialogue circles
dialogue and local communication as part of crisis preparedness
a safe, calm and meaningful space to come together



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