

# Estonian Festival of Opinion Culture

– how to make it happen





# Introduction

The skill to listen and not only to the opinions that you agree with, but also to positions and statements that you do not carry close to your heart, is a skill that is essential in democratic political order. Humans are not born with talking and listening skills: these need to be developed during the course of life. The family, school, public space, and society at large can either value this skill or simply ignore it. In post-totalitarian societies, the generations that did not learn the listening skill (as well as debating and discussing skills) are in special need of first learning and then installing those skills firmly in society and its institutions.

The Festival of Opinion Culture is one of the tools to promote, teach, and practice the skills of listening, debating, and discussing. The Estonian experience with the Festival of Opinion Culture shows that people enjoy non-formal space and the method of debate. The festival has grown from a civil society action with a bit more than 1000 participants to nationwide public event with more than 10,000 participants within just three years. This has been one of the success stories of civic action as well as public mobilisation. People come together, plan, and implement a large public gathering with only one idea to discuss, talk, and listen to each other on issues that are close to the heart of every

citizen. Everyone leaves the festival satisfied because he or she has spoken or has been heard out.

We wanted to share this experience with other societies that similarly used to struggle with the development of a democratic discussion society. With the help of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Estonia and National Foundation of Civil Society, we invited guests from Ukraine, Belarus, Moldova, and Georgia to take part in the 3rd Festival of Opinion Culture in Estonia. Our guests were infected with the festival bug and are forming initiative groups in their own countries to install this culture in their respective societies. This small booklet is a help toolkit for those who dream of developing democratic opinion culture and want to use the festival format. The booklet takes readers through the main idea, how these things started in Estonia, and through the steps you need to make and people you need to convince. Our hope is to infect ever more people with the Festival of Opinion Culture bug and help them in their endeavours. Good luck!

Kristina Kallas  
Member of the Board  
Institute of Baltic Studies



# What is the Festival of Opinion Culture?

Festival of Opinion Culture (Arvamusfestival) is a yearly event that takes place in August in central Estonia, in the small town of Paide. The festival has been organised as a civic initiative since 2013, inspired by the 46-year-old Almedalsveckan festival in Sweden, as well as other similar events in Finland, Norway,

and Denmark. Based on the Estonian experience, this booklet outlines the main steps and considerations in organising such festivals. We summarise our experience, some important lessons learned, and the main recommendations to those interested in following this inspiring example.

The aim of the festival is to provide an open platform for discussions on politics, society, and culture, without any interference from political ambition or party competition. The festival gathers together alert and active people to discuss issues that are important to them, their communities, and Estonia in general.

This is a self-evolving community-wide festival open to every citizen and resident of the community.

**Community-wide** – the festival welcomes representatives and interest groups from all walks of life.

**Self-evolving** – organisations that bring up issues to be discussed participate using their own resources.

**Open to everyone** – the festival is free of charge and anyone interested in sharing his or her ideas is welcome to take part. The costs are borne by the initiators of specific discussions, e.g. civil society organisations, political parties, or media organisations.

The festival provides the opportunity to hear inspiring speeches, exchange opinions about social and political issues, gain new knowledge and fresh ideas, participate in workshops, meet new people, and enjoy the cultural programme.

## The aim of the festival is to:

- bring together people from all corners and layers of Estonia, including political and non-political institutions;
- create a platform for people to exchange opinions regardless of their position in society or their title;
- give participants the opportunity to discuss issues that are vital to the present and future of their communities, and to Estonia as whole – something that is usually done behind the closed doors of conference rooms or in small circles of friends around kitchen tables;
- leave visitors motivated with a sense of well-being and the desire to return the next year.

The Festival of Opinion Culture is a living organism that keeps growing and



learning from the outside world. We also urge you to keep an open mind about its identity, to be cool with starting out with a dream and making it more concrete, step by step.

In advance of our fourth year, we still have not really decided exactly what our

identity is. Below we list several possible identities – but we feel we cannot be just one thing. Those identities rather show different viewpoints and form a basis for our development. Each year we try to become better in all of them.

## The Festival of Opinion Culture is:

- A festival as an event. It started out as a 2-day event where you could either organise or take part in discussions on very different topics, and when tired of discussing or listening to smart ideas, also just walk, taste good food, and relax in cafes, or enjoy a modern and always surprising cultural programme (music, stand-up comedy, theatre, books). However, the more we think about our goals, the more we understand that having only one event is limiting our chances to achieve these goals.
- A festival as a network. We see the need to develop discussion culture and to support the overall idea of the festival.
- A festival as a development programme for organisations.
- A festival as a citizens' education initiative. It inspires people to think about and discuss important social topics, to step forward and be the change, and to start a change from themselves instead of waiting for someone else to say or do something.
- A festival as a new platform for public discussions. Different disciplines meet and intertwine, marking down important topics and new ideas; it helps to grow initiatives, as a place where people of all walks of life meet and talk.

# Good principles

To promote the sound debate culture, the Festival of Opinion Culture has made an effort to establish rules for discussions. Basic principles are to be followed by all participants at the festival. Listening to the other person and accepting different views is as important as discussing or proving one's arguments. To ensure a civilised, solution-focused, and constructive atmosphere for exchange of views, all participants at the festival are asked to follow the rules of the game. Here are the basic rules of the Festival of Opinion Culture:

1. We respect the time, the discussion leader, and all other festival attendees.
2. We back up our arguments.
3. We listen – listening is just as important as speaking.
4. We are objective in our discussions with other people.
5. We react to the idea, not to the person.
6. We need solutions – if we criticise, we offer solutions.
7. If possible, we do not use presentation materials in discussions – let the person speak, not PowerPoint.

# How to get started?

Maybe you've been to the Festival of Opinion Culture in Estonia or other similar festivals elsewhere. Maybe you just got this great idea from the media and got inspired.

But how to get started? Here are some first steps that the Festival of Opinion Culture took and were important.

## 1. Be clear about WHY you want to do this festival

What is the problem you want to solve or the reality that you want to change? Are you OK with waiting for the results to take time? Are you OK to try and fail and try again, improving the model each year?

The Festival of Opinion Culture in Estonia got started because there were a number of people who felt that in Estonia we do not have a functional and productive public discussion culture, and that this is a weakness in Estonian democracy. Additionally, there was a perceived lack of social cohesion, of people, organisations

and institutions being rather disconnected. There was too little cooperation and joint visions for really forming the future. These concerns led the initiators to realise the need for a platform for open discussion, the need to team up to offer a new kind of experience through meaningful debates.

The valid question is, of course, this: what change have we achieved with the festival? That's the most common question asked of us. We are still thinking about it, but we have drawn a 4-level model of impact for ourselves:



The diagram reflects the idea that Festival of Opinion Culture as a platform or event is not a magic wand that will change Estonia's society or culture in a blink of an eye. However, it can change the people who take part in the festival, those who get inspired by new ideas. It can help to make new friends and find cooperation partners. Each and every one of us belongs to various groups that have influence on us. And, in turn, we also make an impact on other people in these groups.

## 2. Consider WHAT kind of solution you offer

What do you want to create? Are there other events, networks, or initiatives that are similar to yours and to which people will compare your Festival? Do you want to be different?

For example, when thinking about the Festival of Opinion Culture we understood that there were lots of events, conferences, seminars, development programmes, fairs, meetings, processes, culture festivals – local and International – for experts or fans of a single specific topic or fields. These events allow those people to meet with each other or with decision-makers and opinion leaders. However, we felt that those important discussions should

The Festival of Opinion Culture also has an impact on organisations that are engaged in creating the programme and deciding on the content of the festival. Not only does it help them to get more involved in the processes in society, the festival also urges them to apply the best principles at their discussions at the festival, which hopefully leads to them using the same principles on their own events elsewhere.

be more accessible, more open to all interested people, and bring together different fields. Even if diverse media channels (traditional media as well as social media) offer platforms for public debates, the debate environment is too controlled and revolves around just a few like-minded people. Traditional media debates don't facilitate public discussion very well, since the rules of the market often narrow down the scope of topics reported. Social media, on the other hand, fragments the discussions and predisposes people to isolate into their own groups. This is why a new platform was so greatly needed in Estonian society.

## 3. Engage important people and organisations

You need them in your team as supporters of your ideas, as a resource, and as cross-networking partners for organising important and interesting discussions.

In January 2013 two people decided that there would be a Festival of Opinion Culture in Estonia. One of the first

steps they made was to meet with their friends who happened to be experts on communication and marketing, media relations, social relations, or just had recent experience with civic initiatives that seek to have a real impact. This was a first test-group for the initial idea of the festival. The idea received positive



feedback and a number of suggestions for improvement.

The next step was to meet up with the representatives of the largest media channels (all together) and representatives of political parties and Parliament (separate meetings with each party). These meetings have been vital for the success of the Festival of Opinion Culture. This approach was inspired by Almedalsveckan festival in Sweden, which was initially started by a single speech held by a politician, but today the backbone of the festival is made up of all Swedish political parties and media organisations. The initial goal in Estonia was to test this idea in these very same groups, to make it clear that the festival would not have any political aspirations. The aim was to discuss whether cooperation with the festival and input in organising it would be

possible. We succeeded in attracting two media organisations (news outlets) and five political parties. They came and set up their own thematic stages, inviting opinion leaders and moderating the discussions.

The next step was to get a good team, and to inspire the right people as well as organisations who could be interested in taking an active role in organising the festival. The focus of the festival was on local people and organisations: we chose a small town, since it needed a development-push and a new energy. Thus, the first partner organisations were from the local community of Paide Town and Järvamaa County. After that, some of the umbrella organisations joined in: Network of Estonian Nonprofit Organizations (NENO) and Estonian Debating Society, as well as the Open Estonia Foundation. It took a few months to get 6 organisations



committed to organising a discussion at the festival. At the first festival, the initial goal was to organise at least two stages with discussions, but the interest turned out to be greater than planned and already the first year the festival had 19 stages.

The success of the first Festival of Opinion Culture was built on the professional and personal networks of two initiators of the festival. So use your network to the maximum in these first steps or sell your idea to someone influential who has a big network of their own!

## 4. Engage professional marketing

The Estonian experience shows that you need to start marketing as soon as possible.

The marketing team works on creating and developing the brand for the festival, as well as getting the message to the target groups. The target group is not only the broader public, but also your own people, your team.

The marketing team quickly became one of the biggest teams and required a lot of coordination, which means that it was extremely important that the leader of the team had experience and motivation! In Estonia, the whole marketing team,

A tip! There might be people and organisations you didn't get on board the first time. Invite them personally to the festival! Experience shows that it is much more difficult to describe what the positive impact of the festival is, but everyone who experiences it first-hand understands it. So get those important key people to the festival and keep in touch with them after your first event, keep engaging them for the next year.

including the leader, was made up of volunteers – they worked for the festival in addition to their main work, without salaries. It is an added benefit if the leader of the marketing team has experience in engaging volunteers.

To have a reliable image, there are two crucial tasks to be done already at the first try: create a visual identity and achieve a good representation in the country's important and popular media channels. The latter does not only mean articles or interviews, but also encompasses advertisement and smart solutions.



# Define your target group

The festival does not appeal to all people in the country. Most likely, the Festival of Opinion Culture attracts people who are interested in the society in general or in the development of a certain field, people who are following the news. In the first year of the festival in Estonia, the advice given by one of the cooperation partners sounded as follows: the target group of the festival probably equals the number

of people in Estonia who are subscribing to newspapers and/or read them on a regular basis.

The profile of those who have been following the festival's Facebook account and have submitted feedback is the following: highly educated, mostly women, aged 25–45, from the bigger cities or cities that were closer to the festival.

## 1. Creating a brand

The name of the Festival of Opinion Culture and its values, positioning, corporate visual identity, possible motto, mission, vision, linguistic use of brand in diverse channels, entry theme, desired guest experience – these are the tasks that should be led by the marketing leader and festival leader. It is strongly recommended to engage professionals in creating the brand and designing it, since it concerns the image of the whole festival and has to be reliable. Even though it is possible to change the image later, it is

time- and resource-consuming, as well as confusing for the public.

It has to be said that image of the festival (brand) has an impact on many things that might not be that obvious: for instance, it might influence which volunteers and what competences you get for your teams. Don't forget to target marketing also towards the festival team members – it is important for keeping motivation.

Choosing a name for the festival is very important. In Estonia quite a few options were drafted and later tested in several meetings. The ultimate choice was based on the following criteria:

- short and memorable;
- not too local and not tied to only one municipality;
- hinting at both the substance (English: Opinion; Estonian: Arvamus) and atmosphere (festival);
- suitable for a brand, rather than just an event name.



In Latvia the event was named Discussion Festival LAMP (Latvian: Sarunu festivāls LAMPA), which is even more to the point! Lamps enlighten and this symbol gives great possibilities for visuals, design, decorations at the festival site, etc. While discussions are actually at the core of the Festival of Opinion

## 2. Marketing focus on starting your own channels – webpage and social media accounts

The marketing team leader should already in the first year create a coherent marketing plan for the next 2–3 years (web development, app, social media plans, etc.) in order to optimise reaching the goals.

The first year should be focused on building up the channels – first and foremost,

Culture, one of the fundamental ideas is that there are a variety of ways to “speak your mind”, “have your say”, and “state your opinion” – not only through discussions, but, for example, through arts, music, theatre, stand-up, design, paintings, architecture, etc.

a webpage and social media channels (FB, Twitter, Flickr, Youtube/Vimeo). It is a huge amount of work that will come in extremely useful already in your third year, when the novelty of the festival will fade away and news channels will be less interested in talking about it than in the first year. By building up your own

channels you’ll have them for the next years – the channels will already be known and you will be able to share information effectively. The statistics gathered by the Estonian festival confirm that the webpage is being read and it pays off to invest in web development. The webpage was most visited in the third year, and journalists also used the materials from the webpage for their stories.

Creating the webpage demands a lot of time and other resources. A three-year plan helps to make decisions on what to focus on the first year, and what can be left to the following years. Since making a webpage is a project that will demand some costs, it is even more important to plan the tasks.

The programme for the Estonian Festival of Opinion Culture has grown from 50 discussions to 224 discussions in three years. This means that visitors have quite a challenge in following the programme and making their choices. This challenge has to be tackled in the marketing team – it is important to find the solutions both for traditional printed media and web media, and in the Estonian case also for apps. This work was started already back in 2013 and developed further, step by step. The work on the webpage and app – from briefs to final product – took 10 months. Therefore, in the first and second year, the focus was on the webpage (creating, developing it further, improving the ways in which the programme can be seen, adding English and Russian) and only in the third year the app was created (and developed in the fourth year).

## 3. Create the right atmosphere

Choose the festival site wisely! As platform builders, we can make the choices about where the festival takes place and what the festival site looks and feels like. In Estonia, we had the following wish-list in our hands when we went to look for the right venue for the Festival of Opinion Culture the first time:

- A positive historical place.
- Trees! Not a forest, but not a just a plain grassland. Parks give the right feeling, as they are perfect for walking around and having a discussion, and, more generally, for having a good time.
- In the heart of Estonia – Paide town is the centre of the Estonian mainland. It is both symbolic (great

input to marketing and communication of the festival) and practical – almost the same distance for everyone in Estonia to travel here. An additional plus was that it is a one-hour drive from the capital.

- A small town – so that this event would matter to the locals and motivate them to get engaged. For the festival guests it would be an opportunity to visit a new place where they usually have no specific reason to go.

In the first and second year, the Festival of Opinion Culture used volunteers to plan and design the space without involving professional organisers and designers. The results achieved were satisfactory – creative and safe – but a lot of the organisers’

stress could have been avoided. In the third year, volunteer professionals were involved and it clearly raised the quality. It improved both the visual appearance of the space, as well as the work process. The people involved in space planning were students and teachers of the Arts Academy; the plan for the fourth year is to involve students and teachers of vocational schools into building up the space. It is a brilliant cooperation that benefits both the festival and students – a real project that gives students a great experience and gives

## 4. Leave a trail!

Capture even the first steps of putting this event and network together. Keep the memos of first brainstorming and meetings, collect memos and sound bites from first get-togethers and events in written text, in photos, or in videos. In the future it will help you to build up communication. By keeping this information that refers to the very beginning and to the very first festival, it will help you measure the progress made and show it to others: to the public, possible investors and partners, and possible new team members and volunteers.

the festival an innovative image. Based on the Estonian experience, we recommend engaging experts to volunteer with their competence or consider cooperation with universities/high schools, providing an opportunity for students to get their practical work done.

The amazing feedback is that 97% of festival guests want to come back next year – this is our most important measure of success and it has been achieved by creating an open and pleasant atmosphere.

When doing the Festival of Opinion Culture we understood the importance of documenting the process only after the first event in August 2013. So we started the work of archiving our “what” and “how” when preparing the second festival. At the beginning of 2015 we published the Album of the Festival of Opinion Culture – it captured the moments and lessons of the second festival for us and our partners. Doing this has been informative but also fun.

# The team and organisation you need

You need a team where you'll have both people with great vision who are able to inspire, as well as those who are able to set detailed plans and follow through with them.

If in the beginning you do not have a budget then obviously the whole team has to be made up of volunteers. You will need a team that shares the goal and core values of the festival – realizing those values will be the starting motivation for most members.

Start with drafting the festival team structure – what are the general clusters of work that need to be done in order to organise the Opinion Festival? You need to plan the division of labour that fits your goals and resources. The Estonian festival team structure has changed over the years. It is

important to look back and analyse what kind of organisation structure you need to reach your goal: to build an organisation that suits your festival the best. The table below shows how the main “divisions” and roles have changed for us. We started out with a group of seven teams of volunteers. There was a slight change in the roles in the following year, but since the festival grew very fast, the workload for each of the seven volunteer team-leaders turned out to be too large. In 2015, 15 teams were created to divide the tasks; however, this experience showed that if this core team was too big to work, then it was difficult to ensure that everyone got the information necessary for their work. In 2016, the plan is to cut the number of teams in half and consolidate the same roles in those fewer teams, but also to improve the internal communication.



2013	2014	2015
Project manager	The Head of the Festival (internal communication, IT, finance, analysis)	Team management team
Analysis team		Feedback and analysis team
Finance and Partnerships team	Järvamaa partnerships team for local community engagement	Finance team
Programme team	Content team (incl. main stages, theme stages, engagement of the public, tutoring of moderators, stand-up, and open microphone)	Theme stages team that works in cooperation with partners, media organisations, political parties, etc.
		Content team that takes care of festival values, good common convention, main stage, open microphones
Communications team	Communications team (media relations, web, social media, texts, translation, photo and film, blog)	Engagement and participation of the public team
		Communications team
IT team	Marketing team (visuals, web, design)	Marketing team
Logistics team (incl. festival area, food, information desk)	Mood team (music, food, children's ground, book fair)	Atmosphere and cultural programme team
	Festival area team (incl. building festival grounds, parking, emergency services, first-aid point, security, logistics, etc.)	Food and drinks team
Design	Staff (information point, urgent problem-fixing crew, volunteers on the festival grounds, food and accommodation for visitors, team events, greeting foreign visitors)	Festival area team
		Information desk
		Logistics team
		Group for teambuilding and internal communication
		Volunteers for the festival area



Each of those groups is led by a team leader, and team leaders make up the core team of the Festival of Opinion Culture. The next step is to set up regular meetings for the core team. The core team considers all important subjects that influence the Opinion Festival the most and that influence the groups. In the beginning, the core team also made all important decisions regarding the Festival of Opinion Culture and as such gave input for each team's work: it was a diverse set of questions back then, starting from defining our values and goals, discussing what should be the common rules we adhere to, and finishing with the design of the poster!

It is good practice to have team leaders as engaged in building the foundation of the festival as possible. Internal communication is extremely important. In

the first year, talk together – at least at the level of team leaders – as often as you can! You cannot overestimate the importance of each team leader being aware of what the others are doing, and what stage the other teams have reached in their work. In addition, that is the year in which almost everything is built from scratch, and it is helpful to discuss upcoming issues with the whole team in order to get a balanced result and increase the team member's ownership. In following years we have changed this discussion and decision-making process, because most of the decisions concern 2–3 issues and teams.

We encourage you to work in sections and work groups – i.e. the team leaders whose tasks are more connected should meet and speak more often. For instance, leaders of marketing and communication

teams, also marketing and space planning/design teams, and (This one is crucial!) people who work on programmes for each area should meet with marketing and communication teams so they are harmonised.

There are some roles that are more important and time-demanding: the leader of the festival and the programme/discussions team leader have to communicate with almost everyone, and participate in most of the decision making.

We suggest that team leaders meet at least once a month at a long meeting, and meet in smaller groups according to the upcoming need. The two final months before the Festival are the busiest ones, and demand more meetings. When preparing for the second festival, the Estonian team leaders met every 2 weeks. The time was set in advance, and the scheme worked very well. Information was exchanged, decisions were discussed and made, and last but not least – the festival requires a lot of work, and it helped us to support each other and keep up the positive energy. Don't be afraid of the meetings – just make them informal, arrange them in different places, and use participatory and innovative methods to moderate the meetings.

Every year, 1–2 weeks before the event, the festival team has arranged a day of joint work to tune in, close last open issues, and charge our batteries.

It is worth thinking about how to share and archive the materials already from the start. Our experience shows that Google Drive worked best for us. It provides the opportunity for many people to have simultaneous access, and files are divided into folders and are easy to name. Since teams do not meet often and rather work over the Internet, it is good to have a joint system in the team (create file templates, agree on logic in document administration). It should be the team leader who creates the systems according to the need. The system will become especially valuable in the following years, when you'll have to do similar tasks or you'll get new people in the team.

The role of the team leader is to keep the team working – to create the conditions necessary to keep people committed, show the general direction and give feedback, and to check the results. Only then can this year-long process be kept together and yield results. When the teams didn't have time for meeting physically, then weekly Skype-meetings worked very well.





# Volunteers

The Festival of Opinion Culture is about volunteers – they make up 99% of the Opinion Festival people. In 2013 there was 1 paid person in the team and 156 volunteers, in 2014 there were around 190 volunteers, and in 2015 there were 3 paid workers and around 300 volunteers. From all of the team leaders only three team members received some pay to secure the planning processes and support the team manager: the leader of Theme Stages, the person dealing with partnerships in Järvamaa (the festival venue), and the person responsible for finances.

Many volunteers found their way to the festival on their own – they are somehow connected to the core team members and want to join in. Last year there were many university students doing their internships for Festival of Opinion Culture. However, we also have a person responsible for finding volunteers for the festival. He gathered information from all the team-leaders, asking what kind of people and how many they would need in their teams, and went looking for volunteers. To find the volunteers a number of networks were used, including student fairs. Once people are interested and willing to help, you need to keep in touch with them and give them tasks in specific teams. Sometimes it takes time to match the person with the tasks: occasionally there were some volunteers “on hold” for several months, but finally the right fit was found and they received an assignment which both helped us and at the same time was interesting enough for them.

The Festival of Opinion Culture values volunteering and has developed a prize in order to show appreciation and engage even more

volunteers. We have connected our goal of promoting volunteering with helping the local community of Paide and Järvamaa County by creating a special programme for local youngsters. They volunteer in the festival area team: help to build, set up, and tidy the festival grounds, welcome guests at the festival entrance, distribute the festival magazine and important information, help to regulate parking, etc. They get combined into teams, choose their own name and identity, and go through training and preparation so that they know all the information and aren't too shy to talk to festival guests. All of this takes a lot of energy and planning – and you will need responsible adults to watch over them during the festival – but they cherish the experience and will hopefully grow up to be more active and responsible citizens.

For three years one of the principles of the Festival of Opinion Culture has been not to say “no” to organisations and people who want to join in with their discussions and topics. However, there's an exception that stems from practical needs:

We say “no” to those, who submit their idea too late – that is, when we have all theme stages in place and there is no more room, OR when we do have room but have a programme in place (one month before the festival!) and there is no time left to organise a good-quality discussion using platform of the Festival of Opinion Culture. In such cases we direct newcomers to those organisations that are already organising a theme stage or discussion on a similar topic, so that they would join the team this way, but not necessarily bring another discussion to the programme.

# Your partners on this journey

When initiating the Festival of Opinion Culture, a crucial decision was made from the start: to keep a wide range of actors informed about the goals and plans of the festival. This served as a tool to spark interest on one hand and to mitigate risks of public personas working against us. The first year was the most critical in building partnerships and the organisers met with as many political

parties and media organisations as possible. Today, the Festival of Opinion Culture has established its place in the Estonian public and the communication load has decreased. However, it is still important to keep close relationships with the media (through the editors-in-chief of all major media channels), with local municipalities of Järvamaa County and Paide Town, as well as with political parties.

## Media

It is a good idea to invest time in establishing good relations with main media outlets in order to keep them engaged and help communicate the festival to the public.

The media is in constant need of new content, new topics and new personas, so we aimed to become a festival that offers all of that! The first year we asked editors-in-chief to become members of an advisory council for the Festival of Opinion Culture. This was something new to them and they wanted to be involved. They got information about the festival first-hand and could feel they influenced the way we were developing this initial idea. They had an important role in offering topics for discussion since they were more aware about the issues that are vital to the Estonian present and future. Later, editors-in-chief of some smaller magazines were asked to participate in the teamwork and help to organise those discussions. Media organisations have also organised their own discussion stages each year, and since

they are known brands they attract the audience to the festival. In addition, they are keen to advertise their discussions beforehand, and in this way also the festival gets advertised.

The first year is important: that's when you can use the novelty factor! Gather information about the festival, structure and divide it into units, and give the information out piece by piece. Also, send information about content (possibly about some of the most important discussions) to the journalists.

To reach the public, try to make deals with media channels about advertisement. In Estonia it worked out pretty well that media channels published festival information for free. The marketing team created visuals and texts, and media channels could use them in their printed editions and online editions instead of their own advertisements or advertisements that were cancelled by their customers – so to



say, as fillers. Since the Festival of Opinion Culture takes place in August and the period before that (July and August) is very quiet in the advertisement world, then in the most critical period for a festival there was extremely good visibility. Those deals with media are negotiated by the leader of the marketing team.

Don't forget to use regional media to inform local people and attract them to the festival. It could be radio, newspaper, or anything else – go and tell them about your initiative and invite them to cooperate! In your communication team, do engage the people who will write the press releases and content that makes it easier for the journalists to use in their work. Also, engage your partner organisations

and discussion organisers to get updates about content. This information can be used to create teaser-information about the upcoming programme and to show which VIPs and other fascinating people are engaged in organising the festival.

Journalists want to know already before the festival the profile of the people who are joining the event. Invest some time in attracting prominent people, preferably from the political and cultural elite, known opinion leaders. The opinion leaders may be enthused by your suggesting to organise a discussion on a topic interesting to them, or if you invite some of them to speak up at the discussion. If they agree to come, it is a big step.



A tip! If you do not manage to engage media from the start, then your team should be prepared to harvest and write down important ideas and quotes that emerge

in discussions. The next step can be to use them in writing articles and propose them to the media, both during and after the festival.

## Partners from the local community

Without the support from local people, the Estonian Festival of Opinion Culture would never have had a chance. These are not empty words. Firstly, there was so little money that it would not have been possible to make it without the input from people of the area. If the work of local people were to be converted into money, it would equal the whole budget of the first festival. It was the support of the local people in particular that gave the organisers belief that the festival really could be done!

Even if engagement of the local community might seem difficult at the start, in the long run it is the only way to create something sustainable. Only then can the festival last for years and even decades.

What can the local community do? It depends on the competence that is available in the community. So, if there is a diversity of competence, they can do basically everything. The following examples of community input that was especially beneficial stem from the Estonian Opinion Festival held in Paide.

Co-creation of the festival together with local people is also consistent with the festival's values. It would be quite bizarre if we'd promote participation and involvement of people and try to push for good practices in discussion, while simultaneously side-lining locals from organising such a big event. Already from the very start, one of the important missions of the festival was to help enliven some of the peripheral areas of Estonia. As odd as it may sound, in Estonia regional marginalisation is severest right in the centre of the country.

- Volunteers. Organising a festival like this requires an unbelievable number of people. The easiest way is to find them in the local community, because they are motivated by the idea of something that cool happening in their hometown. Most people on the festival grounds in Paide were from the local community.
- Setting up the physical environment of the festival. This means everything connected to setting up the area – transportation, parking, food, sound and light, stages, coffee-shop area, cultural programme in local venues, design of the area, accommodation, etc. All of that depends to a great degree on the local community. In Paide, the festival was started up with a minimal budget, and a large share

When we engage people and show trust in them, we create new bonds – at the same time creating a festival and promoting its mission and values. Taking part in organising the festival sparks personal changes, gives the local community self-esteem, and encourages people to initiate the next big things by themselves.

# How to start putting together a discussion programme

of the solutions was created with help of local people.

- Support from entrepreneurs. Since the festival creates new flows in local life and gives a considerable contribution to local businesses, are local entrepreneurs willing to support the festival both with money and skills? For instance, local building companies in Paide helped to build the stages, etc.
- Good atmosphere. Local people create the atmosphere of the festival, and according to all questionnaires and feedback, this is the most important aspect for all the visitors. Thus, if you want a relaxed, welcoming, and safe atmosphere, if you want the city to embrace the visitors and be open about the event, then you can't achieve it without the community. "You are welcome to my town!" – that is a feeling only locals can create. If local people are not happy with the event, you can only create the feeling in the festival area, and this is so much less attractive.
- Food. There are too many people to feed with the help of local caterers only, but they do have an influence on the whole concept of festival food. In Paide, it's the local home-café on the hill of Paide Vallimägi that have turned out to be extremely popular, with home-made cakes, drinks, soups, etc.
- Home accommodation. This is something that is just crucial. Without local people opening their homes to offer accommodation, there's no way to organise a several-day event in a small town. The Festival of Opinion Culture has been lucky to be able to use dorms of the local vocational school, but this is not enough. While in the first year, only 8 local families opened their home to host people coming to the festival, in the second year they were already 50, and hundreds of people were able to stay in the homes of local people. Thanks to this, more people were able to stay the night in Paide and take part of the festival for its full length. So, it is really worth engaging the local people!
- Problem-solving support during the festival. However professional the teams are, there will be unexpected issues on festival days. In those unexpected situations, the support from local community networks is invaluable – these are people who know which shop you need to run to (even if the shop is closed, they have the number of the shop-keeper), and they know which official to call to solve the problems. And, of course, the whole process becomes so much easier if people are with you from the start and they know what is being done and why.

The first year we had the Programme Team, but for the second year we converted it to the Content Team. This means that we acknowledged that we are creating the content, and that the programme is created as a result of the content.

Already in the very beginning we set a goal: in our plans, the role of the festival team itself in organising discussions would diminish over time. For us, the Festival of Opinion Culture was to be a platform, and it is up to all the actors to use this platform for their discussions. From the graph below you can see how this has become a reality. While in the first year we ourselves organised almost half of the discussions, it went down to just 4% later on. We want to make sure that topics that are important for Estonian society, its present and future, will be discussed at the Festival of Opinion Culture, so we have been proposing our own topics and discussions to fill the gaps. But as more and more partner organisations have joined the festival and posed discussion topics for the programme, this particular role of ours has diminished.

There are two things that we have done to gather topics and themes for the Festival of Opinion Culture and find the organisers.

1. We engage the media, communication experts, and activists to gather input – what are the most acute problems in Estonian society today

and what are important themes that need more attention, discussion, and solution? After gathering the input, the Programme Team (2013) or Content Team (2014, 2015) was using this information to organise the discussions. The overall starting point has been that we'd cover different fields: economy, politics, health, education, democratic values, migration, future, security/foreign politics. In 2015 our starting point was to cover topics that are horizontal and cover different fields, because as it can be seen from the graph, there were a lot of partner organisations posing good discussions on "theme stages", and we do not want and do not need to compete with those discussions.

2. In February 2014 and 2015 we organised a public collection of ideas/themes for festival discussions. The Theme Stages Team was responsible for this call. We distributed this call for discussion ideas in our own channels, in the media (printed media, radio, TV), and in news lists of our biggest partners and funders. We got 100 ideas in 2014 and 250 in 2015 from a variety of organisations (NGOs, public institutions, private sector) and from individual people.



We used a simple Google Forms platform to collect those ideas, and we had it on our website for 1 month. We also accepted the ideas that reached us later and were more elaborate. We wanted everyone to write:

- a. The topic, the main question or central problem of discussion
- b. Arguments; why it is needed or why it is important
- c. Who would be the opposing sides or different actors discussing the topic
- d. The X-factor – how would you make this discussion stand out, more interesting than others
- e. The language of the discussion
- f. Contact information: name, organisation, e-mail, phone number

On the whole we expect the initial ideas posed in open call to remain the same, but just to evolve in depth and detail. The initial role of the Theme Stages Team was to gather those ideas and later on (in March-June) to cooperate with organisations who proposed the topics to organise the discussions for the festival programme. Discussion organisers are responsible for elaborating the theme/problem, setting the goal of the discussion, finding the moderator and speakers, planning the discussion format, an ultimately sending the organisers

this information and summary of the discussion so it can be integrated into the programme. The Theme Stages Team consults on that process, gives feedback to initial ideas, keeps organisers on track, and reminds them of the deadlines. In addition, our role has become checking that there is minimal or preferably no redundancy of discussions to avoid having too similar topics with the same speakers. If there are similar or connected discussions, we take care not to have them at the same time so that interested people can take part in both. We also compare different theme stages to avoid dubbing – for example, the entrepreneurship stage might have discussions on education, but at the same time there is a separate education stage, so the focus of their discussions should differ. In such cases our team also encourages the partners involved to communicate with each other to make sure that they set a different focus for their discussions.

In June, July, and August the main effort of organisers (both the Theme Stages Team and partners) is spent on technicalities: finding and renting tents, podiums, sound systems, chairs/tables or carpets, blankets, wood stumps, and other decorations for the theme stage. Creating a suitable space for open and inspiring discussions is an important principle that is applied for all stages of the Festival of Opinion Culture – the Theme Stages Team has a role of communicating this and other expectations of the Festival of Opinion Culture to partner organisations and giving advice on how to make spaces more creative.

# In conclusion

This booklet is the very first attempt of the Festival of Opinion Culture team to present the work we do and the experiences we have gathered. In organising the festival you will encounter many questions and hurdles – you will get many surprises no matter how well you pre-plan everything. But this adds to the inspiration! Every decision and solution brings you closer to the mission.

We hope this Estonian experience, the festival's important lessons learned and recommendations presented in this booklet answer some questions and uncertainties you might have had. We hope you are now inspired and ready for action to organise your own festival!

And once your festival is on the way, please do invite us to visit!

Authors:

Maiu Uus, Maiko Kesküla,  
Anu Melioranski

Photos:

Anna Markova  
Kärt Vajakas  
Sven Tupits  
Tauno Tõhk

Graphic design:

Tuumik Stuudio

More information:

[www.arvamusfestival.ee](http://www.arvamusfestival.ee)  
[info@arvamusfestival.ee](mailto:info@arvamusfestival.ee)

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