

IDENTITIES AND IDENTITY POLITICS ON THE BALTIC BORDER: AN ESTONIAN SCHOOL IN RUSSIA¹

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ABSTRACT

The article discusses the politicization of language, ethnicity and nationality issues in a border region between Estonia and Russia. The region's recent past as part of the Soviet Union has a strong bearing on local peoples' attitudes towards languages and language users in the neighbouring country and among the minorities. Russian-Estonian relations on all levels continue to be affected by the language situation of the former Soviet Union: the dominant status of Russian and the threatened position of Estonian. I discuss the debate around the altered status of the Estonian-language school located in the Russian Pskov region which borders with Estonia. This border region is interesting because of a very long-term co-existence and common history of both Estonian-speaking and Russian-speaking populations. The transformation of the Estonian school in Pechory from a minority language school into a foreign language school can be understood on one hand as a straight-forward response to pressures from declining numbers of pupils that schools in peripheral rural areas are facing everywhere. On the other hand, the case of this particular school can also be seen as an example of the increasing politicization and political use of language and ethnic issues in the Russian Federation.

KEY WORDS: language policies and politics, identity formation, multilingualism, state borders, Russian-Estonian relations.

ANOTACIJA

Straipsnyje aptariami kalbos politizavimo atvejai ir probleminės etniškumo bei tautiškumo apraiškos, egzistuojančios Estijos ir Rusijos pasienio regione. Šio krašto gyventojų sovietinės gyvensenos palikimas daro esminę įtaką jų nuostatoms tiek vienos, tiek kitos (estų ir rusų) kalbų atžvilgiu. Tai būdinga ir abiejų tautinių mažumų atstovams, gyvenantiems „anapus sienos“. Rusijos ir Estijos tarpvalstybiniai santykiai visais lygiais yra lemiami buvusios SSRS politinių nuostatų nacionalinės kalbos atžvilgiu. Iki pat šiol ten dominuoja anuo metu visuotinai vartojama valstybinė rusų kalba. Estų kalba pavieniais atvejais yra viešai ignoruojama. Ši paribio sritis socialiniu aspektu įdomi tuo, kad joje jau seniai kartu gyvena tiek estiškai, tiek rusiškai namuose ir viešose erdvėse kalbantys žmonės. Autorė tyrinėja debatus, keliančius grėsmę Pečioruose (Rusijos Pskovo srities regionas, besiribojantis su Estijos Respublika) įkurtos estų mokyklos tolesniam egzistavimui. Keičiamas minėtos mokyklos statusas. Iš tautinių mažumų mokyklos ji perkvalifikuojama į mokyklą, kurioje pamokos vyksta užsienio kalba. Viena vertus, tokia reorganizacija gali būti suprantama, nes estiškai kalbančių vaikų čia ir kituose abiejų šalių pasienio miesteliuose nuolat mažėja. Kita vertus, tokia akcija gali būti vertintina ir kaip sąmoningas Rusijos Federacijos sprendimas tautinių kalbų vartosenos bei etninės tapatybės problemų politizavimo lygmenyje.

PAGRINDINIAI ŽODŽIAI: kalbos vartosenos ir politika, tapatybės formavimas, daugiakalbiškumas, valstybių sienos, Rusijos–Estijos santykiai.

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Introduction

This article discusses how language, ethnicity and national identity intertwine and interact in complex ways in a border region between Estonia and Russia. The article is based on long-term ethnographic research in the area². The region's recent past as part of the Soviet Union has a strong bearing on local peoples' attitudes towards languages and language users in the neighbouring country and among the minorities. Russian-Estonian relations on all levels continue to be affected by the language situation of the former Soviet Union: the dominant status of Russian and the threatened position of Estonian.

I will here present and discuss the case of the Estonian-language school in the town of Pechory located in Pskov region which borders with Estonia. This is the only comprehensive school in the Russian Federation that (until autumn term 2005) has operated fully in the Estonian language. The border region around Pechory is an interesting case of very long-term co-existence and common history of both Estonian-speaking and Russian-speaking populations.

Languages carry deep and subtle social meanings. Languages are also an important part of a search for identities and identity politics. In our study region, which is today the easternmost border of the European Union and NATO, local residents' ideas about belonging – in national, citizenship, linguistic, religious and local terms – are all in a post-Soviet flux and therefore extremely interesting to study.

More generally, language and ethnicity are among the dominant issues in the recent history of transition countries of the former Soviet Union and Eastern Europe. Language plays a crucial role as the single most important marker of ethnicity as well as an issue around which conflict often crystallizes. The numerical, symbolical and practical dominance of Russian over national languages in the Soviet Union explains the strong emphasis put by the newly independent former Soviet republics on legislation safeguarding their national language(s)³.

Estonia presents some peculiar sociolinguistic features that help to explain the politicisation of language and ethnicity in Soviet times and in the post-Soviet situation. The Estonian language has for more than a century been considered a synonym of Estonian national culture. The fear of a small language (there are currently about 1,1 million native speakers of Estonian worldwide, less than 900 000 in Estonia) losing ground or even disappearing altogether under the heavy pressure

² Research projects 'Ethnic identity and everyday life in the borderlands between Estonia, Latvia and Russia' (1999-2001) and 'Russia and the new EU-neighbours on a local level: a comparative ethnography of the border area between Estonia, Latvia and Russia' (2003-2006). Besides the author, the researchers were: Dr. Jeanna Korminna and Dr. Marina Hakkarainen from the European University at St. Petersburg; Sanita Vanaga and Aija Lulle from the University of Latvia; and Dr. Aili Kelam, Institute of International and Social Studies, Tallinn University. The projects were funded by the Academy of Finland and the University of Helsinki Network for European Studies. The discussion in this article is based on fieldwork on the Estonian and Russian sides of the borders in question. For detailed descriptions of the research areas in all three countries see: ASSMUTH, Laura. Nation Building and Everyday Life in the Borderlands between Estonia, Latvia and Russia. *Focaal – European Journal of Anthropology*, Vol. 41, 2003, p. 59–69; ASSMUTH, Laura. Ethnicity and Citizenship in the Borderlands between Estonia, Latvia and Russia. In Risto Alapuro, Ilkka Liikanen & Markku Lonkila (eds.). *Beyond Post-Soviet Transition: Micro Perspectives on Challenge and Survival in Russia and Estonia*. Helsinki: Kikumora Publications, 2004, p. 128–147; ASSMUTH, Laura. To which State to belong? Ethnicity and Citizenship at Russia's new EU-borders. In: Thomas M. Wilson & Hastings Donnan (eds.). *Culture and Power at the Edges of the State. National Support and Subversion in European Border Regions*. Reihe: European Studies in Culture and Policy, 2005, p. 255–288.

³ See: SMITH, Graham. Introduction: The Baltic Nations and National Self-Determination. In: Graham Smith (ed.). *The Baltic States. The National Self-Determination of Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania*. Houndsmill: MacMillan Press, 1996, p. 1–9; LAITIN, David. *Identity in Formation: the Russian-speaking Populations in the Near Abroad*. Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1998.

and influence of Russian was experienced as a real threat by the ethnic Estonian population in Soviet times. To defend the mother tongue and by implication, the fatherland, was a driving force behind the re-independence struggles of all the three Baltic states. After all, the peaceful “singing revolution”⁴ was fought (sung) in Estonian⁵.

During the Soviet period Russian was the *lingua franca* in all the republics of the Soviet Union. The policy toward the languages of the various other ethnic groups fluctuated in practice. Though each of the constituent republics had its own official language, the unifying role and superior status was reserved for Russian. Following the break-up of the Soviet Union in 1991, several of the newly independent states have encouraged their native languages, which have partly reversed the privileged status of Russian, though its role as the language of post-Soviet national intercourse throughout the region has continued⁶.

Article 36 of the Soviet constitution of 1977 enshrined citizens’ right to use their mother tongues “and the languages of the other peoples of the USSR.” In fact, the Russian language was advantaged, though not to the complete exclusion of others. The Soviet Union had no official state language, but Russian was the preferred language of government and economics, the sole language of military command, and the medium of communication within the Communist Party. It was taught in all elementary and secondary schools, together with indigenous languages in most minority areas, and it was the language of instruction in higher education in all the republics except the Baltic republics, Georgia, and parts of Ukraine⁷.

Everyday bilingualism

In our Estonian study area, towards the Russian border in the south-east, Estonian-Russian bilingualism was the norm both during the first Estonian republic 1918-1940 and in Soviet times. Our qualitative interview material shows that current attitudes towards communicating in Russian and towards bilingualism are less negative among ethnic Estonian residents of the border regions than among Estonians in general.

For example, there is the informed opinion of our informant Arvo, 50, who was born and raised in an Estonian municipality which borders both with Latvia and Russia. Today he has his own company of training and educational services. In Soviet times he worked as a lorry driver in a local collective farm. This is what he told me in an interview about the relations between different nationalities and their communication in the Soviet Union during his school years in the 1960s and 70s:

⁴ The mass mobilization of Estonians (also Latvians and Lithuanians) against Soviet power and for national independence during 1986-1991 has been called a singing revolution because of the importance in the peaceful struggle of huge crowds of people gathering at traditional song festivals. Such popular festivals, having been approved and encouraged by the Soviet authorities as examples of “freedom of national cultures to flourish in the SU” were spontaneously turned into protest actions where hundreds of thousands of people together sang forbidden “nationalistic” songs, like the national anthem of the First Estonian Republic, and from 1989 onwards even waved the forbidden Estonian flag. The Soviet authorities were unable to stop this from happening. See: LIEVEN, Anatoli. *The Baltic Revolution. Estonia, Latvia, Lithuania and the Path to Independence*. New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1993; RUUTSOO, Rein. *Civil Society and Nation Building in Estonia and the Baltic States*. Rovaniemi: University of Lapland, 2002.

⁵ See: SMITH, G. (...) 1996; LIEVEN, A. (...) 1993.

⁶ See: LAITIN, D. (...) 1998; SMITH, G. (...) 1996.

⁷ See: CLEMENS, W.C. *The Baltic Transformed: Complexity Theory and European Security*. Lanham, etc: Rowman & Littlefield, 2001.

All communication was in Russian and everybody knew how to speak Russian. I've gone to school together with Russians and Latvians and we never had any kind of a language problem – like what language should one speak with this person or that person. The school I went to was an Estonian-language school and it would never have occurred to a Russian pupil that someone would tease him because of language or nationality. The Russians could have gone to a Russian-language school also but most of them chose to come to our Estonian-language school, and it was the same with Latvians. There were no problems, but the common language for all different nationalities was without any doubt always Russian. It was like completely natural in those days and nobody made a fuss about it. In our region I think Latvians could speak Russian even better than us Estonians. That was because they had closer and better relations with Russians⁸.

Arvo is here making reference to the fact that during Soviet years Estonians and Russians lived quite separate lives and formed two separate linguistic communities. For example, there were few marriages across the ethnic line, far fewer than in neighbouring Latvia or other Soviet republics. On the other hand, marriages between Russians and other nationalities of the Soviet Union were very common, and in such cases linguistic Russification usually followed. Russian clearly had a much higher status than other Slavic languages. But when an Estonian married a Russian both languages were usually retained and spoken at home⁹.

Remarkably, in the pre-war period, before the Soviet occupation, also local Russian-speakers were able and willing to use Estonian, and not just the other way round, Estonians being expected to be perfectly bilingual. Of our informants, those ethnic Russians who were old enough to have gone to school in pre-war times all knew at least some Estonian; most had forgotten how to speak it but they could easily understand both spoken and written Estonian¹⁰. Russian monolingualism had only become possible and desirable for the local Russians during the years of Soviet language policies.

The sociolinguistic situation of Pechory town is an intriguing example of practical bilingualism that has functioned well in a peripheral region. Pechory (Petseri in Estonian) is today part of the Pskov region of the Russian Federation, but the town and the surrounding territory belonged to the Estonian Republic between 1919 and 1940. “Those Estonian times”, 21 years of Estonian rule, are remembered fondly and even nostalgically by those who are indigenous to the town, regardless

⁸ The direct quotations are from interviews conducted in 2000, 2004 and 2005 by the author in Estonian, transcribed by Uno Saar; interviews conducted in 2004 by the author and Uno Saar in Russian, transcribed and translated from Russian into Estonian by Uno Saar; interviews conducted and transcribed in 2005 by Jeanne Kormina and Marina Hakkarainen in Russian. Translations from Estonian into English are by the author; from Russian into English by Kormina, Hakkarainen and Svetlana Kirichenko. All personal names of the interviewed persons have been changed.

⁹ See: VERSCHIK, Anna. Research into Multilingualism in Estonia. *Multilingua: Journal of Multilingual and Multicultural development*, Vol. 24, Issue 4, 2005, p. 413–429.

¹⁰ In interview situations with Russian-speakers it often happened that the informants would initially make no hint at knowing any Estonian at all. For example, I and Marina Hakkarainen were interviewing a village elder, Dimitri and his Ukrainian-born wife in a Russian Old Believers' village on the Estonian side. Dimitri said he knew no Estonian, and conversed only with Hakkarainen in Russian. When he realized I could follow the conversation but not intervene in Russian he finally turned towards me and said in hesitant Estonian: “I apologize for my very bad Estonian but you know, I hardly ever use it any more. I can still read it perfectly, though!” Then he showed us an official document about land reclamation he had received from the municipality and translated it correctly, word by word, from Estonian into Russian. At the end of another interview occasion the informant Aleksandra, 92, exclaimed in Russian to my research assistant: “Tell her I would really like to chat with her in Estonian but I can't do it anymore, not properly anyhow”.

of their ethnicity or native tongue. In the context of widespread Soviet nostalgia and growing xenophobia in present-day Russia such a positive discourse about “foreign influence” is rare and remarkable and serves as one more reminder of how local historical circumstances affect peoples’ understanding of political and politicized phenomena¹¹.

The Estonian school of Pechory is the only school in the whole Russian Federation that until autumn 2005 has operated fully in the Estonian language. Although there are tens of thousands of ethnic Estonians living permanently in different parts of Russia, especially in Krasnojarsk region in Siberia, the border region of Pechory in many ways is a unique case of centuries long co-existence of Estonian-speaking and Russian-speaking populations.

We have conducted case studies¹² on borderland living in a multi-ethnic Estonian- Russian border area called *Setomaa* or *Petserimaa* in Estonian, *Pechorskii raion* in Russian (here: Pechory district). *Setomaa* means the Setos’ land, and *Petserimaa/Pechorskii raion* is named according to the district’s main town Petseri/Pechory, where there is a famous Russian Orthodox monastery. The Finno-Ugric populations in this area pre-date the Russians. Besides Estonians, *Setos* are indigenous to this area. The *Setos* are a small Finno-Ugric people, numbering approximately 15 000 at present. Seto culture can be said to form a link between Estonian culture, on one hand, and Russian culture, on the other: their vernacular language, a dialect of South Estonian, connects Setos with Estonians, and their religion, Russian Orthodoxy, with Russians¹³. Religious practices, especially those of celebrating patron saints’ holidays and visiting family graves at cemeteries, also firmly connect Setos with the Russian side of the border, where many of their most important churches and graveyards are located. Lay religious activities are very much female-dominated; women go actively to church, they sing in church choirs, they do voluntary work for their congregations, they visit and take care of the graves of family members, relatives, and friends. Women have no official position in the organisation and hierarchy of the Russian Orthodox Church, however.

The current citizenship laws of Estonia grant automatic citizenship to all persons who were citizens of the pre-annexation Estonian republic (1919-1940) and their descendants. This includes those citizens who resided at that time in the province of *Petserimaa*, which during the first Estonian republic was part of the territory of Estonia. The population of the province was quite mixed at the time, mainly with Setos and Russians, but the Estonian government encouraged ethnic Estonians to move to the province. Moreover, an extensive program of educational, cultural and economic development was set up, and it was hoped that development of the area would eventually “Estonianise” and “civilize” the “backward” Russian Orthodox Setos. When Estonia was annexed by the Soviet Union in 1944 the province first became part of the new Socialist Republic of Estonia, but

¹¹ Similarly, it is possible to see, how in Russian Karelia the local population has re-discovered the Finnish-ness of the region (large parts of present-day Russian Karelia belonged to Finland until the end of II World War and most of the present-day population originates from other parts of the former Soviet Union). In both cases the “Western character” of local history and traditions has a higher status than Soviet, Russian or Slavic ones. See: MELNIKOVA, Katya (et. al.). *Granitza i lyudi. Vospominaniya pereselentzev Priladozhskoj Karelii i Karel’skogo Pereshejka*. St. Petersburg: The European University, 2005.

¹² For this article only materials from the Russian / Estonian borderland have been utilized. For the Latvian / Russian borderland see: ASSMUTH, L. (...) 2005; LULLE, Aija. Social and Cultural Consequences of a newly established Border in Latvian and Russian Border Areas. Paper presented at the conference *Lineae Terrarum, Borders Conference*, University of Texas, El Paso, USA. Published in full on the conference CD-ROM: *Lineae Terrarum. Borders Conference*. University of Texas, El Paso, 2006.

¹³ See: JÄÄTS, Indrek. *Setude etniline identiteet* (The Ethnic Identity of the Setos) Tartu: Tartu Ülikooli Kirjastus, 1998.

in 1945 the border between the two socialist republics was moved further west and the province of Pechory was joined to the Socialist Federation of Russia as the Pechory district¹⁴.

The town of Pechory currently has 14.000 inhabitants. It is situated at only two kilometres from the present Estonian border, and is an important centre of Russian Orthodoxy (monastery, site of pilgrimage and religious tourism), but also of Seto and Estonian culture. Besides the Estonian-language school there is a Russian Orthodox Church where the mass is in Estonian, and a Lutheran church where the remaining local Estonians, Setos and Finns go. In the post-Soviet situation the formerly ethnically mixed villages in the surrounding countryside have in effect become wholly Russian-speaking, most Estonians and Setos having migrated to the much wealthier Estonia. The few Setos and Estonians who continue to live in Pechory district are usually elderly women, often widows, who have refused to relocate together with their relatives to Estonia because, as I have heard many of them explain, they “want to die peacefully in the homeland”¹⁵.

Thus, the absolute majority of inhabitants in Pechory district are Russian-speakers. There are ethnic Latvians, Estonians, Finns, Setos, Ukrainians, and other nationalities, but most of them speak Russian either as their mother tongue or as their second or third language. Accordingly, the position of other languages than Russian in Pechory district is very weak.

The town of Pechory prides itself of its Estonian influence, which is seen on one hand exotic and therefore touristically promising, on the other hand Estonian-ness is a code word for European orderliness and cleanliness. But at the same time Pechory is perceived as a frontier-town, a bastion of Russianness against hostile foreign influences and a holy site of Russian orthodoxy, because of its famous monastery that, remarkably, has functioned without interruption from late 15th century. “These lands are indisputably Holy Russian lands”, then-president of the Russian Federation Vladimir Putin declared during his official visit to the area in 2000. This interpretation has gained in popularity in recent years, due both to the increased popularity and influence of the Russian Orthodox Church, and also due to Russia’s strained relations with its Baltic neighbours Estonia and Latvia.

We can therefore conclude that everything connected with language, ethnicity and religion is highly political and politicised in this border region of Russia. As elsewhere in the world, issues of ethnicity, language and religion are especially contested in border regions, because there they necessarily involve an international aspect. The Baltic States’ entry into the European Union and the NATO in 2004 highlighted the region’s political and military importance for Russia. Patriotism and veneration of “our boys protecting our borders” continue to be key values among most citizens of Russia¹⁶. The situation of Finno-Ugric minority languages and cultures in Russia has been a reason for concern and controversy between Russia and the EU-member states Finland and Estonia. Also in bilateral relations there is tension: Russia continues to refuse to sign an already negotiated border treaty with Estonia, claiming that Estonia may in the future present claims for the re-inclusion of the Pechory area into its territory. It is therefore no wonder that in such a charged political climate the seemingly innocent issue of the future role of a small Estonian school in this Russian territory should become a hot and contested topic.

¹⁴ See: JÄÄTS, I. (...) 1998; BERG, Eiki & ORAS, Saimi. The Estonian-Russian Border: Ten Years of Negotiations. *Estonian Foreign Policy Yearbook*, 2003. <http://www.evi.ee/lib/valispol2003.pdf>

¹⁵ See: ASSMUTH, L. (...) 2004.

¹⁶ See: BREDNIKOVA, Olga & SIIM, K. Divided Town in Transition: Social Space, Identity and Discourse. In: Eiki Berg (ed.). *Negotiating Borders of Multiple Meanings: Research Report*. Tartu: Peipsi Koostöö Keskus, 2001, p. 17–36.

“Little piece of Estonia on Russian soil”

The Estonian school (gymnasium) in Pechory was established in 1919, the second year of the young Estonian republic. The aim of the school was to “bring first-class education to the youth of Pechory in the Estonian language”. The school operated throughout the Soviet years, often in difficult conditions but it was never closed. All teaching was in Estonian, except for Russian language, literature and history. There were enough Estonians in the district to keep the school alive, and also some half-Russian and wholly Russian-speaking families sent their children to the Estonian school because of its reputed “good quality teaching”. Since 1991 the school has operated under Pskov region’s educational authority in the Russian Federation as School number 2¹⁷.

The new political and border situation after the dissolution of the Soviet Union dramatically affected the school. There has been a slow but steady decline of pupils. The number of pupils dropped more drastically first in 1994 when the new border line between Estonia and Russia was finally demarcated and it became evident to all that Pechory was to remain a Russian territory (until then many residents had hoped for the re-inclusion of the district into Estonia). The second wave of migration happened in 1997 when it was for the last year possible for the district residents to obtain a relocation subsidy from the Estonian government. Under such conditions most Estonian families with children chose the option of migrating to Estonia. However, over these difficult years new pupils from mixed families had continued to come in, so the situation of the school was not more threatened than that of other (Russian-language) small schools in the Russian periphery. Most importantly, the Pskov region’s educational authorities continued to support the school and its principle of teaching in Estonian. Remarkably, the Estonian Ministry of Education was allowed to support the school financially, and the school was presented favourably also in the Russian media.

In August 2004 when I first visited the school I was assured that it would continue to operate “as a special language school and a cultural centre of Estonian-ness in Russia”. The teachers told me that co-operation between the Pskov region’s and Estonian ministries of education was without problems and the school got all teaching materials it needed from Estonia. Also the Estonian teacher’s salaries were paid for by Estonia – quite a unique arrangement between two states. During my visit, the Russian Orthodox St. Mary Day festival was celebrated in the traditional Seto way in the small school courtyard and everybody assured me that everything was “just fine” with the school. The bilingual teacher I interviewed said:

Well, we could have some more pupils of course, some classes have to be put together and that is not good. But on the bright side, there are more and more Russian-speaking children here in Pechory who wish to study with us, and who wish to learn Estonian. Or maybe their parents think it gives them a head start. Whatever the reason, education in Estonian will definitely go on here.

To my surprise, then, in March 2005 Estonian newspapers reported of a high-level meeting between the educational authorities of Estonia and the Pskov region in which it was decided that the school would continue to exist but from September 2005 most of the lessons would be taught in Russian. Only Estonian language (5 lessons a week) and Estonian literature and history (2 lessons) were to be taught in Estonian by native speakers. Both parties had agreed that this was the only way to save the school from which only one pupil (11th grader) graduated in 2005. The school would

¹⁷ See: TAMM, V. (ed.). *Pechory eesti kool. Minevik, olevik, tulevik* (The Estonian School in Pechory: Past, Present, Future). Tallinn: Foundation for the Estonian Language, 2005.

become an institute of “modern, intensive foreign language studies” and would therefore attract many more students than at present. It was planned that in three years the school would have 120-130 pupils instead of the current 30 pupils¹⁸.

What followed was a heated discussion in Estonian newspapers about the real, hidden motives behind the decision. The Estonian negotiators were accused of “selling out” for the Russians and especially, for working behind the backs of the Seto people, whose consultative body, the Seto Council, was completely by-passed. Some readers wrote that the decision was a deliberate plot of the Russians “to finally put an end to all traces of Estonian culture in Pechory”. A link was made to the “struggle for survival” of some other Finno-Ugric small peoples and languages of Russia, like the Mari people in central Russia whose linguistic rights have been a cause for great concern. Other commentators were a bit more moderate, pointing out that a school with only 30 pupils would not survive in Estonia either¹⁹.

The reaction from the teachers of the school was more subdued and realistic. One teacher said:

There was simply no better option. If this had not been done the school would have been closed. And then what? What would become of Estonian culture here if there was no school at all?

The Pechory townspeople were divided on the issue. As in other matters, there emerged dividing lines between those who originate in the area and those who are “newcomers” from other regions in the former Soviet Union²⁰. A Russophone woman, born in Pechory region, whose nephew had attended the school, told us:

Look, I think it is important we continue to have this little piece of Estonia on Russian soil. After all, it is a unique thing in Russia. But it needs to be opened up a bit, otherwise it cannot survive. A school cannot survive without any pupils!

But a male “newcomer” said:

I have no opinion on the issue. We all speak Russian here anyhow and you can learn other languages in all the schools if you wish. I really don’t understand all this fuss about Estonian.

The process around the Estonian school in Pechory reflects the new situation of Estonian in Russia: from an odd and disregarded minority language it is developing into a prestigious foreign language worth intensive study. This is because studying and mastering Estonian has become an asset, at least in this region bordering Estonia. Knowledge of Estonian (and the possession of an Estonian passport) opens up the lucrative gates of the European Union. So, ironically, with the fading out of an Estonian minority culture in Russia emerges a new, heightened status for the Estonian language. The situation of Estonian therefore starts to resemble that of Finnish, which is nowadays a popular language in the Russian republic of Karelia, despite a longstanding outflow

¹⁸ See: Eesti Päevaleht 2005.

¹⁹ See: Lõunaleht 2005; Postimees 2005; Pärnu Postimees 2005; Eesti Ekspress 2005.

²⁰ See: HAKKARAINEN, Marina. On the Margins: Minority Groups in Pechory Borderland. Paper presented at the conference *Defining Region: Baltic Area Studies from Sociocultural Anthropology and Interdisciplinary Perspectives*, Klaipeda University, Lithuania, May 2005.

of Finnish-speakers. Demand for speakers and teachers of both languages will definitely increase in the future. Therefore, despite the worries of cultural activists next door, Estonian is not likely to disappear from Russia together with the last remaining Estonian-speakers. It goes without saying that the situation of the so-called small Finno-Ugric languages in Russia is completely different, and those languages (and cultures) are indeed endangered²¹.

Ethnic and language identities intertwined

What does ethnicity mean to the people who live at or close to the border? What relevance does ethnic identity have in their everyday lives? Do they think of themselves primarily as Estonian or Russian citizens, Estonian, Seto, or Russian by ethnicity and language or as inhabitants of their respective regions and towns? Seto ethnicity certainly has become more pronounced and appreciated lately; one can even speak of a Seto cultural revival. Political scientist Robert Kaiser and sociologist Elena Nikiforova have even linked the flourishing of Seto ethnic identity and Seto cultural movement specifically to the establishment of the present state border²². Our Estonian-speaking informants, both in Estonia and in Pechory district, frequently said they had always felt themselves to be Estonians, even in Soviet times. Language and customs (and the obligatory designation of ethnicity/nationality on one's personal documents²³) had marked that basic distinction quite clearly in a multi-cultural environment. Thus, ethnicity had always mattered and ethnic boundaries had always been there, but only lately had a specific Seto sub-ethnicity come to the fore. People were now making finer distinctions than before; "gradually I began to realise that I was and I had always been Seto, not just Estonian", as one male informant put it.

Küllli, a Seto woman in her 40s who travels very frequently to Russia, had also started to think about her ethnic identity only recently:

Interviewer: Do you consider yourself a Seto? Does Seto identity mean anything to you?

Küllli: Well... When somebody asks me that you are a Seto, aren't you – well, then I realise, I guess I am.

Interviewer: But earlier, in Soviet times, you didn't think in those terms, whether you are Seto or not, it didn't seem important or how?

Küllli: Well you know, we used to think in terms of Estonians and Russians only, only in terms of those two peoples.

Interviewer: People didn't talk about Setos in those days, then?

Küllli: No, we didn't really.

²¹ See: NETTLE, David & ROMAINE, Suzanne (eds.). *Vanishing Voices. The Extinction of the World's Languages*. New York & Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000.

²² See: KAISER, Robert & NIKIFOROVA, Elena. Borderland Spaces of Identification and Dis/location: Multiscalar Narratives and Enactments of Seto Identity and Place in the Estonian-Russian Borderlands. *Ethnic and Racial Studies*, Vol. 24, No. 5, 2006, p. 928–958.

²³ Every Soviet citizen had to choose his or her nationality (*natsional'nostj*) at the age of 16. This permanent choice was inscribed in one's internal passport and other official documents. The list of available nationalities did not include Seto, which was considered a sub-group of Estonians. Cf.: HUMPHREY, Caroline. *Karl Marx Collective. Economy, Society and Religion in a Siberian Collective Farm*. Cambridge & London: Cambridge University Press, 1983; ANDERSON, David. Bringing Civil Society to an Uncivilised Place: Citizenship Regimes in Russia's Arctic Frontier. In: Chris Hann & Elizabeth Dunn (eds.). *Civil Society. Challenging Western Models*. London & New York: Routledge, 1996, p. 99–120; JÄÄTS, I. (...) 1998.

From Külli's hesitant words about her 'real' ethnic identity it becomes evident that the Soviet practice of an obligatory choosing of one's nationality from a list of approved, officially existing nationalities had a profound effect on how people placed and understood themselves. Külli and many others did not think of themselves in terms of a Seto nationality/ethnicity earlier because Seto was not an official designation but was regarded only as a sub-group of Estonians.

But ethnic (or national) identity is not the only kind of identity that is important to our informants in this region. For many Setos, ethnic origin, language and the practice of Seto religious customs *all taken together* mark the crucial distinction both from Estonians and Russians. For the remaining few Finns in Pechory town language is no longer a key marker of identity but Lutheran religion definitely is. These elderly people, mostly women, switch between Russian and mixed Estonian-Finnish with ease and consider languages pragmatically as means of communication. For those cultural activists who are eager to maintain an Estonian community in Pechory language is definitely the key, because as before, they maintain that "Estonian language is the bearer of Estonian culture". Therefore, for them the preservation of the Estonian school is of fundamental importance. Ironically, and perhaps typically, most of the cultural activists are students and educated people who live in Estonia. The few remaining rural Setos, elderly people who live isolated lives in small hamlets of Pechory district, don't have a viable linguistic community any more, but they still "strongly feel themselves" distinct as Setos among Russians and other Russian-speakers.

Also for the younger-generation Seto people religious and language identities and practices sometimes go together, as for Svetlana, born in 1980 in Pechory town:

Of course I visit the monastery every now and then. For prayer. But I don't go to mass in the monastery churches. Instead, I always go to mass in St. Barbara church where Father Jevgenii²⁴ is the priest: There the service is in Estonian and that is the way it should be. The mass should be in one's own language, shouldn't it? And I also help out in St. Barbara's. Many people do.

During our fieldwork in this region we have encountered many very different kinds and understandings of Russian identity. For example, there is the strong and firm Estonian Russian identity of Vladimir, a man in his late seventies, a former Soviet soldier, prisoner-of-war and an "enemy of the Soviet state" who spent years in concentration and labour camps both in Germany and the Soviet Union and later was convicted for 10 years' to Siberia in a hard-labour camp for "spionage". After Stalin's death he was freed and returned home to Soviet Estonia. With us he insisted on speaking only Estonian (which he mastered perfectly), and with no prompting defined himself as "*a proud citizen of independent Estonia who learned Russian as his first language*". But in the same Russophone village on the shore of the Russian-Estonian border lake we also spoke with Svetlana, 50 years old, born and raised in central Russia, who had come to work in Soviet Estonia "just by chance", married and stayed, and suddenly found herself living in a foreign country. Adjusting to that new situation had been very hard for her, especially language-wise. Technically, both Svetlana and Vladimir are Estonian citizens whose mother tongue is Russian, but their ideas about being Estonian Russians were almost opposite. From the start, Svetlana had problems with the question

²⁴ Father Jevgenii is a Russian born in Estonia who is completely bilingual. He is a highly respected public figure in the town. He is very active in charity work and therefore his church has become a haven for the poor and needy. When I interviewed him in August 2004 he was delighted to use Estonian and talk about Estonian matters. Father Jevgenii's "Estonianness" is very relevant to the Estonians and Setos in Pechory, but most local Russians who seek him know nothing about this.

‘what is your ethnic/national identity?’ Only when we asked her repeatedly and in many different ways (in Russian) she replied:

You might simply call me a Russian person who lives in Estonia, because that’s what I am.

Vladimir’s certainty (and pride) and Svetlana’s hesitation with the interview question “what is your ethnic/national identity?” taught us researchers an important lesson: for our informants, ethnic and/or national identities were issues that were relevant and spoken about in relation to something else, not as separate, well-defined identity categories. In Vladimir’s case, his Estonian Russian identity was related to locality, citizenship and language; for Svetlana, the crucial thing was her Russianness related to birthplace, family and language and unaltered by (Estonian) citizenship and long-term residency. In other cases still, people would talk about their ethnic identities mainly or only in relation to religion.

People with mixed (multiple) identities we encountered during our fieldwork were often bi- or multilingual from childhood. Bilingualism as an ability and willingness to interact in more than one language is rightly seen as the key to successful intergration for minorities and migrants, but I hold that it would be equally important for people of ethnic and linguistic majorities. The Baltic Russian-speakers like Vladimir or Svetlana are interesting in this respect since their language is a minority language in the countries in which they live, but a powerful majority language in the next-door neighbouring country, Russia. Due to Soviet language policies Russians in most cases had no need or incentive to learn other languages than Russian whereas people of all other linguistic groups (more than 200 officially recognised of them in the former Soviet Union) were obliged to know Russian²⁵.

Turning inwards or opening up in a borderland

People everywhere are re-creating and re-enforcing local, ethnic and linguistic identities, and the same processes are under way in the “prison of nationalities”, the former Soviet Union. The paradox of the 21st century is that the increasing homogenisation of economies and societies is paralleled by cultures becoming more and more heterogeneous. People living in the European peripheries have indeed become thoroughly modern and still want to and decide to retain their cultural distinctiveness²⁶. Many of our informants are now making new choices with regard to their identities as Seto, Russian, Latvian, Estonian or Finn. But modern identities are not exclusive: the people who live at the border between the three different post-Soviet states will continue to want to choose their distinct ethnic, linguistic and religious identities, but they might also at the same time feel that they are borderlanders, village people, citizens of their nation states or Europeans, depending on the context. In the modern world, people can and will hold multiple identities, and increasingly, also in the national peripheries of Estonia, Latvia and Russia, they are doing so quite consciously.

When I started doing research on Estonia in mid-1990s, my first hesitant attempts to suggest to ethnic Estonians and Russians that there might, in the near future, exist such a category of people

²⁵ See: NETTLE, D. & ROMAINE, S. (...) 2000.

²⁶ See: ROGERS, Susan Carol. *Shaping Modern Times in Rural France. The Transformation and Reproduction of an Aveyronnais Community*. Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1991; SIIKALA, Anna-Leena. Toisiinsa virtaavat maailmat (Intertwining Worlds). In: Anna Maria Viljanen & Minna Lahti (eds.). *Kaukaa haettua. Kirjoituksia antropologisesta kenttätyöstä* (Fetched from Afar. Writings on anthropological fieldwork). Helsinki: The Finnish Anthropological Society, 1997, p. 46–68.

living in Estonia who would see themselves and who would be seen as ‘Estonian Russians’ was met with laughter, scepticism, or suspicion. Such reactions came from urban people living in Tallinn where the social realities of the two groups, Estonians and Russians (or non-Estonians), were quite separate and remain so to this day. Later on, fieldwork in the peripheral regions of south-east Estonia and north-east Latvia taught me and my colleagues that such identity categories as ‘Estonian Russian’ or ‘Latvian Russian’ did exist, and there were people who would actually identify themselves as such. This was perhaps not so surprising in the case of the ‘old Russians’, having generations-long family backgrounds locally, but more significantly also many Soviet-era migrants to the area are choosing to think of themselves as ‘Baltic Russians’.

In my view, the glue that could tie the Estonian and Latvian Russians to their Baltic country of residence is a strong sense of local identity. What we have found during the research process in this border region are localised, grounded versions of being Russian, Estonian, Latvian, or Seto. Crucially, with a local identity comes a feeling of *belonging* – If a person doesn’t feel that she belongs she will always remain, in other’s opinion as well as her own, a relative outsider. This is the simple but important lesson that the borderland peripheries of Estonia and Latvia and the people living there have taught us, and it is a lesson that hopefully has implications in other contexts as well.



Pic. 1. Estonian school in Pechory (small wooden building). Photo by L. Assmuth, 2009

Conclusions

The transformation of the Estonian school in Pechory can be understood on one hand as a simple, straight-forward response to pressures from declining numbers of pupils that schools in peripheral rural areas are facing everywhere. As such, there is nothing particularly worrying in the outcome, and the responsible authorities of the two countries involved can be seen to have worked

out a reasonable compromise. Estonian language and culture will not disappear from Russian soil even when the school operates mainly in Russian. The school being designated a foreign language school may paradoxically even enhance the status of Estonian. On the other hand, the case of the Estonian school can also be seen as a worrying example of the increasing politicization of language and ethnic issues in the Russian Federation. To some, Estonianness represents alienness and unwanted foreign influence on Russia and Russians and therefore a school that actively promotes and protects such foreign influences, language being one of them, is unwelcome. It remains to be seen which of these contradictory forces evident under the surface in present-day Russia will be stronger. In any case, processes of politicization of language and ethnicity are always local processes that happen in particular locations with particular histories. In a hugely heterogeneous country like Russia it would be a serious mistake to read the macro-level of political and state actors into the micro-level of people's experiences and memories. This is why locally grounded studies are necessary for us to understand what really goes on in Russia. Our study area, the Pechory district, may indeed be an especially favourable location to shed light on the intermingling of language, ethnicity and religion because this "Holy Russian Land" once was concretely on foreign ground, in Estonia. And the small wooden building of the Estonian school in Pechory (see: Picture No. 1.) continues to remind residents and visitors alike of the region's multicultural and multilingual local histories, even when designated a "foreign language school".

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IDENTITETAS IR IDENTITETO POLITIKA BALTIJOS PARIBIO REGIONE: ESTŲ MOKYKLA RUSIJOJE

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Santrauka

Straipsnyje aptariami kalbos politizavimo atvejai ir probleminės etniškumo bei tautiškumo apraiškos, egzistuojančios Estijos ir Rusijos pasienio regione. Šio krašto gyventojų sovietinės gyvenamosios palikimas daro esminę įtaką jų nuostatoms tiek vienos, tiek kitos (estų ir rusų) kalbų atžvilgiu. Tai būdinga ir abiejų tautinių mažumų atstovams, gyvenantiems „anapus sienos“. Rusijos ir Estijos tarpvalstybiniai santykiai visais lygiais yra lemiami buvusios SSRS politinių nuostatų nacionalinės kalbos atžvilgiu. Iki pat šiol ten dominuoja anuo metu visuotinai buvusi vartojama valstybinė rusų kalba. Estų kalba pavieniais atvejais yra viešai ignoruojama. Ši paribio sritis soci-

aliniu aspektu yra įdomi tuo, kad joje jau seniai kartu gyvena tiek estiškai, tiek rusiškai namuose ir viešose erdvėse kalbantys žmonės.

Autorė tyrinėja debatus, keliančius grėsmę Pečioruose (Rusijos Pskovo srities regionas, besiribojantis su Estijos Respublika) įkurtos estų mokyklos tolesniam egzistavimui. Keičiamas minėtos mokyklos statusas. Iš tautinių mažumų mokyklos ji perkvalifikuojama į mokyklą, kurioje pamokos vyksta užsienio kalba.

Aptarusi tiriamo regiono socialinės struktūros sanklodą, autorė sutelkia dėmesį į sociolingvistinės ir etninės situacijos, susiformavusios sovietiniais laikais ir tebesitęsiančios posovietiniu laikotarpiu, tyrimus. Fenomenas, įvardijamas *kasdienės dvikalbystės* sąvoka, čia yra analizuojamas remiantis individualiomis regiono gyventojų nuomonėmis, liudijamomis šiais laikais čia darytuose interviu (garso įrašai). Šiame kontekste galima aiškiau suvokti socialinių problemų, slypinčių minėtos estiškosios Pečiorų mokyklos reorganizacijoje, priežastis, jų ištakas ir raidą. Tiriama, kokių būdu ir kiek giliai čia tarpusavyje susipynusios vietinių gyventojų lingvistinės, etninės, religinės ir tautinės tapatybės apraiškos. Pateikiama konkrečių šio proceso pavyzdžių. Politiniai ir politizuoti pavienių asmenų saviidentiteto apsisprendimo atvejai liudija daugelio posovietinės erdvės pasienio regionų gyventojų gyvenamosios specifinę problematiką.

Išvadose daroma prielaida, kad vienareikšmiškai įvertinti situacijos, kurioje yra atsidūrusi estiška mokykla Pečioruose, negalima. Viena vertus, tokia reorganizacija gali būti suprantama, nes estiškai kalbančių vaikų čia ir kituose abiejų šalių pasienio miesteliuose nuolat mažėja. Kita vertus, tokia akcija gali būti vertintina ir kaip sąmoningas Rusijos Federacijos sprendimas tautinių kalbų vartosenos bei etninės tapatybės problemų politizavimo lygmenyje.