



## BETWEEN TWO UNIONS: THE REVIVAL OF VÕRO IN THE POST-SOVIET & PRE-EUROPEAN UNION ESTONIA

**Kara D. Brown**, Indiana University  
[kara\\_dbrown@yahoo.com](mailto:kara_dbrown@yahoo.com)

The civil society advocates of Võro, a Balto-Finnic language spoken by some 50,000 people in rural Estonia, are gamely negotiating a rapidly and radically changing world. Estonia emerged from the Soviet occupation scarcely a decade ago and is hastening towards European Union (EU) membership, voluntarily but without much choice. In the process, the country is reestablishing a democracy and market economy while witnessing the lurching development of civil society and ever-shifting civil society-state relations. The Estonian language, a thread of identity and tradition that survived Soviet Russification policies, is still perceived to be in danger, whether from the 400,000 Russian-speakers left from the Soviet colonization, its pending peripheral position in a powerful EU, or the demands of the global labor market. As a small language in a small state, Võro advocates are finding opportunity amidst often mysterious and threatening changes. Capitalizing on their new-found freedoms, a web of identities, and decentralized language policy, as well as Estonia's desire to obtain EU membership and the aid that may ensue, Võro advocates are able to pursue a diverse set of programs, research, and projects. The result is best characterized as a kind of "market policy," one whose unique benefits and limitations merit broad discussion.

In the midst of rapid transition and despite the fact that many Estonians feel that the survival of Estonian itself is still in doubt and national unity is at a premium, several cultural associations and groups in southeastern Estonia have declared that Võro is not a backwards, rural dialect, but a language with a rich cultural history that should receive government support and funding. In the span of ten years, a civil society movement persuaded the government to finance both the Võro Institute, the group spearheading the language revival movement, and the "Southern Estonian Language and Culture Policy," an extensive four-year program to develop southern-Estonian (Võro) language and culture by 1) articulating a place and an importance for Võro in the global, European, national, and regional contexts; 2) connecting to international civil society networks in the context of a sometimes resistant local civil society; and 3) utilizing the language of democracy in the process of implementing language projects. This paper, based on eleven months of ethnographic research on the Võro-language revival in southeastern Estonia, discusses these aspects of the Võro case in an effort to broaden the dialogue about the relationship between civil society and the language policy process in the twenty-first century.

The Estonian experience in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries calls into question our most basic assumptions about the nature of civil society and its role in the language policy process. The blossoming of language and environmental movements in the waning years of the Soviet Union boded well for the development of civil society in the post-Soviet period. Western Europe and North America championed the power and potential of civil society in democratizing countries both to balance and to complement state power. But the very concept of civil society presupposes that people will have available both surplus income and free time to support civil society organizations. For a broad segment of the Estonian population, especially in rural Võro County, this is simply not the case. Free time is lacking and, with the second highest unemployment rate in the country, the county residents face intense pressures to find and retain jobs. Even those who work full-time are often insecure and must spend considerable time



growing their own food, making clothes, or otherwise engaged in activities that more prosperous people can pay for. The promising civil society movements waned in the face of harsh economic realities. Additionally, Estonians had little direct experience with formulating or implementing "policy," a concept that has no translation in Estonian, and the transition period has offered few opportunities to learn. Well-intended decentralization, when carried out without capacity-building, often leads to ineffective policy. In light of the lack of policy experience, time, and surplus income, what is a reasonable role to expect civil society to play in local language revitalization or preservation movements? Are our concepts of civil society even appropriate in such a context?

Both broad and narrow definitions of civil society enlighten the Võro-language policy process. In its broad sense, civil society is "composed above all of the intimate sphere (especially the family), the sphere of associations (especially voluntary associations), social movements, and forms of public communication." [1] During the Soviet occupation of Estonia (1940-1991), merely speaking Estonian or Võro in the "intimate sphere," itself an assertion of an independent identity, constituted an act of resistance, however small, to the Soviets' Russification policies. [2] Yet Estonians generally agreed during this period that preserving standard Estonian, the language of only one million people, was a priority and developing "regional dialects" would divide the energies and resources of a small nation. During this transition period, however, when Soviet work, income and health care guarantees have disappeared, resistance is no longer an issue and collective identities become subordinate to pressing economic concerns, individual language choices are dominated by the perceived demands of the global labor market. Thus, just as many of the 400,000 Russian-speakers in Estonia are convinced that learning English is more important than Estonian, children in Võro County prefer English to Võro in schools.

The more narrow sense of civil society as "the complex network of freely formed voluntary associations, apart from the formal governmental institutions of the state, acting independently or in partnership with state agencies" [3] can also be misleading. For most of the Soviet period, independent voluntary associations were forbidden or coopted by the state for its own political ends. By the late glasnost period (after 1987), the civil society terrain shifted as the Soviet Union opened up and permitted those who were disturbed by the Russification of their country and the potential loss of Võro to coalesce as a movement. [4] In 1988, a small group of Estonian university professors, poets and journalists called publicly for the revival of Võro and organized regular meetings at the Tartu University library café; they founded the Võro Language and Culture Fund (Võro keel ja kultuuri fond) to promote the language [5] and established an annual summer "open university" with lectures in Võro.

A new kind of relationship has emerged between civil society and the state in post-Soviet Estonia. The Estonian government guarantees cultural and linguistic rights for minority groups in the Estonian Constitution (paragraphs 6 and 12) and the Law on Cultural Autonomy of Ethnic Minorities (1993) [6], yet relies on civil society to design and implement language programs and does not monitor the results. Meanwhile, civil society groups lack the means to function independently and are dependent on funds from international sources or from the state itself. The state, however, may be more interested in the existence of a regional language program, because it enhances Estonia's EU portfolio, than its success. The existence of civil society organizations thus frees the government to work on other problems. Both benefit from the relationship, and the result is an unusual type of policy. In a climate of new freedoms, the government-funded, civil society organizations lack the coercive powers of the state, and would be disinclined to use them. Instead of legally-binding policy, the state functions more as an enabler: the Võro Institute has the opportunity to succeed or to fail, to make its case for the people to choose to learn Võro or not.

In this shifting, post-Soviet terrain of civil society in partnership with the government, it is difficult to make clear distinctions between voluntary associations and state institutes. Typical of the transition period is the "hybrid" organization that has features of both independent associations and state organizations. The Võro Institute provides a good example of a "hybrid organization." On one hand, the Institute has the markings of an NGO: a grassroots movement provided the inspiration for the organization in 1989; the staff draws on local ideas and cooperates closely with another Võro-language NGOs; and the Institute operates independently of the state by making all hiring decisions (except for the Director), independently formulating and implementing research projects, and developing Võro-language programs without any involvement from the Estonian government. On the other hand, the Institute is also closely connected with the state: it is officially designated as a "state scientific research institution" and the Ministry of Culture



provides most of the funds for projects and selects the Director. The mixed features of the hybrid associations give them the flexibility and the funding to be major players in the development and implementation of language policy. Yet, their close connection with the government makes it difficult to conceive of civil society in Estonia as a force to balance the state.

The complex relationship between civil society and the state is reflected further in the shape of regional language policy. In Estonia, language policy is based on a "competitive market model" where individuals or organizations in civil society compete to implement projects that are connected within a general "program" framework developed by the Ministry of Culture (e.g. within the "Southern Estonian Language and Culture Program" guidelines). In short, a series of programs replace a comprehensive language policy with a clear line of development. Although this "market policy" model has significant drawbacks, which I briefly discuss at the end of this paper, it provides civil society organizations with great freedoms to design and carry out the project once they receive funding. Moreover, with few checks on the outcome of the projects, the model also gives organizations room to experiment.

In the market-dominated model of regional language policy in Estonia, civil society organizations have discovered an effective tactic in securing project funding -- the savvy promotion of regional language projects as programs that benefit more than one constituency. In the Võro case, civil society has articulated a place and an importance for the Võro language in the global, European, national, and regional contexts. These arguments have proven to be especially potent in the context of the transition process when the Estonian state and society are undergoing transformations that rest on both international and national support. Võro civil society most frequently invokes the "international" importance of supporting regional-language projects in Estonia by alluding to the international agreements that emphasize the value and legitimacy of protecting minority and regional languages. The most important of these for a country like Estonia, which is not yet a member of the EU, but is already adapting many of its policies as part of the accession process, is the Council of Europe's "Charter for Regional or Minority Languages." By drawing on this international/European context, civil society groups have helped to convince the Estonian government that a Võro-language policy will enhance its European Union accession portfolio by providing a symbol of the state's support for the regional cultures of Estonia.

In order to appeal to more nationalist-minded politicians, organizations in Võro civil society use two arguments. The first is the "two in one" language protection reasoning, which posits that investing in the development of Võro also protects Estonian as well by enriching the Balto-Finnic language sphere in Estonia and by providing an additional linguistic buffer. This line of reasoning taps into the Estonians' concern about the future of the Estonian language once Estonia becomes a member of the European Union and, more generally, in the age of linguistic globalization. The second argument is connected with economic development -- that an investment in Võro is an investment in the rural south, one of the more underdeveloped regions in the country. According to civil society organizations, an educational program that emphasizes local culture and regional language will also nurture regional pride. In the future, this pride may translate into the return of valuable human capital to the south and be the foundation of a larger strategy of economic development.

Indicative of this post-Soviet and pre-European Union transition phase are the efforts of Võro civil society groups to link webs of identity with language-project design. Since 1991, the promotion of two identities -- the Finno-Ugric and the Northern European - (in addition to the advancement of the Võro and Estonian identities), has informed the design of language projects and driven the connections made between Võro civil society and other NGO groups. The experiences and know-how of nearby minority groups has been especially important as southeastern Estonia NGOs attempt to reshape "international trends...to local ends." The Võro organizations, especially the Võro Institute, have reached out to the East to other Finno-Ugric (e.g. Karelians, Mari, Udmurts, and Komis) nations that share a similar past as the Võro speakers: Russification, weakened languages, the pressures of the post-Soviet period. When project ideas are informed by the activities of other Finno-Ugric groups, such as the publication of regional-language primer and the collection of local place-names, the Institute not only places their projects in the "tradition" of the Finno-Ugric peoples, but also has a useful project "blueprint" available.

The ideas generated in civil society organizations in the Scandinavia, especially Finland, have also played an important role during the transition period. Finland, as Estonia's most influential northern neighbor, as well as being a Finno-Ugric country and member of the EU, has been especially influential and provides an



idea to Võro civil society of the resources that might be available once Estonia is in the EU. Moreover, the similar languages (Finnish and Võro are believed to be more closely related to each other than Võro with standard Estonian) and the geographic proximity facilitate the flow of ideas from North to South and vice-versa and joint projects. Since projects with Finland carry a certain prestige in Estonia and are likely to be funded and well-received by the public, the past five years has witnessed a variety of joint Finnish-Võro projects including linguistics research and the writing and publication of a bilingual poetry collection.

Just as making civil society contacts to the East and North is indicative of this transitional time in Estonia, so is the careful use of "democratic" language to facilitate the implementation of language projects and secure a spot for regional-language education in the "domain" of optional subjects. [15] Since the Soviet experience of forced language learning is still fresh in Estonians' minds and civil society organizations are careful to avoid tactics that smack of anything totalitarian, the language of democracy with the watchwords - "choice," "voluntary," "optional" - permeates the civil society associations' descriptions of their projects' implementation. A recent controversy over Võro-language education, the most heavily funded, yet most controversial project, reflects the importance of using these democratic watchwords in the implementation process. In Spring 2000, the southeastern Estonian public was in an uproar over a misunderstood announcement that Võro-language education would be mandatory (sundõpe) in all county schools. [16] In response, one civil association education director explained that "the development of a Võro-language program in County schools will be voluntary, based on the interest expressed by students and teachers, and will remain an optional subject." [17]

The ability of Võro civil society to navigate skillfully over the ever-changing and developing political and social terrain of the transition period should not cloud some of the major problems that have arisen in the last ten years in the language policy process. Most problematic is that civil society organizations lack the "marketing" or public relations experience necessary to garner public support and to anchor "their ideas in wider circles." [18] Currently, the Võro-language movement is yet to be a broad-based movement. Many Southern Estonians, keenly aware of the lack of economic opportunity in the region, find it difficult to support the investment of time, resources, and energy into a language whose boundaries are coextensive with those of economic deprivation. Although Estonia is doing well relative to other former communist countries, opportunity is seen in cities, in technology, and in "global" languages, particularly English. As a result of this general lack of support and interest, the Võro Institute has found it difficult to convince today's students to take Võro in school -- of the twenty-seven Võro programs in local schools, few offer a Võro-language class to more than one grade per year.

There are also significant problems with the "market model" of language policy. First, it is essentially a competitive model of funding that pits civil society groups against one another instead of encouraging cooperation. Second, the government has abdicated its coercive power with the "market model" and has left the regional language projects to be implemented by civil society groups that lack the "teeth" of a defined and enforced government policy. Without the charge of the state, civil society groups are not able to compel the public to do things necessary for the preservation of the language like forcing schools of education to offer Võro-language teacher training or coercing resistant school directors to offer Võro-language classes in their schools. Lastly, the current policy process lacks a comprehensive and stringent evaluation of the regional-language projects. With civil society organizations usually understaffed and underresourced, it is the responsibility of the government to follow-up on the projects it has funded.

In conclusion, the Võro-language case reveals the complex and shifting relationship between civil society and the language policy process in a country undergoing rapid and dramatic change as it emerges from totalitarianism, and introduces and establishes democratic and market systems. Since the "market model" of language policy is only likely to spread, we need to consider how the optimal freedom of this model can be reconciled with a coherent vision of policy to enable those who so desire to pursue the language of their choice and to make that a viable decision.

## Notes

1. William A. Galston, "Civil Society and the 'Art of Association,'" *Journal of Democracy* 11, 1 (2000): 64.
2. Võro County Government, *Võro County Development Report 2000* (Võro, 1999).



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3. John Patrick, quoting Jean L. Cohen and Andrew Arato in "Principles of Democracy for the Education of Citizens in Former Communist Countries of Central and Eastern Europe," in Richard C. Remy and Jacek Strzemieczny, eds., *Building Civic Education for Democracy in Poland* (Washington, D.C.: National Council for the Social Studies and Eric Clearinghouse for Social Studies/Social Science Education, 1996): 11.
4. According to the Baltic historian, Toivo Raun, Russification policies strove to "increase the role of Russian in education, administration, and everyday life....[resulting in] the scarcity of printed matter in Estonian; and the restrictions on research in Estonian culture." Raun, *Estonia and the Estonians 2nd Edition* (Stanford, CA: Hoover University Press, 1991): 219-220.
5. John Patrick, "Principles of Democracy for the Education of Citizens in Former Communist Countries of Central and Eastern Europe," 11.
6. Võro Institute homepage, "History," [www.wi.ee](http://www.wi.ee)
7. Maire Kriis, "Asutati võro keele ja kultuuri fond (The Foundation of the Võro Language and Culture Fund," *Töörahva Elu* (24 November 1988): 2.
8. This law allows national minorities to have public education in their mother tongue from first through ninth grade and gives the option of establishing private Upper Secondary Schools (10-12th grade) with instruction in a language other than Estonian.
9. Võro Institute, "Võro Instituudi põhimäärus," from the Võro Institute's homepage, 1, [www.wi.ee/est/pohimaarus.html](http://www.wi.ee/est/pohimaarus.html)
10. The importance of this European context is reflected in the preamble to the "Southern Estonian Languages and Culture Program." See [www](http://www).
11. Toivo U. Raun, "Estonia in the 1990s," *Journal of Baltic Studies* 32, 1 (Spring 2001): 36.
12. Jussi S. Jauhianen and Priidu Ristkok, "Development of Regional Policy in Estonia," [www.geo.ut.ee/nbc/paper/jauhianen.htm](http://www.geo.ut.ee/nbc/paper/jauhianen.htm), 9
13. Robert F. Arnove and Carlos Alberto Torres, "Reframing Comparative Education," in Robert F. Arnove and Carlos Alberto Torres, eds., *Comparative Education: The Dialectic of the Global and the Local* (Boulder: Rowman and Littlefield, 1999): 3.
14. Séamus Mac Mathúna and Ailbhe Ó Corráin, "Introduction: The Minority Language Syndrome," in Ailbhe Ó Corráin and Séamus Mac Mathúna, eds., *Minority Languages in Scandinavia, Britain, and Ireland* (Uppsala, 1998): 15
15. Urmas Seaver, "Lõuna-Eesti lapsed ähvardab võru ja setu keele sundõpe (Southern-Estonian Children Threatened by Mandatory Võro and Setu Instruction)," *Postimees* (March 2000).
16. Interview with Nele Reimann, education director at the Võro Institute. Summer 2000, Võro, Estonia.
17. Leena Huus, *Reversing Language Shift in the Far North* (Uppsala, 1999): 28