



ESTONIAN LANGUAGE STRATEGY IN PROGRESS

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Situation

Estonia was occupied by the Soviet Union during the years 1940-1991, except for 1941-1944, when Nazi Germany occupied the country. The weakening of the USSR paved the way for major reshuffling of power. Together with the weakening of Soviet Union the new conditions of perestroika and glasnost enabled the processes of ethnic mobilisation to gain more freedom. This resulted in the restitution of independence of Estonia in 1991 and the establishment of a new power balance.

Accommodation to this new order was challenging. Changes affected Estonian population with various pace, varying in different territorial (capital Tallinn compared to North-East Estonia) and functional domains (e.g. banking vs. oil shale mining) as well as between different ethnic groups (e.g. Estonians vs. Russians). During the past decade the populational data have changed considerably, with the relative share of Estonians expanding. The data of the census of 2000 show a major decrease in numbers of all population groups. Together with the decrease of the total population from 1.565 million to 1.361 million the number of non-Estonians decreased to 0.459 million, comprising 32.1%. The number of Russians decreased by 25%. Here different patterns of out-migration, birth rate and rearrangement of ethnic affiliation altogether have resulted in this data.

However, the main dividing factor has not been ethnicity as such, but rather mother tongue, representing the main source of information and opinion and value creation. Language has been the main filter to various societal goods and values and the channel to societal mobility and economic well-being. Soviet language policy promoting monolingualism in Russian created a barrier based on language use, this and this language barrier was not broken by political changes leading to the restitution of Estonia's sovereignty. During the Soviet occupation, massive migration and education consisting of two different language-medium systems kept apart in Estonia facilitated the maintenance and the reproduction of two separate communities, whose mutual understanding was deficient both linguistically and culturally. This has become a crucial factor for the development of the Estonian society. Several markers accentuated the linguistic differences between these two communities:

- Territorial distribution. Russian-speakers of immigrant origin comprised an overwhelming majority in urban centres of North-East Estonia, significant share in Tallinn and its environments (Harjumaa) and minor groups elsewhere. Most of them resided in towns (ca 90%). Such a pattern crystallised even more after the withdrawal of the Soviet (and later, Russian) troops from Estonia.
- Functional distribution. During perestroika Russians were employed in the firms working in legally grey areas (like collecting secondary metal, some import-export branches with vague transit schemes, etc.) and in Soviet-type remaining enterprises with low profit margin. Traditionally their contacts had been with the governmental apparatus in Moscow that were of small use in new conditions. This led to economic marginalization in the sectors of trade with Russia as well as in production and marketing in



the economically incompetent regions with the Russian language environment. Among the reasons of Russians' failure in the new environment one should list the poor knowledge of Estonian, restricting the access to Estonian-medium business, as well as comparatively more modest knowledge of foreign languages, effectively obstructing this group from foreign investment and assistance. Consequently, job opportunities were dependent on linguistic skills in other languages than Russian.

Language policy

Estonian language policy of the past decade may be divided into 3 periods, according to the main goals of Estonian society during the period concerned. The first period extended from the late 1980s to the beginning of the 1990s, when the new realities of perestroika and glasnost enabled to create the basis for the restitution of Estonia as a sovereign state in 1991. The second period started with the adoption of the new Constitution by a referendum in 1992, the content of which (nation-building, human rights protection, etc.) required qualitatively new language policy to be implemented. Simultaneously together with the development of sovereignty the process of integration to Western democratic, economic, financial and security structures was launched. At the end of the 1990s it became the main goal, leaving other societal trends with less attention. This switch of this balance seems to be the starting point of the third period of Estonian language policy.

The Constitutional amendment declaring Estonian the national language of Estonia was adopted on December 6 in 1988. Language law was passed on 18 January 1989 by the Supreme Soviet of the Estonian Soviet Socialist Republic. The law was a provisional one in its content, matching the needs of the transformational process under way in Estonia. Though it proclaimed Estonian as the sole official language, due to political expediency, the main principle was based on the requirement of Estonian-Russian bilingualism, which required that holders of certain jobs had proficiency in both Estonian and Russian (in most cases 800 words were sufficient). To reach the required level a 4-year delay was introduced in the law, so that it became effective from 1st February 1993. The Law of 1989 was in force up till 1995, up till the adoption of the new law.

As the main emphasis was laid on the status of Estonian in comparison with that of Russian, the issues of corpus and acquisition planning were considered with less detail. The law confirmed the position of Estonian as the official state language. Besides several articles in the Law itself, it is supported by detailed regulations. These provisions assert the dominance of the local language against other languages, chiefly Russian. The law also provided Estonian-medium communication for Estonians.

In providing individual rights, the law made generous concessions to non-Estonian speakers, including the right to use a language other than Estonian in dealing with the state and to receive official documents in Russian. Article 3 of the law provided that an individual who does not speak Estonian has a right to conduct his or her affairs in Russian in the state and government institutions of the Estonian SSR as well as in institutions, enterprises and organisations of the Estonian SSR. It also provided for special rights attached to some functional domains, and maintained the Russian-medium education. Thus, it secured a special status for the Russian language, however, considerably improving the position for Estonian.

Minority protection was stipulated through the provision of schools in other languages, broadcasts, and other cultural institutions and forms supporting ethnic maintenance. These provisions were especially important for other non-Russian minorities, who had been denied all these aspects of cultural autonomy under the Soviet regime. It enabled to (re)open minority schools and other institutions. The law, thus for the first time recognized non-Russian ethnic identities equal to Russian one and provided legal basis for their development (e.g. through education).

The law in its content was a provisional one, matching the needs of the transformational process going on in Estonia. Though it described Estonian as the sole official language, due to political expediency as well as to reality where most of the Soviet-period immigrants had not got acquainted with Estonian culture and language, the main principle was based on the requirement of Estonian-Russian bilingualism, demanding the holders of certain jobs to have a proficiency level command of both Estonian and Russian. An important human right was formulated: the right for private persons to communicate both in Estonian and Russian, obliging the other side to accommodate. The principle of bilingualism of services and state agencies, with the right to choose the language of communication by customers, introduced constraints on monolingualism of clerks and service personnel, which, taking into account the situation, meant restrictions on upward mobility and on employment in positions of public

contact for Russians, overwhelmingly monolingual at that time. The law provided for these requirements to come into effect as of January 17, 1993, four years from the date on which the language law was adopted.

State obligations concerning Russians were brought to the level of actual needs of this populational group, eliminating ideological (the tenet of Russian as an interethnic language) and assimilative (language for other minorities) motives in this aspect. However, this group still enjoyed more privileges compared to other minorities (which reflects no discrimination by its own).

From the formal point of view, the law did not alter the former situation substantially, but rather maintained status quo by granting the right to receive education in one's native language, with Estonian enjoying higher status among Estonians and Russian among Russians. The Language Law redefined the Estonian language from a minority status that it had de facto acquired to a full national status, as the language of state and of administration, and of most social discourse. Even more, this occurred in a peculiar context where the national language was not the most wide-spread language in Estonia: while most of Estonian residents were able to cope in Russian, only a minor part of local non-Estonians knew Estonian that much.

In this way, the adoption of the Law signalled the redistribution of power and together with it, the formation of new elites in Estonia. Due to insignificant formal changes for the most of the Russian-speaking population (the Law did not concern the main bulk of it directly), the ambiguity of the situation with the two endo-majorities remained, causing thus several further conflicts and offering grounds for outside political influence. The main scope was laid on short-term visible programmes, while long-term programmes like educational and integrational programmes were not given adequate attention or even neglected. Thus, the new emerging situation, being still not a satisfactory one, needed further qualitative step to be made in order to improve the linguistic situation in Estonia.

To support the aims of the law administratively, various institutions were established. In order to coordinate the teaching of Estonian to Russian-speaking adult population, a special office, the Estonian Language Centre, was established on 13 March 1989 by a governmental decree. Language Protection Committee (LPC), an organ foreseen by the Law, was also formed at the collective state organ - Presidium of the Supreme Council by the decision of the Presidium of the Supreme Council of Republic of Estonia from 31 March 1989. As the work of the LPC as an advisory body turned out to be ineffective, the government created an executive organ for implementing language policy. On 23 November 1990 the National Language Board was established. It was the main body responsible for the implementation of language planning in Estonia, monitoring the usage of Estonian, the official language as the native and second language of the population, but also supporting and regulating minority languages usage among adult population. The primary functions of the Board were the elaboration of language policy and language planning strategies, including the organization, supervision, and analysis of the implementation of the Language Law, the improvement of language teaching methods, the supervision of normative terminological and onomastic work, and the pursuit of sociolinguistic studies. This organ was rearranged to Inspectorate in 1997 with only control functions.

In July 1993, the President of Estonia Lennart Meri set up the Presidential Round Table, a permanent assembly in which representatives of non-citizens and national minorities participate together with members of the Estonian Parliament. The aim of this body was to mediate various views and smooth tensions between various political powers of different ethnic groups.

II The virtues and vices of the first language law and its impact on society were constantly monitored. Taking into account the factors that the linguistic transition period had ended and the new Constitution required new and different linguistic environment, a decision to adopt a new language law was made. For this purpose, a new hierarchy of linguistic goals was envisaged. According to the features of nation-building model, the main task was to introduce the common language, in this case Estonian, being the first language for Estonian-speakers and the second language for non-Estonian-speakers. For the needs of the state, and for speakers of Estonian as the native language, Estonian had to be normalised, regulated and standardised in its use as the official language. For the non-Estonian population of Estonia the main challenge was still the issue of linguistic integration. Thus, the main challenge lies in the crossing of interests of the state promoting the common language policy through the official language, and the non-Estonian (mostly Russian)-speaking community, for whom it means the acquirement of Estonian as the second language, often perceived as an additional burden.

The second domain of importance is the foreign language planning, concerning acquisition and use in



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certain functional domains (customs, tourism-related services, etc.). Here the underdevelopment and inertia threatens Estonia's intentions to integrate into international security (NATO) and economic structures (European Union) and competetively cater for the needs of international tourism and trade. The third domain concerns the regulation (or considering the power relations, hierarchisation) of minority language use and acquisition. This domain is facing two major tasks: dismantling the Soviet-inherited structure aimed at the maintenance of the monolingual Russian language environment together with assimilation of other ethnic groups into it, which now has turned into a powerful factor of segregation, and simultaneously, creating the maintenance structure for third nationalities. Here, the state has provided occasional help in the form of subsidies and donations to various language and cultural maintenance activities. However, the solution of the other task, accommodating the Russian-speaking community to the new situation, requires considerable political power and international assistance.

Based on this system of goals new language policy was drafted. It is implemented through legislation, comprising the Constitution, over 70 laws, lower legal and normative acts. The cornerstone of Estonian legal system is the Estonian Constitution. It was approved by referendum on 28 June 1992 and entered into force on 3 July 1992, combining Estonian legal tradition from the first independence period with developments on the international level. The Constitution proclaims Estonia a nation-state and a politically unitary state (Article 2), so that ethnically autonomous regions would be unconstitutional. The two main characteristics of nation-building, namely the requirements for the introduction of the common language and the hierarchisation of languages, lead to the two language regimes introduced in the Constitution, which are:

- Estonian monolingualism throughout the whole Estonian territory;
- Estonian-minority language bilingualism, reflected in two different forms:
- territorial autonomy;
- cultural autonomy.

In addition to this, functional regimes concerning foreign language use may be introduced by the Estonian government. These regimes provide legal basis for two cases: for transmitting information, and for communication during employment. For employees this means the requirement for competence in the foreign language concerned. The domains specified are international transport and tourism, customs, information bureaus, export requirements and international events.

III Language legislation in Estonia has been developing inconsistently, affected by domestic political reshuffle and international pressures. Thus, though the Constitution was adopted in 1992, the new language regime was legitimized only at the beginning of 1995 with the adoption of the new language law. The laws on language and citizenship adopted in 1995 signal the stability of the society and power consolidation, enabling to launch a new, nation-building-motivated language policy. The approach in legislation is non-ethnic and purely instrumental. It is possible for almost for all residents legally living in Estonia, regardless of their ethnicity, to apply and acquire Estonian citizenship if they wish to. Thus, neither ethnicity nor political identity have no major value in establishing one 's position in Estonian society. Instead, proficiency of the common language is valued through the system of various domains (citizenship, employment, elections, etc.). In this way, those developments signal the transformation of the society to more democratic, open and civic.

However, Estonian has lost grounds in technological planning. Machine translation and speech recognition are still in initial stage, synthesis is not widely applicable, computer software in Estonian is scarce and Estonian language support software rarely used, the reason being in disinterestedness of the government. To create popular support and consolidate interest groups the Estonian Language Council started a 3-year project Estonian Language Strategy in 2001 in the framework of the European Year of Languages. The preliminary results of it will be introduced in the presentation.