

Recent developments in language policy and legislation in Estonia - problems with multilingualism

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Background

Census 2011 – 1,294,236 persons

- Nationalities (ethnic origin) – 192
- Languages – 157 different languages spoken as mother tongue
- Dialects – 10% of the population
 - Võro – 87 048 (6,7%), incl. Seto – 12 549 (0.97%)



- Main legal acts
 - Constitution – state language and general principles
 - Language Act – recently extensively amended
 - Estonian Literary Standard
- Main policy documents
 - Development Plan of the Estonian Language 2011-2017 (replaces former Strategy of the Estonian Language 2004-2010)
 - Estonian Strategy of Foreign Languages 2009-2015



View on foreign language

- Learning of foreign language – encouraged
- Foreign language as a mother tongue – problematic
- Special position of languages of national minorities



Estonian language

- State language – privileged position
- Constitution's main purpose is to protect Estonian nation, language and culture



Multiple identity / mother tongue?

- Presumed no to be a possibility
- Võro and Seto language communities are therefore confusing to handle by the authorities
 - bi-lingual
 - double cultural identity



New Language Act 2011

- the Estonian Literary Standard
- the Sign language
- Regional varieties of Estonian language
 - Dialects - Place Names Act
 - Dialect languages - Language Act 2011

Regional language? – advocated by the Seto and Võro language communities



New Language Act 2011

Now clear rules on how, when and where regional varieties can be used:

- In official use (by public authority) – in parallel with Estonian corresponding to the Standard (municipality with historical links to the variety)
- In public use (public information and provision of services by private persons) – freely, no translation required



So what's wrong - why do I think there is a problem with multilingualism?

First, parliament was still not prepared to recognise the Võro and Seto languages as (regional) languages

Second, the discussions during the drafting of the new Language Act are especially revealing of the fear towards multilingualism



So what's wrong - why do I think there is a problem with multilingualism?

Treatment of the Võro and Seto languages by the government and parliament (legal acts and policy papers) is symptomatic of the way Estonia looks at multilingualism.

