

REPORT ON EXPLORATORY STUDY ON FULL TRANSITION TO ESTONIAN LANGUAGE

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IN ASSOCIATION WITH:



EUA
Erinevused ühendavad!

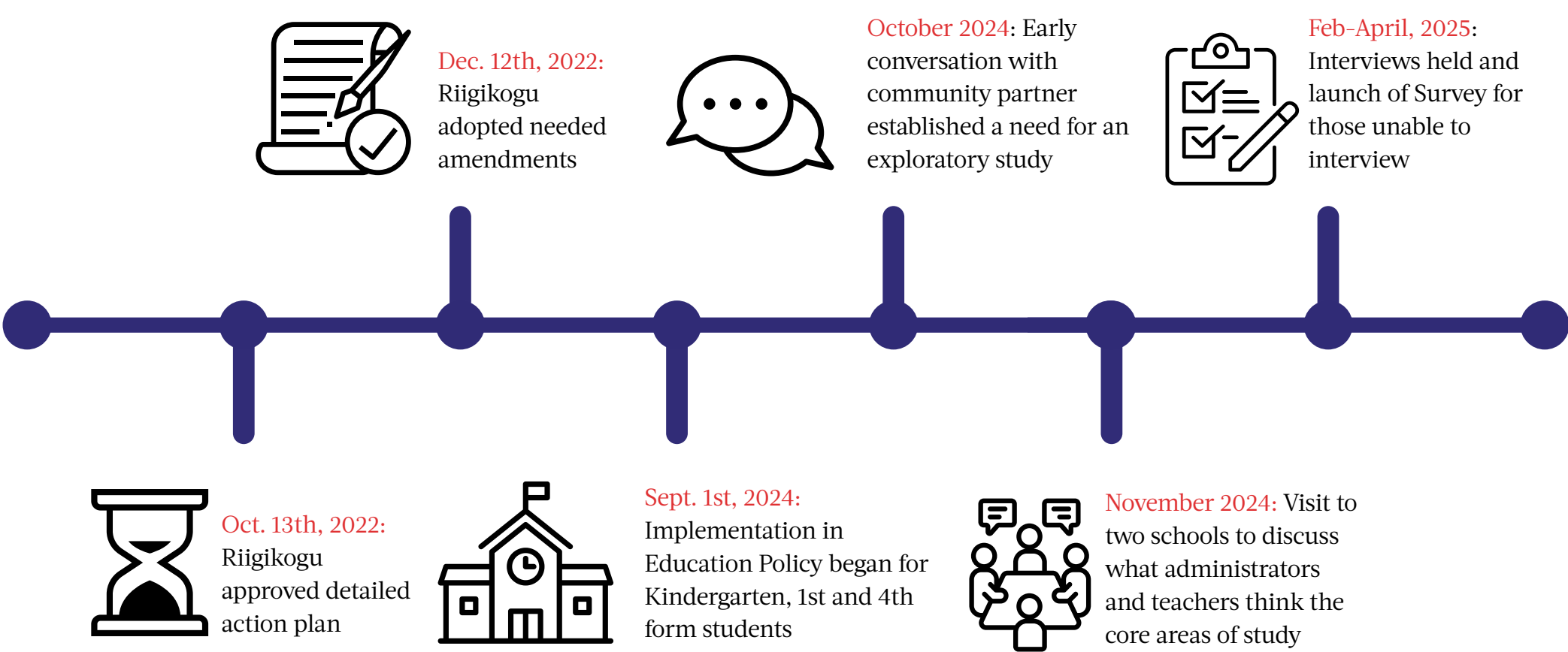


**American
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BACKGROUND

While serving as a Peacebuilding Fellow through the American Friends Service Committee and in partnership with “Erinvused uhendavad!”, concerns about emerging challenges linked to the new education policy were brought to attention by a community partner in September 2024. Through their work, they observed that the policy might have an impact on the teachers’ and administrators’ well-being and stress. They raised concerns about potential increases in social division and growing tension within schools and communities. In response, an exploratory study was initiated to capture the early impacts using narrative-based methods. These were completed primarily through dialogue sessions, both informal and formal, with those directly affected. These conversations helped surface lived experiences and offered a nuanced understanding of the policy’s initial outcomes

TIMELINE OF RESEARCH SCOPE



INTRODUCTION

On September 1st of 2024, a new language policy was put into effect in Estonia. Passed by the Riigikogu (Estonian Parliament), the policy states that all classes in schools must be taught in only Estonian. Starting with kindergarten, 1st and 4th form classes, each year, new classes will transition to Estonian instruction by 2030 (Estonian Ministry of Education and Research, n.d). Teachers and instructors are held to new standards of language proficiency, all who have been teaching for 5 years or more must have a relative fluency in Estonian (about 2,245 teachers do not meet the requirement). The policy has further restrictions on when instruction can be taught in foreign languages, and for how long (Eurydice, 2022). The new policy has been described as potentially conflicting with EU regulations, and UN officials have characterized it as a possible human rights violation (OUNHCHR, 2023).

UNDERSTANDING THE CONTEXT

For the context of this study, tensions in the development of the education curriculum were traced back to the transition from the Soviet system to a Western-oriented model. During the occupation, Soviet forces made active efforts to erase the Estonian language and culture. The trauma experienced by the Estonian population during this period continues to impact current social structures and communities, causing underlying tensions between different language communities. Estonia still has areas that are predominantly Russian-speaking, with some people rarely coming in contact with people of the Estonian-speaking population, and vice versa.

Currently, the demographics of Estonia still reflect this period of displacement. During 1945–1989, the number of non-ethnic Estonians, primarily Russian-speaking, increased by 4.5 times, and their share in the total population rose from 8.5 % up to 38.5 %. (Krull, 2007). This period of movement was a geo-strategic effort to colonize Estonia (Kirch, 2004). This resulted in a larger population of Russian students attending schools established during the Soviet era, where Russian language, history, and culture were taught. After the fall of the USSR, the education system was clearly fractured, highlighting an urgent need for reform.

During the period of transition in Estonia in the 1990s, the government moved towards democratization and marketization (Helemäe, 2011). The transition years following were marked with instability both economically, politically, and socially, as Estonian society worked to establish an independent rule. The educational reform did not begin immediately, and schools remained segregated between Russian speaking communities and Estonian speaking communities until 1996 (Oja, 2017). Even after the schools were formally integrated, not every school adopted the language and curriculum changes. This led to many schools operating with vastly different educational and language structures. Some kept the more traditional methods of teaching that were reminiscent of the Soviet Era, while others moved away from the “traditional” methods of education, exploring different forms of pedagogy.

Tensions around how language and history were taught frequently caused a standstill with educational reform. Many Russian speaking teachers and schools were reluctant to adopt the social and political changes. Some criticized how Russian history was taught, while Estonian teachers argued against the teaching of Russian history and language and pushed for a centering of Estonian culture and language (Oja, 2017). Language became the “one of the single point agenda behind building...Estonian identity” (Lenin Kumar, 2016). The differences in priorities, and unwillingness to adjust, led to a long, drawn-out process of curriculum and education reform. Additionally, due to the historical trauma and fear of a return to Soviet oppression, the two language communities did not communicate much (Kaarlõp, 2022, pg.4).



Estonian School, 1947 (HBC, 2016)

As time went on and reforms were gradually put into place, noticeable changes in terms of curriculum and language began to emerge within the educational system. Nevertheless, an analysis of the Estonian education system in 2007 noted that “schools were often not appropriately prepared for implementing its requirements,” leading to disparities in the resources available across different schools (Krull, 2006)

Currently, the curriculum stresses the importance of multi-perspectivity, but differences still exist in schools with Estonian and Russian as their main language (Kaarlõp, 2022). While the framework for teaching was standardized, differences persist in schools, resources and teaching methods. The historical context from the period of transition in the 2000s illustrates the importance of ensuring adequate resources and training are given to all those involved. Krull’s report cautioned that finding a balance between everyone’s political right for participation in decision-making should be prioritized in future education decision making (Krull, 2006). As the newest educational language policy takes effect, understanding the historical and cultural implications of social divisions is of vital importance. This study took careful consideration to understand the historical context of Estonia’s oppressive history. Understanding current events and the increasing risk that the current Russian regime poses to Estonia and Estonian language and culture informed much of the analysis.

Based on initial conversations with trusted community partners, the study found that the new education policy is beginning to cause tensions within schools and communities and is also contributing to the decrease of education standards within 1st and 4th form students. The issue of standardized resources and communication between schools still presents as a problem in current educational standards. Once again, while the language has been formally unified, there are gaps in the system that could lead to future roadblocks and tensions. This exploratory study looked to identify some of the emerging problems with through dialogues with teachers, administrators and parents.

LANGUAGE AND SOCIAL CONTEXTS

Consideration of the social impact on language policy is vital in ensuring social cohesion. Government policies, while they can feel separate from the everyday population, are both products and influences of the larger social environment (Liddicoat, 2013).

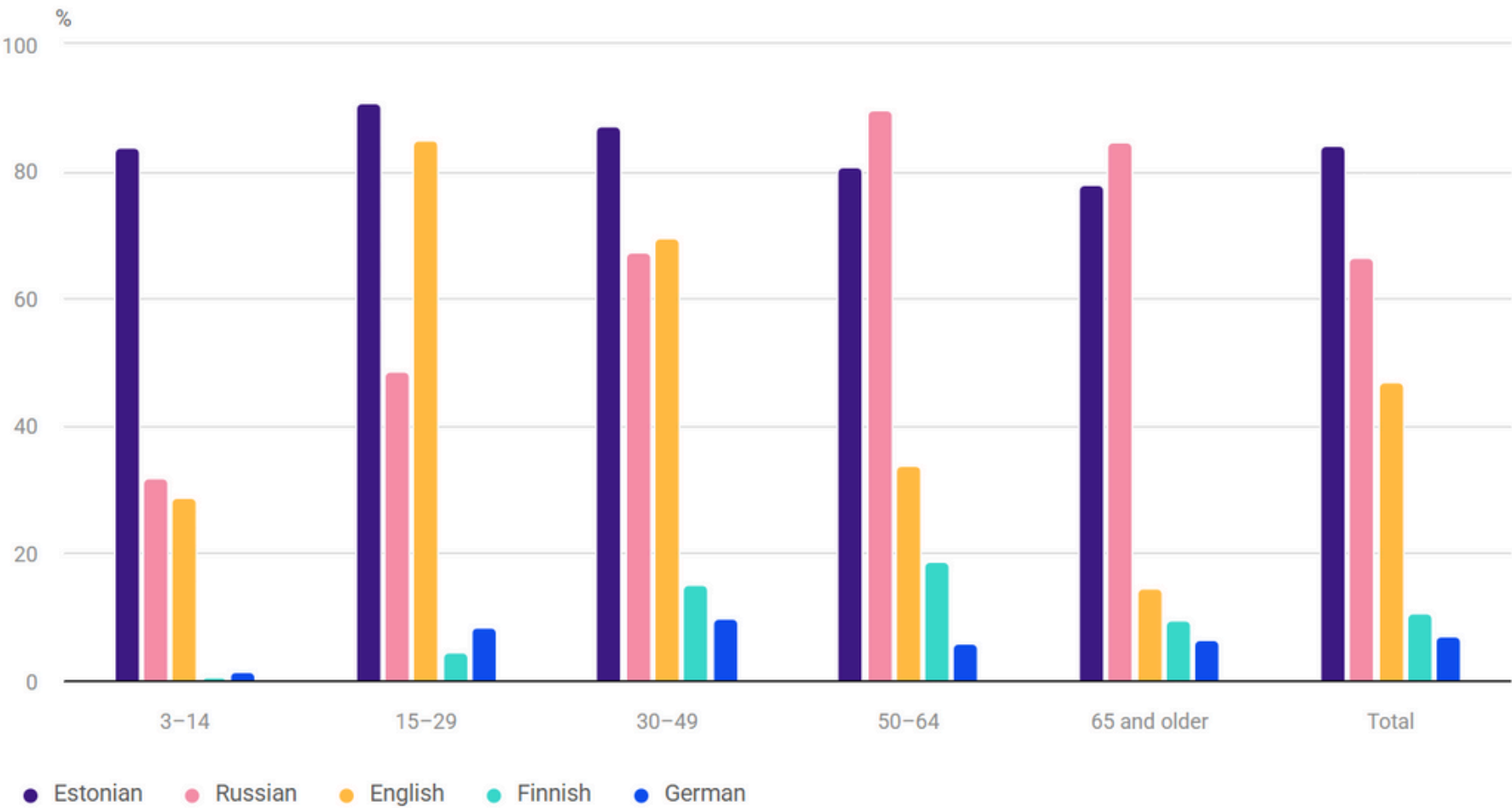
The treatment of minority language policies can impact government, communities, and social cohesion, potentially deepening or improving divisions. According to language policy scholar Helder De Schutter, “unlike the religious/secular debate in government, where there is an option for NO religion, there cannot be NO language. Governments must pass some policy on how language plays a role in the everyday life of a nation”(pg 10, 2007).

Therefore, policymakers should consider a wide range of theories and possible impacts when passing policies.

This study looks at language not just as a tool for communication, but rather as a key element of identity and social belonging (De Schutter, 2007). Understanding that an individual can hold a multiplicity of language identities is at the core of the study. Recognizing this reality and how it relates to the perception of public policy is a crucial contextual note.

Many interviews were emotionally charged, with common expressions of fear and disappointment. Interviewees often noted that the policy felt less about language itself and more about societal attitudes toward non-fluent Estonian speakers. This reveals the intersection of language as both communication and identity, underscoring the importance of language fairness and inclusive policymaking (Kaplan 1991; Sayers 1996).

Share of language speakers in age groups, 2021



(Statistics Estonia, 2022)

- Estonian is the highest percentage language spoken in the general population
- Russian, English, Finnish and German follow, but Russian remains the largest foreign language spoken.
- Around 84% of young people (14-29), speak English as a second language. This is a shift from previous generations, who spoke mainly Russian as a second language (Population Census)
- Only about 4% of the population speak no Estonian (ERR News, 2023)
- 76% of Estonians speak a foreign language (Taylor, 2022)
- About 211 ethnic nationalities live in Estonia (Statistics Estonia, 2021)

METHODS AND SAMPLE

KEY TOPICS

- 1. Feelings of support or lack thereof and government communication
- 2. Impact on teaching ability and students learning
- 3. Feelings of inclusion/exclusion
- 4. Recommendations for improvements

SAMPLING METHODS

To build understanding of the intangible impact, the study sought input from teachers and administrators working at a variety of affected schools across Tallinn and Narva. Schools were selected on the criteria that they did not operate in fully Estonian education prior to the language policy. The study visited a mix of private, immersion, traditional, and public schools in Tallinn and Narva and focused on drawing parallels between the different schools to highlight shared experiences.

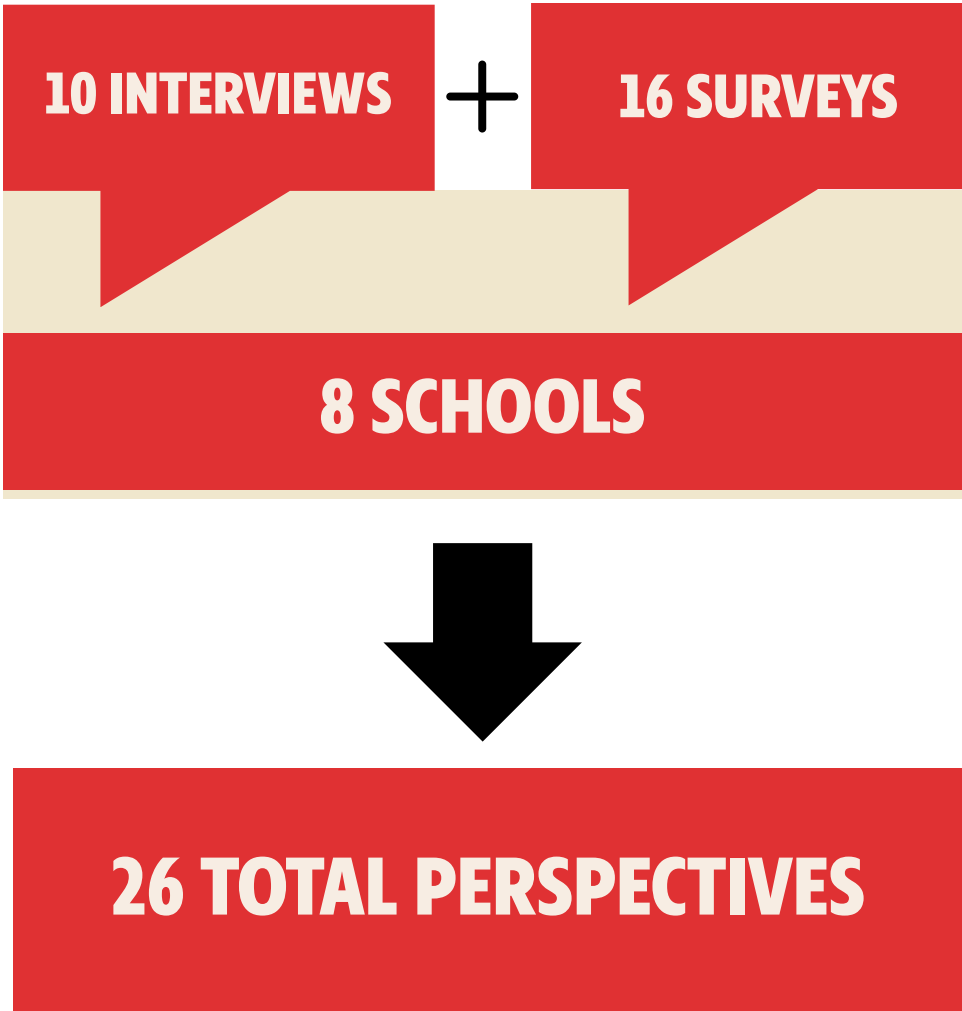
Interviewees were selected through the purposive sampling method; when deciding who to ask for interview, considerations for their expertise and ability to give in-depth accounts informed the choices. Due to limitation of translation access, teachers and administrators who either spoke English or who had access to translators were interviewed. Additionally, the stress and increased workload of teachers because of the new policy meant many people were not available for full interviews. A survey was developed to send to those who could not dedicate the time, and were provided in Estonian, English and Russian translation.

Due to concerns of job insecurity, all interviews and surveys were done anonymously.

Two key methodological frameworks informed this study

- Participatory Action Research Model (Fahlberg, 2023; Whyte, 1989)
 - Places emphasis on following the process of emerging design, inviting affected actors to co-construct the approach, questions, and process (MacDonald, 2012). Early dialogues during the preliminary field work stage incorporated suggestions for survey construction.
- Social Impact Assessment Model (Finsterbusch, 1984).
 - Geared more towards policy impacts, this model suggests that researchers should look at non-tangible impact factors, or non-construction factors. These are defined as changes within the community or social sphere cannot be easily tracked
- A positive inquiry approach was utilized when asking about recommendations for changes (Center for Appreciative Inquiry, n.d.)
 - Questions were focused on “what is working” and positive visions for the future

Insights from these approaches combined to highlight impacts relevant to policymakers, while including the experiences of those interviewed. Through core methods and peer-reviewed policy analyses, the research aimed to uncover needed areas for adjustment and identify shared patterns of concern.



Supplemental interviews from educational experts, parents and government officials also informed the analysis

KEY FINDINGS

The following pages detail the findings of this study in three key learnings. Each page has the findings with supporting data and narrative accounts taken from the interviews and surveys.

SUMMARY

- The key negative impacts found from the policy were increased concerns of declining mental health of students, burnout of teaching staff and increased fears of job insecurity.
- Many teachers feel unheard, and do not feel as if the government is available for open dialogue about the matter.
- However, almost all the teachers and administrators surveyed showed continued support for students learning Estonian
- Suggestions to adjust the policy in order to ease the burden on teaching staff were provided, and there was widespread support for organizing open houses and school exchange programs



Due to the nature the Estonian education system and the varying types of schools, the impact of the policy varied. The interviews revealed that each school has vastly different levels of resources available. The inconsistency of the impact is largely because a standardized policy is being applied to a non-standardized education system. Because schools are afforded relative autonomy, some had structures that already integrated mainly Estonian instruction. Others already had resources and a plan in place for the transition, and some had little to no resources or preparation. However, even in the face of these salient differences between schools, some attitudes were remarkably widespread.

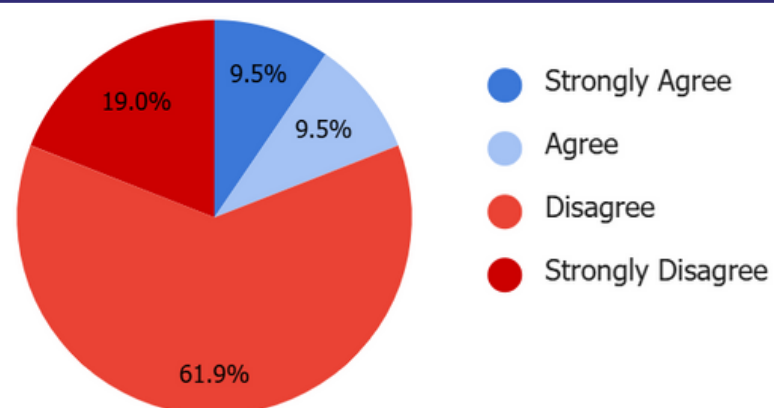
KEY FINDINGS continued...

1

There is a lack of resources and qualified teachers, which is leading to burnout and stress.

- Teachers reported spending significant time adapting teaching materials, attending required classes to retain their positions, and helping their own children adjust to the new policy.
- Many of the materials are outdated or are only for Estonian as a first language. Some of the materials are for adults and not children.
- Every school reported that teachers that taught kindergarten, 1st and 4th form have had to spend extra hours creating their own resources.
- Many schools have said they were promised better resources by the Ministry but have yet to receive them. There has been a decline in motivation for most students, and students' mental health has started to suffer, as well as the teachers.

I have adequate support and resources to implement the new policy.



“Nobody cares about the situation of children with special needs. Children... are in a difficult situation, whose parents cannot help them because of their insufficient knowledge of the Estonian language.” - Special Needs Teacher

“The biggest difficulty is the loss of mental health and physical health, huge workload, late at night at home and in the morning, everything repeating.” - Teacher

“Many students are from lower income homes, or single parents home, and do not have the ability to dedicate more time” - Director of School

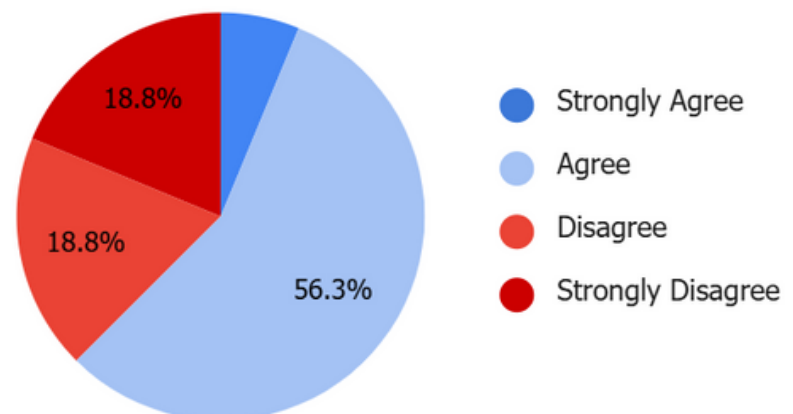
KEY FINDINGS continued...

2

Most agree that learning Estonian is important, but the way the policy is being implemented goes against how language is generally learned.

- They feel as if this policy does not take into consideration how scientifically language is learned.
- Most reported feeling confused, as the policy defies educational research and pedagogy.
- The focus should be on the younger classes, rather than 4th form, and a longer transition period, as learning and studying in a new language takes time.

The new language policy is beneficial for the future of the students.



“Culture cannot be instilled by force... Providing opportunities, not restrictions, gives such a result. In the Integration of Russian speakers, not only schools and the Ministry of Education, but everyone should be interested. Without the support of the people, nothing will happen.” - Secondary Teacher

“The ministry does not seem to care about culture or understanding about native tongue and does not seem to understand that language has bigger implications in society” - Director of School

The policy ‘forget[s] what we already have’ and does not ask what do the students bring. This creates social identity issues and does not ask the students what it means for them. They do feel as if they strive to fit into society, but no one is interested and no one cares who they are. - Teaching Aide

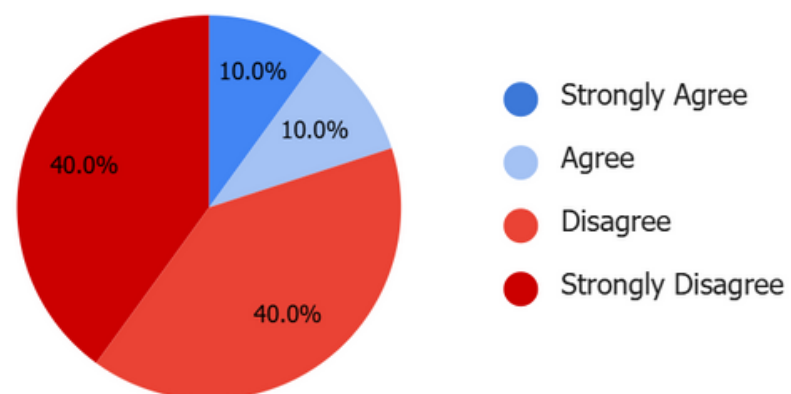
KEY FINDINGS continued...

3

There is no stability in the current system and the monitoring and pressure from the ministry has created an environment where they cannot express their concerns publicly.

- Educators are forced to adapt and change and have no time to actually work with what they are given.
- Ongoing monitoring by the ministry causes them stress, as they are only told what they are doing wrong and are not given adequate support to improve.
- The threat of job loss, as well as the exacerbating tensions in communities has created fear and uncertainty for many teachers.

I am able to openly express concerns and needs to those around you.



“There have been conversations with the expectation that if the transition fails, or if there are issues, it falls entirely onto the administrator and educators, rather than an outcome of the policy itself” - Director of School

“This policy looks like a punishment despite the fact that there has been complete agreement to learn the language” - Teacher of English

“Unfortunately, I do not have the opportunity to express dissatisfaction openly even at the school level. I am afraid of being fired. All the agreements that we received from teachers at school can be said to be forced, since there was no choice. ” - You must sign that you agree to the transition to the Estonian language, you agree with the new program." I was forced to sign, although I do not fully agree with this” - - Secondary Teacher

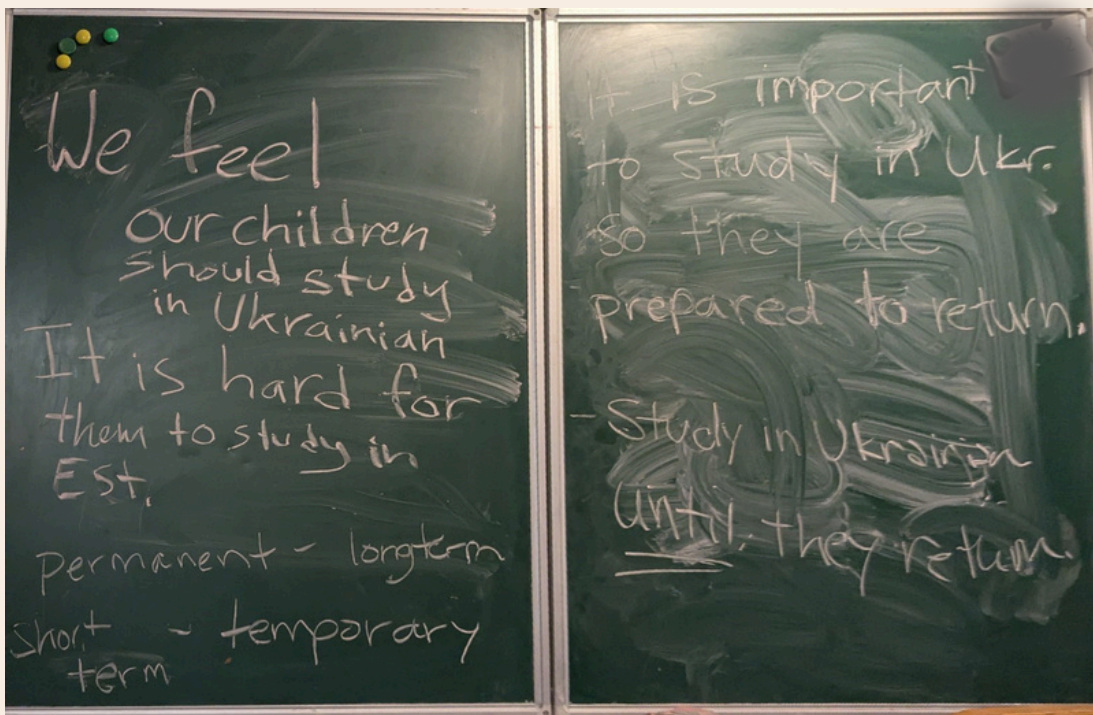
KEY FINDINGS continued

The following page includes a narrative account on the impact on immigrant and refugee students

INSIGHT: Conversations with Immigrant and Refugee Parents

Estonia predominantly has had restrictive policies towards immigration, however in recent years this has liberalized (Jakobson, 2020). After the full-scale invasion of Ukraine, Estonia accepted an increased number of refugees, predominantly from Ukraine (Tambur, 2022). A few key conversations were had with parents who are immigrants or refugees.

In these conversations, many they felt that the Estonian education system can be hostile to foreigners, especially ones that do not speak fluent Estonian. They reported that some teachers and students have shown prejudices against their children or were resistant to provide help. One parent stated that “[schools] put a lot of excuses but refuse to take on students that require extra work.... there are so many barriers to getting my children a good education that we often consider leaving, even though I was asked to work here.”

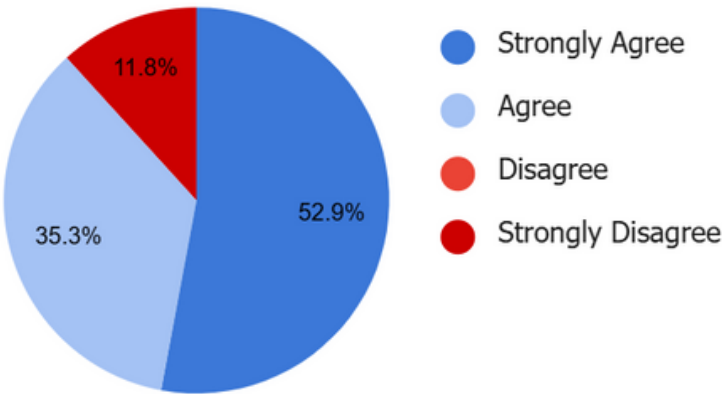


Blackboard from conversation session with Ukrainian refugee parents
Text: “We feel our children should study Ukrainian”, “It is hard for them to study in Est. [Estonian]”, “It is important to study in Ukrainian, so they are prepared to return”

Additionally, refugee children, predominantly from Ukraine, often spent all day in Estonian language courses, and then spent all evening in online courses for Ukrainian. Because many want to return, parents and children have to work harder to maintain connection with their home language and culture. They reported that being able to learn and study Ukrainian is important so they can continue to feel this connection. While they have reported feeling supported in many capacities, the strain of the long hours and the fatigue of the on-going war is affecting the mental health of both the students and parents.

Overall, there is support for the learning of the Estonian language. However, how the policy currently is, and the amount of teachers and resources, many students are beginning to fall behind. Some are not receiving the level of instruction they need to be successful.

The new language policy will negatively impact student achievement.



The figure to the left illustrates that many teachers are concerned about student achievement

DISCUSSION

Conversations with administrators and teachers reveal that there is significant strain put on the school system because of the current policy. While most administrators and teachers seem to be managing, these challenges will only increase if the policy continues to transition at the current pace. As more and more classes transition to fully Estonian education, the lack of resources and burnout of both teachers and students will continue to rise. Like the transition in the early 2000s, many schools are currently unprepared and struggling to adapt. While there is a chance that schools will successfully adjust in the long term, the short-term impact of this transition will most likely come at the expense of teachers and students.

A few key interviews with administrators pointed out that while predominantly Russian-speaking schools currently bear the brunt of such changes, the strain on the system will trickle into all schools. Administrators reported that some parents have started to transfer their children to predominantly Estonian-speaking schools, largely due to the lack of qualified teachers and resources. This can exacerbate cultural conflicts between students and put teachers in a position where they are trying to teach students with vastly different understandings of the Estonian language. Currently, most schools are struggling to find solutions individually. Many directors reported that they are constantly putting out fires with no time to plan for the future. The pace of the policy implementation, and the push to transition older classes rather than only focus on younger grades, is shaking the educational system across the board.

Regarding broader social impacts, the lack of open dialogue and integration could lead to increased tensions around key identity markers such as language and nationality. Most teachers feel like they are not being listened to by the Ministry, and that their concerns are unimportant. The lack of open consideration for the real-time impact on teachers started as early as the announcement in September. Most said they learned about the new policy from the news, not the Ministry, and reported feeling dismissed or ignored when concerns about certain elements of the policy were brought forward.

Democratic policymaking must consider the affected parties of a policy, and as it currently stands, most feel that this policy is not based in educational pedagogy. Among those I spoke to, there is a sense that the Estonian government may not fully understand or prioritize how the policy is affecting people.

Neither the premise of the policy nor the desire to encourage widespread adoption of Estonian is the problem. Rather, its implementation seems to be heightening cultural tensions both within and outside of schools. As the threat of the Ukrainian and Russian war continues, national security concerns continue to be salient. If Russian-speaking students are not afforded the same human rights allowed to other non-Estonian speaking students, there is a risk that this policy will have the opposite of the intended effect. The securitization of the educational system could have negative long-term impacts, both for teachers and students.

Language is deeply intertwined with identity and belongingness, and if young students begin to feel isolated within their own communities, they could at risk of isolation or radicalization (Renström, 2020). If certain students and teachers feel that they are being forced into cultural submission, this may push them to reject Estonian language and society altogether – further cementing their identities as excluded outsiders. This possibility seems especially likely for Russian-speaking students and teachers. Because some exceptions were made for French and German speaking schools (Dubolazov, 2024), but not Russian, my interviewees felt as if it was an attack on Russian-speaking Estonians, many of whom have lived in Estonia their whole lives. Exacerbating these kinds of divisions could undermine future government efforts, as well as endanger the social fabric more broadly.

A policy that relies on force and punishment, whether the threat is real or perceived, is not based on the foundational understanding of democratic ideals. A strong democratic government allows for space to air grievances and encourages feedback from affected parties. Establishing a foundation of democratic exchange is necessary to ensure that unpredictable changes to the political and social landscape do not lead to increased divisions or conflict. If the Ministry shows a desire to hear and listen to those affected, it creates an understanding that everyone in Estonia is afforded the same human rights and therefore has more motivation to participate in society in a positive way. Therefore, it is in the Ministry's best interest to open lines of communication with schools themselves in order to better facilitate Estonian language learning – a goal shared by policymakers, school administrators, and teachers alike.



RECOMMENDATIONS

The following section outlines key recommendations, gathered from the teachers and administrators interviewed and surveyed. Through asking questions around positive visions for the future, and creative solutions beyond rejection of the current policy, participants determined areas of improvement for the policy, as well as outside efforts for language immersion.

1

Updated resources for Estonian as a second language that are geared towards the students' needs as well as resources for parents to help improve at home study

- *Even with the teaching shortage, the teachers currently in the system are struggling without proper resources.*
- *If adequate resources are afforded to all schools, it could improve the stratification of the non-standardized schools.*

2

Increased efforts for resource sharing between schools.

- *Many administrators have already begun the process of reaching out to other schools and sharing resources.*
- *Further encouragement for these kinds of exchanges could improve the relations between historically Russian speaking schools and historically Estonian speaking schools*
- *Resources for parents could improve the support students get outside of the classroom*

3

Organize immersion events or school exchanges to help students engage with native Estonian speakers

- *Many students live in Russian speaking areas and do not have the ability to learn Estonian from native speakers. Encouragement of cultural exchanges through school events or open houses could help improve the separation of the two different language speaking communities.*
- *Funded visits to museums or historical sites could help with teaching language and culture.*

4

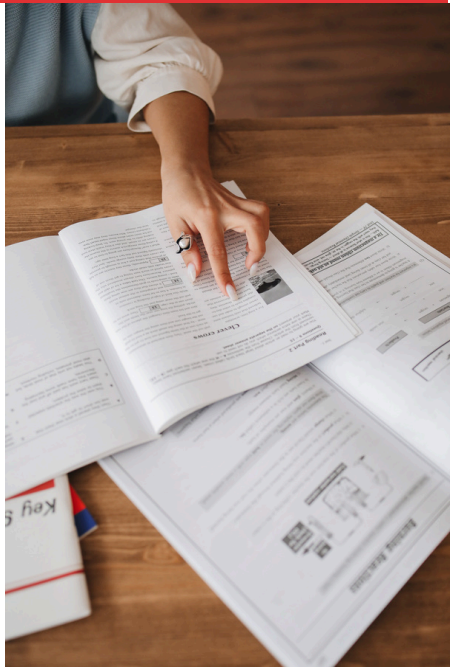
Allow for language learning to happen in arts and physical education, rather than science and history.

- *Students in 4th form classes are missing out on vital information because their Estonian language is not at a level where they can understand complex mathematical and scientific phrases.*
- *Multiple teachers suggested implementing Estonian language instruction in the arts and physical educational courses first and allowing students to learn more complex subject matter in their most fluent language.*

5

Recognize the value that children with diverse identities bring to Estonian culture

- *When students are valued for their diversity, and treated as equal members of society, the desire to participate positively grows, and contributes to a more vibrant community.*



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