

ARTICLE

An Estonian-Russian Language Club as a Venue for Grassroots Ethnic Integration

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Abstract

One third of Estonian residents identify Russian as their mother tongue, and despite having lived in Estonia for decades, many of them are not fluent in the Estonian language and choose to remain stateless rather than obtain Estonian citizenship by passing the state language exam. Ethnic segregation in Estonia continues to be a matter of bitter political debate, not least in the context of tensions with neighboring Russia and pressure from the EU to solve the problem. While a lot of state resources are being spent on what the Estonian-speaking public often perceives as vain attempts at integration of Russophones, several civil society initiatives have recently emerged to provide platforms for informal language socialization. In this article, I focus on the case study of the *Keelegrupp* (Language Group) which provides a venue for interaction between Estonian and Russian speakers, to analyze what makes this informal organization more successful at responding to the challenges of language-based segregation than professional, state-funded initiatives. Ethnographic documentation and analysis of this initiative is essential given that its experience and structure are highly applicable for and transferrable to many other states with similar situations of ethnic segregation, not the least the neighboring Baltic countries.

Keywords: ethnic integration; segregation; Russophone; Baltic; language socialization

Introduction

Comprising one-third of the whole population of Estonia, the Russian-speaking minority has been defined by the Estonian state as the main “problem” to “solve” on the way to a sustainable and smoothly functioning civil society (Siiner, Koreinik, and Brown 2017, 2). Whether in public, media, political, or academic discourse, Estonia’s society has been frequently characterized as split into two parallel worlds: Estonian and Russian communities living in the same country with minimal interaction (Helemäe and Vetik 2011, 15). David Laitin suggests that the divisions between Estonians and Russians are imaginary and that the sensitivity of Estonians to Soviet colonization by Russians shaped the portrayal of Estonians and Russians as separate societies with impermeable boundaries between them (2003, 198). Still, a substantial amount of research has demonstrated that ethnic segregation between Estonians and Russian speakers persists in Estonia at all levels: in secondary and higher education (Lindemann and Saar 2012); the labor market (Pavelson and Luuk 2002; Lindemann 2009; Lindemann and Kogan 2013); income (Leping and Toomet 2007; Kasearu and Trumm 2008); residential preferences (Tammaru and Kontuly 2011); leisure (Kamenik, Tammaru, and Toomet 2015); consumption patterns (Vihalemm and Keller 2011; Seliverstova 2017; Polese and Seliverstova 2019); interethnic marriage patterns (van Ham and Tammaru 2011); and choices of mass media channels (Hogan-Brun and Vihalemm 2013). Some scholars go as far as to claim that substantial differences exist between the mentalities of Russians and Estonians

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(Vihalemm and Kalmus 2008). The Estonian situation is far from being unique in the region: neighboring Lithuania and particularly Latvia share a similar Soviet history and its consequences. Despite the substantial differences in nationalizing policies that the countries adopted following their independence, as well as in the number of Russian-speakers in each state, they face similar consequences from ethnic segregation which may be solved with similar approaches.

Undoubtedly, the concepts of segregation and integration are difficult to measure, politicized, and loaded with different meanings and fantasies (Strang and Ager 2010; Kirch, Rimm, and Tuisk 1997; Loch 2014). However, in Estonia, it is clearly the spoken language that matters most in the divisions. The main challenge has been the lack of language contact zones and of conversational partnering initiatives by means of which people could improve their communicative competence (Vihalemm 1999, 34). In this article, I document how Estonian civil society has responded to the need for contact zones for non-Estonians and Estonians by suggesting solutions for language socialization. I do so from the point of view of a Russian-speaker who came to Estonia as an adult and experienced language socialization from below in a variety of formats, which enabled me to see how language policy works on the ground. I start with a theory and methodology section, followed by a detailed explanation of why ethnic segregation in Estonia has persisted and how recent changes brought by the new waves of immigration influence previous challenges on the way to ethnic integration. I reflect on these issues based on previous research, but also on my (auto)ethnographic observations, bringing to light lesser-known factors influencing segregation. Most of the article is then dedicated to a specific example of a successful solution for language socialization by civil society: a grassroots language club that primarily brings together Estonian and Russian speakers, but also native speakers of other languages, for linguistic and cultural interactions.

Theoretical Background and Methodology

In research literature, the term “language socialization,” implying the development of linguistic, cultural, and communicative competence, emerged primarily to define children’s verbal interaction with more proficient individuals (Duff and Talmy 2011). Later, the term has also been used to describe the processes by which newcomers in a community or culture acquire communicative competence, membership, and legitimacy through social interaction and (often) overt assistance, and by contributing to group activities (Duff and Kobayashi 2010; Baghdadi 2017, 1–2). The intended purpose of language socialization “exceeds the acquisition of linguistic conventions and pragmatics to reach the adoption of identities, stances, ideologies, and behaviors that enable a novice to behave and be treated appropriately in the new community” (Baghdadi 2017, 2; Ochs and Schieffelin 1986). In other words, language socialization is not restricted only to language use but also covers the issue of the effect of those processes on learners’ acceptance in the target community and their own statuses in it.

Studies in language socialization are typically ethnographic, and my research continues this tradition. This article stems from my own persistent engagement and extensive observation of language socialization processes in Estonia “on the ground” (Hult and Johnson 2015) in formal and informal language acquisition contexts (Bronson and Watson-Gegeo 2008; Duff and Talmy 2011). As a recent Russian-speaking migrant living in Estonia since 2010, I have tried a variety of strategies to learn the Estonian language: independent learning, Estonian language and culture courses at the University of Tartu, tandem learning (with Estonians who wanted to learn Russian), language learning apps, state-supported and civil initiative-based language acquisition events, language groups in different Estonian cities, etc. From this unwitting participant observation, I have moved to deliberate ethnographic fieldwork on language socialization in Estonia since 2015. I have conducted fieldwork in state-run and private language courses, Estonian culture and language cafes and clubs, in NGOs working on integration, in the accommodation center for asylum-seekers, in cultural associations of national minorities, among anti- and pro-migration activists, and in less structured spaces and venues of intra- and inter-ethnic communication. Some fieldwork also

includes observation via volunteer work; for instance, I have been a refugee support person in the NGO “Refugee Council” and a volunteering teacher in the national minorities’ Sunday schools.

The central focus of this article is one of several similar civil society initiatives, known as Keelegrupp (translated as “language group” from Estonian), of which I have been a member since 2015. It is thus a longitudinal study of the interactions taking place at Keelegrupp for five years, primarily based on my on-site participant observation of its weekly meetings as well as extra informal meetings of regular Keelegrupp participants for common activities (such as going to the movies, cooking together, etc.—see below). I have also been actively engaged in organizing the meetings which has allowed me to interact with more participants and to observe the factors essential for the meetings to work.

Here, I should recognize several potential drawbacks of the given methodology. First, unfortunately, whether in Keelegrupp or in other language groups, I was not always able to inform every single participant about my research. As, for instance, Keelegrupp is quite informal and people can come to and go from the meeting anytime, it is virtually not possible to chase everyone or to interrupt the meeting to inform everyone about my observation aims. My hope, however, is that this ethical concern is not so crucial given that participants are not recognizable in the situations described below. Also, the article rather concentrates on the success stories, as most of the people I observed have been frequent participants of the meetings and made great progress in their language skills in years. I have not been able to talk to those participants who visited Keelegrupp once and never came back: it would have been of great value to learn what had not worked for them. This research also lacks recorded interviews oftentimes conventional in ethnographic fieldwork, however, I assume that the longitudinal character of ethnographic observation in this case compensates for the lack of interviews. After all, as Blommaert and Jie cleverly put it, “[it is incredible] to assume that what there is to find out can be found out by asking” (Blommaert and Jie 2010, 3). Rather, the research has been complemented by other data: in particular, I sent this article to several active participants of the meetings so that they could comment on whether, to their mind, things have worked differently within the group. I believe, that by filtering my arguments through other active participants’ opinions, I added to the subjectivity of the descriptions. I also complemented this research with the analysis of mass media publications about Keelegrupp and similar initiatives in Estonia. In addition, for the sake of comparison, I did participant observation in other language groups (see the list below) which emerged later.

This allowed for many ethnographic observations of why ethnic segregation in Estonia persists, some coinciding with those previously noted in research literature and others—to my knowledge, hardly documented before. The following overview of the factors contributing to ethnic segregation in Estonia is essential before getting to the solutions offered for it.

Why Does Ethnic Segregation Persist in Estonia?

In 1991, Estonia became independent from the Soviet Union and faced the consequences of the large-scale immigration from the other Soviet republics that took place during the Soviet period. The 1995 Estonian Citizenship Act was built on the principle of *jus sanguinis*, granting citizenship only to the descendants of those who had been Estonian citizens before 1940, when sovereign Estonia was occupied by the Soviet Union. As a result, nearly one third of all permanent residents who could not prove their Estonian roots found themselves with undetermined citizenship (Seljamaa 2012, 5). In order to obtain citizenship, they had to go through a naturalization procedure by passing an Estonian language exam.

Soviet-era migrants chose different strategies for dealing with this situation. Many passed the exam; others emigrated to Russia and other post-Soviet countries or opted to get Russian citizenship and live in Estonia on a residence permit. Still today, 5.3% of Estonian residents have undetermined citizenship and remain holders of the so-called Estonian alien’s passport (ERR 2020a). For many of them, this is a pragmatic choice, since the alien’s passport allows them to travel visa-free between

Estonia and Russia, especially if they have close family ties there. For some, in addition, this is an ideological choice: in my years in Estonia, I have encountered those who chose not to pass the naturalization exam on principle because they felt insulted by the need to prove that they deserve Estonian citizenship by passing the language exam despite the fact that they were born and raised and have worked and paid taxes in this country. Some may speak Estonian but simply not bother to take an exam and change the passport.

In the past two decades, encouraged by critique from the European Union, Estonia has made ongoing and comprehensive efforts to integrate those in limbo and encourage them to pass the language exam. The state has tried to introduce more opportunities for Estonian language learning by including more Estonian-based education in Russian-language schools, by offering language courses and integration events free of charge, or by paying for Estonian language course fees for those learners who pass state language exams. Still, there are many obstacles on the path to successful language integration.

Research on the reasons for ethnic segregation in Estonia typically cites three factors: ideological divisions, two parallel education systems, and residential insulation of Russian speakers. The first, ideological factor, is briefly described above: discouraged by the state's initial approach to citizenship policy, many Russian speakers lack what scholars call integrative motivation for language acquisition, which is based on emotional reasons and the desire to be part of another group (Skehan 1991). The marginalized status of Russian language in Estonia also contributes to this: once a language of domination, it is currently what scholars have called a "forbidden language," such as Spanish in the USA (Gándara, Hopkins 2010). The second factor is the persistence of two parallel education systems established in the Soviet era, when schools were divided on the basis of the language of instruction (Russian and Estonian). In 2019, 77 schools in Estonia still had Russian as the first language of education (Sutrop 2019), and despite the formal requirement for such schools of conducting at least 60% of their teaching in Estonian, this is difficult to apply in practice: the quality of Estonian instruction in Russian-language schools may be poor (Lindemann and Saar 2012, 1995). Some students, especially in the northeastern, primarily Russian-speaking regions of the country, learn the language only in theory, hardly having a possibility to practice it with a native speaker (Verschik 2005, 304). Residential segregation is the third related factor contributing to segregation (Tammaru and Kontuly 2011): growing up in Russian-speaking regions, such as northern Ida-Virumaa, and spatially segregated neighborhoods, such as the primarily Russian-speaking Lasnamäe in Tallinn, children may never encounter Estonian peers, which is harmful not only for their Estonian language acquisition, but also for future friendships and connections, which often persist with other Russian speakers when they grow up.

Living in Estonia and studying the Estonian language, I have additionally observed many other obstacles on the way to successful integration that are rarely mentioned in the research literature. First of all, Estonian language acquisition is not a matter of existential need, as Russian speakers may easily survive without speaking Estonian by sticking to their own linguistic community. Many companies in Estonia are primarily Russian speaking, so the language is not required to work or access certain services. Many doctors speak Russian, most websites of Estonian companies have Russian versions, and many Estonian-language businesses make sure they have a Russian speaker to cater to this linguistic group. In addition, young Estonian and Russian speakers often use English as a lingua franca for mutual communication. In the case of older Estonian speakers, who often have known Russian since the Soviet era, Russian speakers often encounter what Anna Verschik (2004) calls "paradoxical politeness:" Estonians switch to Russian if their Russian-speaking interlocutors are not skillful in Estonian. Elo-Hanna Seljamaa suggests that switching over to Russian in Estonia can serve "as a means of accommodating the other person and steering clear of evoking ethnicity as a potential source of conflict" (2016, 35). Proclaimed as a country with one state language, Estonia in practice is a bilingual state (if not multilingual, given the high proportion of people speaking English). As a result of everyday bilingualism, Russian speakers may lack what is called instrumental motivation: when a language is learned for rational reasons as a means for political and economic

success (Gardner and MacIntyre 1991). Integration of Russophones is eventually not possible without socialization with Estonians, yet everyday informal communication between majority and minority groups remains rare.

Second, the problem of ethnic segregation is primarily tackled by native Estonian ministers, decision-makers, and activists who, due to the same vicious cycle of segregation, are hardly familiar with the attitudes and everyday problems of Russian speakers. As a result, even when striving for the best, they may miss nuances that are meaningful for their target audience. Exemplary of this is the fact that many state integration documents and initiatives have called their target audience “second- and third-generation migrants,” a label which is highly insulting to the Russophones who were born in Estonia and yet still feel excluded by being called migrants. For instance, when I was working as a volunteer in a migration-related NGO, my colleague, a native Estonian, asked me to translate a text from Estonian to Russian for her project. The text addressed migrants, including “second- and third-generation migrants,” and asked them to document their life stories, which would then compete for a publication in a book of migration-related stories. I can well imagine the hostile reaction to this call for Russian speakers born and bred in Estonia and still called migrants.

The third overlooked factor is the brand of Estonian as “the most difficult language in the world.” A Finno-Ugric language, Estonian indeed does not belong to the Indo-European group of languages, which makes it very different from other languages spoken in Europe, including Russian. Language learners encounter persistent horror stories about fourteen grammatical cases that are impossible to grasp, rumors about someone’s exceptional unique acquaintance who learned Estonian (as opposed to the majority of people who are supposedly not able to learn it), or examples of tongue twisters—a genre which exists in most languages and challenges even native speakers—which are provided as evidence that Estonian pronunciation is incomprehensible. These narratives combine to support the Estonian language “brand”—that of a difficult, even impossible, language to learn. These narratives, however, are hardly supported by linguistic evidence: the difficulty of a language is a relative category, and many other peculiarities of Estonian, such as the lack of the grammatical gender, make it easy at the same time. Meanwhile, mythologizing and demonizing the Estonian language demotivates learners: why bother to learn it if this is not possible?

Finally, the Estonian language exam, the official measurement of language socialization success, is a very subjective tool to evaluate integration. There are five levels of the exam: A1, A2, B1, B2, and C1; the B1 (intermediate) level exam is the one required for applying for citizenship. As with most standardized language tests, every one of these exams consists of listening, reading, writing, and speaking parts. Every part has its own requirements, and following them is a much more important criterion for success than actually being able to use the language in, say, everyday listening or reading. For instance, to complete the speaking part of the exam, one has to speak for about three minutes on a given topic. Many learners study phrases like “on the one hand, it is indeed so, on the other hand, some may have a different opinion” by heart which work for any topic and allow the exam taker to fill in the given time as much as possible. Slight improvisations on the topic guarantee that a speaker makes only a few mistakes and completes the speaking part successfully. As it often happens with other integration policy requirements (Gogonas and Michail 2015; Astapova 2020), the exam structure encourages people to use special strategies to pass the hurdle, rather than motivating them to acquire the skills being tested.

Other lesser-known factors, for instance, include what Russian-speakers call the “F5 war”: while the Estonian state offers free language courses, it cannot cater to all those who want to participate. Every time the registration for such a course opens online, the potential learners have to engage in the “F5 war”: the number of those registering is so high that the registration page freezes and one has to constantly press the F5 key to refresh it and “win” the war for registration. Unfortunately, many learners may occupy places at the free language courses but never show up; in the meantime, those who are really willing to take the courses may fail in winning the war of registering for them.

As a result of ethnic segregation, many social problems in Estonia persist. For instance, compared to many countries with a large migrant population, migrants’ children in Estonia do

not experience a considerable increase in education and well-being compared to their parents (Lindemann and Saar 2012). The problems fostered by segregation emerge with any new geopolitical challenge: for example, after the Russian annexation of Crimea, many political scientists viewed the Estonian Russian-speaking city of Narva as being “the next Crimea” to support Russian intervention due to the large pro-Russian Federation population (Trimbach and O’Lear 2015). During the COVID-19 close-down at the time of writing this article, the Estonian government experienced difficulties reaching the country’s Russian-speaking population with stay-at-home orders, as many Russian speakers hardly follow Estonian media, preferring Russia-based information channels. This reportedly created difficulties in establishing social distancing in Russian-speaking regions and neighborhoods (ERR 2020b).

The language segregation problem in Estonia, of course, is not absolute, nor are Russophones’ strategies of dealing with the situation. After all, the Russian-speaking population in Estonia is not homogeneous and includes people from different ethnic backgrounds (not necessarily Russian), ideologies, and attitudes. Moreover, Soviet migrants and their descendants (as well as the descendants of pre-WWII migrants) are no longer the only Russian-speakers in Estonia. In recent years, Estonian net migration expanded due to the high share of newly arriving Russian, Belarusian, and Ukrainian young professionals, whose integration patterns are strikingly different from those of the Soviet-era migrants. The legal demands of the Estonian and general EU migration systems require high qualifications to get through the migration quota for non-EU citizens, which, in practice, includes speaking at least English if not more foreign languages and encourages further learning of Estonian to gain a foothold in the country.

Moreover, the state is now not the only major actor working on immigrants’ integration: due to the growing economy and EU project funding for different initiatives, Estonia has experienced a general increase in civic engagement (OECD 2018), which was also reflected in immigration-related civic initiatives. Following the so-called “Refugee crisis” in 2015, which brought fewer than 300 quota refugees to Estonia after all (Astapova 2020), a variety of NGOs and non-state actors have started to offer solutions to the challenges related to ethnic intolerance and language socialization. They have been organizing meetings of migrant groups with Estonians in various forms, such as ethnic cuisine cooking classes, workshops on braid-making by refugees from Africa, and lessons on various folk cultures, where Estonians can introduce their culture to the migrants in return (Saame tuttavaks n.d.). A growing body of research has demonstrated the role of language and integration policy agents other than the state in facilitating change in Estonia (L’nyavskiy-Ekelund and Siiner 2017, 98). In fact, the scholars have long understood the notion of language policy as processual, dynamic, and in motion, emerging in the course of everyday interaction (McCarty 2011, 2–3), and inferred from people’s language practices, ideologies and beliefs (Spolsky 2004, 8).

The description and analysis of one such language practice, a particular civil society initiative, is the main focus of the rest of this article.

Keelegrupp

Created in 2012, Keelegrupp was one of the first informal language-learning groups in Estonia. Informal language learning with native speakers in non-hierarchical teacher-student situations is a renowned educational method that manifests in a variety of ways, from previously popular pen pal letter exchanges (Barksdale, Watson, and Park 2007) to language meetups. Primarily designed to bring together common interest groups, such as knitters, computer gamers, Spanish scrabble fans, dog lovers, and other hobby groups around certain locations, [Meetup.com](https://www.meetup.com) has been a popular resource for organizing language exchange meetings, especially in large North American and Western European cities (Torres 2017, 384). In Estonia, however, the Meetup groups are more tech- and IT-oriented, and Facebook serves as a primary platform for organizing regular language exchange meetings such as Keelegrupp.

Unlike many other language meetups, which would emerge later to cater to the interests of Estonian language learners with different native languages, Keelegrupp was initially created as a Russian-Estonian language group. The founder of Keelegrupp, a native Estonian named Holger Kiik, came up with the idea when playing chess with his Russian friend, Roman (who would also become an active participant in the language group). As it frequently happens in Estonia in communication between young Russian and Estonian speakers, they spoke English, yet while playing, they started discussing how chess figures and different things surrounding them, like a cup or a table, are called in Russian and Estonian. This is how they came up with the idea that they could teach their languages to each other and that many more people may want to study Russian and Estonian this way (Privalova 2015). For Kiik, Keelegrupp has been one of several conscious civic initiatives, and this is how he comments on its aims:

For me this is the question of social connections and “health,” to which I contribute with weekly meetings when people drink tea, learn to speak each other’s languages, understand the other culture, and they find new friends. All the social changes, no matter how significant, start with particular individuals. I have been engaged in a variety of activist and charity projects, and for me these are connected and start with the fundamental questions: do you help to carry a baby stroller to the bus or do you interfere if you observe a theft or look in a different direction? If you see some significant problem in the society, do you contribute to its solution starting with yourself or stay in your comfort zone and look for excuses, like you do not have time, money, or acquaintances to learn Russian or Estonian? For me, this is a fundamental question of attitude to life. (MK Estonia 2016)

How Keelegrupp Works

The first Keelegrupp weekly Monday meetings organized via Facebook in Tallinn gathered around 30 people; later, the number of participants has fluctuated from five to 50. The meetings have never been led by one “teacher” alone, and the decisions on how the conversation flows are rather spontaneous and collective. The participants in the meeting rarely sit together as a full group: it is optimal to divide them into groups of six to eight people to make sure that everyone gets an opportunity to speak. If there are new people who do not know each other at the table, there is a circle of introduction at the beginning of the meeting; also, in this case, informal communication can be more challenging. To foster conversation, there are board games available, such as cards with questions at different levels, from simple (e.g. food-related) to advanced ones (e.g. social or philosophical), and people answer these questions in a circle in any language they want (nobody forces a Russian speaker to answer in Estonian, for instance: s/he might want to practice language comprehension first). However, if the interlocutors at the same table have met before, their conversation is more spontaneous. After some time, people need fewer artificial topics for conversation, and the talks become quite natural without special stimuli. Natural conversational situations emerge, such as debates on political topics, life- and language-learning stories, or joke exchanges.

Sometimes topics for discussion emerge if people bring homework assigned at their language courses that they have trouble with or questions which arise when they study language independently. Preparing for the Estonian language state exam, some Russian speakers may bring the list of topics usually suggested for the oral conversation part, and this enables participants to discuss different issues in the other language, such as gender inequality or freedom of speech. In such a way, language learners can check their competencies and polish their language skills as advised by native speakers. Also, people may correct each other’s mistakes, which rarely happens in real-life Estonian-Russian communication: people are usually too polite to do so, and a learner may keep repeating the same mistakes for years. Although they may not be professional teachers, native speakers try to explain grammar rules to the learners or reflect on the slight differences in the

semantics of different synonyms. Often, native speakers comment on the appropriate use of vocabulary or explain slang and idioms to learners. Then the tables turn naturally, and the speakers of the other language explain how they would translate and use the same words.

Facebook: A Major Platform for Keelegrupp Organization

The weekly Keelegrupp meetings are organized via a Facebook group (Keelegrupp, n.d.), which had 2782 members at the time of writing this article. In addition to reminding members about weekly Monday meetings, the group serves as a platform for sharing information about language-learning: participants post links to offline and online language courses, apps, learning materials, and intercultural events. Other public listings include announcements about looking for language partners in other languages (e.g. in Arabic, Norwegian, Swedish), YouTube links for songs with lyrics primarily in Russian and Estonian, or random language materials, such as the names for different birds in Russian and Estonian. Moreover, after meetings, one of the members of Keelegrupp often shares the vocabulary discussed at the meeting in Russian and Estonian as a Facebook post. One example of such a post, shown below, attests that the meetings' discussions include difficult grammatical constructions (e.g. conjugation), idioms, and slang expressions (the translations to English in square brackets are mine):

haru maik – кислый вкус, привкус [sour taste]
 suus oli vastik maik – во рту был противный, отвратительный вкус [the taste in the mouth was disgusting]
 mis maik sel supil on? – каков вкус этого супа / какой этот суп на вкус? [how does this soup taste?]
 etendusel oli jandi maik – представление напоминало балаган [the performance resembled farce]
 poliitilise maiguga anekdooidid – анекдоты с политическим привкусом [jokes with political taste]
 maiku suhu saama (millest) – входить/войти* во вкус; пристраститься* к чему, что делать [develop a taste (for) something]
 (February 17, 2020)

Other participants may add comments to the initial post; for instance, an Estonian speaker commented extensively on the post above by explaining the difference between *maik* and *maitse*, both meaning “taste” in English or *vkus* in Russian (Keelegrupp, n.d.). The post also shows that natural conversations during Keelegrupp meetings bring about a variety of language situations.

At the beginning, the founder of the group, Holger Kiik, was also running a Wordpress blog about it. Similarly to the Facebook group, the blog contained information about the language group activities, detailed maps and directions to the meeting venues, time and venue changes, and general information about the meetings in three languages (Kiik, n.d.). However, the last post from the Wordpress dates to 2016, as the Facebook platform proved to reach more participants and enable them to share information too. It has also proven useful in the situation of the COVID-19 state of emergency: isolated at home, language learners organized online Monday meetings via Facebook video chat and Zoom.

Keelegrupp Participants

Based on my observations, participants in the group represent an approximate cross section of Tallinn society. The gender distribution has been more or less equal, and the age is usually between 20 and 50 (although some teenagers have also been joining, especially students of Russian schools who realize the need to integrate in Estonian society and who, for instance, may study in the university in Estonian in the near future). People's professional backgrounds differ: there are

students, teachers, bus drivers, workers, journalists, shop assistants, state or NGO employees, IT specialists, theatre producers, etc. While some may be fluent in both languages, others say that their previous knowledge of Russian or Estonian as a foreign language was limited to what they had learned at school. A recurrent narrative includes a memory of learning classical poems in the foreign language classes at school but not learning how to give directions in the city center or how to make small talk, an experience cited elsewhere (Seljamaa 2016, 33). Many report that at school they studied Russian or Estonian as though it was a dead language, like Latin, and participation in Keelegrupp was the first opportunity they had to speak these languages. Others have had unpleasant encounters when trying to speak foreign languages with native speakers; after years of avoiding foreign language speaking, they decided to make another attempt and joined the group. Some participants are Tallinn-based students from the northeastern, mostly Russian-speaking region of Estonia; many of these students have never had an opportunity to practice Estonian back home and now desperately need to improve it for their university studies in Estonian.

For some, language practice is a professional need, and this is true for those who come to practice Russian too. Even though Estonian is the sole national and official language in Estonia (Rannut 2008, 437),¹ Russian is an important linguistic resource for employees in positions that involve contact with the public (Berezkina 2017). Russian language competence is increasingly valued by Estonians with middle and high incomes (L'nyavskiy-Ekelund and Siiner 2017, 102) as it gives advantages in career growth and facilitates direct communication within the Russian culture without interpretation (Adamson and Tshuikina 2015, 210). This is why many Estonians coming to the language group meetings are young doctors, police officers, or sales managers. Some of them started their jobs by promising to their employees that they would improve their Russian in the near future, and Keelegrupp is one of the free options for language learning that they use to achieve this goal. Paradoxically, I must acknowledge that by learning Russian, they may contribute to reproducing bilingualism, if not segregation, by offering services in Russian to Russian speakers and thus not encouraging them to develop their Estonian.

Even so, the group is much more than that. Many of its participants mention that despite being born and bred in Estonia, they did not have friends or close acquaintances from the other group, and Keelegrupp provides one of their first opportunities to have an encounter with another ethnic community. While the initial aim of the group was to facilitate Russian-Estonian language exchange, this has broadened since the group is also popular among recent refugees, who are not necessarily Russian speaking, as well as those who look for partners to practice other languages, such as Swedish and Finnish. According to the contact hypothesis, which remains one of the prevailing theories of interethnic relations, contact, and particularly close contact, between members of different cultural groups promotes tolerant and positive attitudes (while the absence of such contact contributes to negative stereotypes and prejudice between them) (Powers and Ellison 1994, 385; Schulze 2011, 169), and Keelegrupp is exemplary of such a case.

Moreover, for people of similar backgrounds with similar language learning interests, Keelegrupp is a platform for discussing major problems they face. For instance, for Russian speakers, this is also a venue for discussing the infamous Estonian language state exam and to prepare for it; recent immigrants can learn from the experience of others to find solutions for some bureaucratic difficulties they encounter when, for instance, applying for the Estonian residence permit; and Estonians studying Russian can learn about the best Russian language courses from each other. In other words, not only does the language club provide a venue for language socialization for at least two groups, it also facilitates in-group exchange of experience pertaining to relevant issues they may repeatedly encounter.

In addition to the Facebook group as a platform for organizing meetings, Keelegrupp also uses Facebook messenger as a platform for the so-called *Keelegrupi aktiiv* (“language group active participants”)—a body of active participants who are present at every meeting, take care of integrating newcomers, and make important decisions related to the group. At the time of writing this article, the chat consisted of 30 people, including myself. There are no particular criteria for

becoming a member of the chat; rather, its members tend to invite those new participants who keep attending the meetings, express interest in organizing them and offer related initiatives. In the chat, we discuss places for new meetings, advertisements, new activities to undertake at the language group meetings and additional activities outside of regular meetings. The existence of the chat guarantees the sustainability of the group due maintaining to a body of active members, as they can secure taking care of the Keelegrupp initiative even if its founder(s) move on or step down.

One of the most important decisions that the *Keelegrupi aktiiv* must regularly make is the question of venue. Since 2012, the weekly Monday meetings at 18:15 in Tallinn have been stable (except for summers, when people are on holiday, and during the Corona pandemic); however, the venues have changed a lot, mostly including cafés, bars, and restaurants (e.g. Reval Café, St Patrick's, Cultural Club Kelm, Kuku Club, Levist Väljas). The rule of thumb has been to choose a place which does not charge a fee and agrees to host the language group participants if they buy something. However, in the end, many places did not find it feasible to have several tables occupied with visitors who only buy tea or coffee, if they buy anything at all, and asked the group to find a new venue. In time, some meeting places also closed temporarily for renovation or permanently, which required the group to look for a new place.

The proportion of Russian, Estonian, and other language speakers varies from one meeting to another. *Keelegrupi aktiiv* makes certain that the primary aim of Russian–Estonian exchange is preserved and that there is at least one native Russian and one native Estonian speaker at every meeting to ensure that people have an opportunity to practice both languages.

The *Keelegrupi aktiiv* members also regulate the general balance of different language speakers by publishing targeted articles about Keelegrupp in Estonian and Russian mass media. For instance, after an article titled “Estonian-Russian Language Group Looks for Estonian Speakers” appeared in the Estonian newspaper *Müürileht* (2017), many Estonian speakers joined. In the meantime, advertisement of the group in Russian media (Privalova 2015) brought dozens of Russian-speaking participants and cost the group another venue, as the pub which had been hosting the group refused to receive so many people buying so little. The immediate interest towards the group after each publication, however, subsides naturally, and the high influx of participants decreases at the following meetings. Other publications also appeared in Estonian media and even in a Finnish newspaper, *Helsingin Sanomat* (Kunnas 2016), sparking interest in such meetings and the creation of other language clubs.

Similar Language Clubs in Estonia

It is, of course, hard to say to what extent language clubs which emerged in Estonia after Keelegrupp were inspired by its example, as their format differs. The new language clubs in Estonia are varied: they can be state-supported or grassroots, they can be organized by professional language teachers or by activists of any professional background, they can be limited to Russian/Estonian exchange or include more languages, they can be independent events or serve as extracurricular activities for private language courses, and finally, they can be free or paid. To give just a few examples from Tallinn, where most of the meetings are held, the Tallinn Language Centre (a private language school) organizes a meeting once a week with native speakers of Estonian for the students of their course, combining informal talk and formal teaching. Tallinn Game Club (a language school drawing on innovative language teaching techniques) holds meetings involving speakers of both Estonian and Russian in a format similar to speed dating (the entrance fee is five euros) (MK Estonia 2016). Game Club also holds Estonian-Russian *sõprus* (friendship) meetings supported by the Estonian Integration Foundation and brings Russian and Estonian school-age speakers together to travel around Estonia, introduce their schools to each other, and do other extra-curricular language exchange activities (The Game Club 2018). Having observed that language clubs demand few resources and offer a lot of possibilities, the Estonian Integration Foundation has also introduced the format into their public events. They have been holding speed dating-style intralingual

meetings, as well as language cafes, in Narva and Tallinn. Public libraries supported at the municipal or state level, as well as a recent initiative of the Integration Foundation, *Eesti keele maja* (“Estonian language house”—a state-supported organization supporting education about the Estonian language and culture), offer free language groups for learning Estonian (MK Estonia 2016).

Some of these initiatives only last for a short time; others persist. In addition to Tallinn, where most of the meetings are held, similar events also became popular in Tartu, Estonia’s second largest city. In contrast to Tallinn’s 34% Russian population, Tartu’s population is only 14.5% Russian, and because it is a university city, it also has many foreigners of different nationalities. This difference in demographics requires a different approach to organizing a language group. One Estonian-language learning group in Tartu, *Räägime eesti keelt* (We speak Estonian language), takes place twice a month on Fridays at Illegard Pub (except for the time of pandemic) and mostly brings together native speakers of languages other than Russian, with English as the second language of communication. Primarily university students, the learners are gathered together by Linda Palts, a professional Estonian language teacher who conducts the meetings and organizes the group via Facebook in her spare time as a leisure activity (*Räägime eesti keelt*, n.d.). Another Russian-Estonian language group (Kula 2015) was held in the Youth Center located in Annelinn, the most Russian-speaking neighborhood of Tartu, but it existed only for a short time, as it was very difficult to find enough native Estonian speakers who wanted to study Russian and thus contribute to an exchange.

Language clubs reached the 95% Russian-speaking Estonian city of Narva later for the same reason: despite the great demand, there was a lack of Estonian speakers who would be interested in learning Russian.² Living in a Russian-speaking city, most Narva-based Estonians speak Russian quite well and do not need additional practice. Because of this, paid courses worked: among the first ones, there were language cafes organized by the VitaTiim language center. The cafes were conducted by local and foreign volunteers and allowed people to study not only Estonian, but also English, German, Swedish, Italian and French for a five-euro entrance fee. The state Integration Foundation soon started to support these events (Narva.ee 2016).

Having visited many of the language exchange groups listed above, I have observed a particular quality that set Keelegrupp and other informal initiatives apart from their state-supported counterparts. Most groups offered course-based meetings, which followed a certain structure and rules, had leading teachers, and thus differed a lot from everyday communication. In contrast, volunteer groups are much more informal and flexible, thus mimicking natural interaction better. Most importantly, however, informal groups, including Keelegrupp, go beyond language learning. By bringing together two previously segregated groups of native Russian and Estonian speakers, as well as newly arrived foreigners, these groups create joint leisure and close friendships and thus truly enable language socialization.

Beyond Language: Ethnic Integration through Joint Leisure, Consumption, and Civic Activism

The Keelegrupp meetings often go beyond mere weekly language practice events. At the beginning, depending on the possibilities provided by the venue, participants watched movies, prepared sushi, and played table tennis or board games together. This allowed for everyday conversations on topics associated with a variety of activities. Moreover, after a while, spontaneous activities at the meetings have grown into deliberate additional meetings beyond conversation nights. Members of Keelegrupp have been gathering for table tennis, bowling, volleyball tournaments, picnics, bicycle rides, parties, pub crawls, Christmas celebrations, and meals, introducing different favorite places, brands, and activities to each other.

Many of these joint leisure events also provide opportunities for rich cultural exchanges. For instance, the members of the group once had a food party with an assignment to bring the most disgusting food from their ethnic cuisine. We had Russian *salo* (bacon fat), Estonian *sült* (meat

jelly), Belarusian *draniki* (potato pancakes), Finnish *veriohukainen* (blood pancakes), and Swedish *surströmming* (fermented herring), among other dishes. The participants of the group came up with the idea for the event spontaneously during one of the regular weekly meetings: as usual, there was no particular organizer or instructor who decided on the rules; rather, all the members of the group who were present at the time of this conversation came up with the idea naturally and democratically.

The discussions at the weekly meetings often touch on the latest cultural news, such as new movies and theatre shows, which sometimes inspires the interlocutors to attend these events together. Among others, the group members went to see the 2017 British film *The Death of Stalin*, which encouraged conversations about Soviet history in a café next to the cinema after the screening. We also watched the Estonian play *Kosmos* together: simultaneously performed in Estonian and Russian by eight actors—four from the Tallinn City Theater and four from the Russian Theater of Estonia—it consists of a series of funny sketches about interactions between Russians and Estonians (Teater 2016). The choice of the play was not random, as these same questions and problems of perceived cultural differences and similarities have often also been discussed within the group. For the same reason, the participants in the group went to see the Estonian film *14 käänet* (14 cases), followed by a conversation with the film director. The title of the film refers to the major known difficulty of the Estonian language: having fourteen cases for pronouns, nouns, and adjectives. The film uses this major grammatical difficulty for Estonian language-learners as a metaphor for integration hardships that Russian speakers encounter in Estonia (ERR 2018). Interestingly, the Estonian Integration Foundation also organized the screening of this film for Russian-speakers and paid for their tickets. In contrast to this state-funded activity, participants in Keelegrupp bought the tickets themselves; also, the discussion afterwards was fostered by participants from both ethnic groups reflecting on their own similar experiences or friend-of-a-friend experiences. The latter is a recurrent difference between Keelegrupp and many integration events organized by the state: while the state-funded integration initiatives bring Russian speakers together in a group with other Russian speakers, Keelegrupp involves Estonians, Russian speakers, and sometimes other foreigners.

Scholarly analysis has revealed important ethnic differences in almost all leisure activities in Estonia, which can be attributed to the uneven distribution of the Estonian majority and Russian minority within settlement types and socio-economic status, as well as to the feeling of being a stranger in places of leisure where the other ethnic group is already over-represented (Kamenik, Tammaru, and Toomet 2015). A related difference lies in the consumption choices of Russian and Estonian speakers, with each group reportedly having distinct preferences for restaurants, apparel brands, and entertainment venues (Seliverstova 2017; Polese and Seliverstova 2019). In the meantime, leisure time spent together with the “other” group is known to encourage people to move away from their ethnic networks and to reduce ethnic divisions in multi-ethnic societies (Shinew, Floyd, and Parry 2004). Keelegrupp has challenged the existing pattern of leisure and consumption segregation, as its activities bring a majority and at least one minority group together for joint events. In addition to emphasizing the positive impact of joint leisure and consumption on ethnic integration, cross-national research has highlighted a correlation between integration discourses and the degree and type of civic engagement among immigrant minorities (Bloemraad 2006; Ireland 1994; Maxwell 2008). Keelegrupp, which was initiated by a native Estonian, a representative of the majority group, has been embraced by Russian speakers and other non-Estonians. They organize events, suggest solutions regarding the group’s future, and form a good half of the *Keelegrupi aktiiv* decision body. Via Keelegrupp, some representatives of the minority group also got involved in other social projects related to the support of migrants and refugees. After discussing other civil society initiatives in Estonia, such as World Cleanup Day (which are less advertised e.g. in the Russian- and English-language press), many engaged in them too.

Conclusion

In 2015, Keelegrupp was nominated for the annual Estonian award *Keeletegu* (Language Deed) granted for language-related initiatives by the Estonian Ministry of Education and Science. The two conventional annual awards, one decided by the ministers and the other by popular voting, however, were given to the Hiiu (Estonian island dialect) Dictionary and the Estonian E-Language Advice Platform (Haridus- ja Teadusministeerium 2016). I do not want to diminish the importance of these and other language-related initiatives that participated in the *Keeletegu* competition, but from the point of view of a newcomer who has experienced various formats of ethnic integration and language socialization from below, I do want to underline that the Keelegrupp achievements should not be underestimated either. Keelegrupp embodies the ideals of integration in Estonia: redefining the concept of nation “in larger civic, multicultural and multilingual global context, including creating positive multilingual and multicultural awareness, both among Estonians and Russian speakers” (Siiner 2006, 181). This language initiative addresses most of the negative factors which contribute to language segregation. First, by bringing together members of the majority and at least one minority group for informal and voluntary socialization, Keelegrupp facilitates the elimination of existing ideological divisions. It establishes many intercultural exchanges beyond language classes and allows the majority population to hear about the minority group’s experiences, which are less known to them due to the existing segregation. The influx of many other foreigners, including refugees, is also significant, as for many, Keelegrupp is their first opportunity to encounter a refugee, listen to that person’s story, and understand what refugees’ lives are like, which is highly beneficial in the context of the high rates of ethnic intolerance against them in Estonia (Astapova 2020). Keelegrupp also allows Russian speakers and other participating foreigners to identify positively with their mother tongue and to have this identification respected by Estonians. Similarly, the club challenges the attitude of Russian or English speakers towards the Estonian language as something that is not necessary for survival in Estonia, as people discover new circles for communication that become available when they begin to speak the language. Second, Keelegrupp addresses the problem created by decades of segregated education in Estonia by providing an alternative venue for language socialization, a contact zone that is not secured by the school system. Third, the notion of Estonian as the most difficult language in the world is contested by the fact that Russian speakers can also observe the difficulties Estonians encounter in learning Russian. Due to the informal structure, everyone is a language learner in Keelegrupp, which encourages people to talk freely and feel less intimidated in front of more proficient or native speakers. Finally, in Keelegrupp, fluency is no longer measured by the exam but by the ability to use the language in everyday communication.

Undoubtedly, addressing the obstacles on the way to integration has been possible due to a number of other factors, such as growing civic engagement of the Estonian population, which has fostered collective action in the field of migration inequalities, and increased visibility of events and initiatives due to the widespread availability of the Internet. With the support of these factors, Keelegrupp offers unique opportunities for individuals who had been segregated from each other, going beyond mere language learning to language socialization. But most importantly, by spending time together in improvised classes and beyond, many participants make their first friends and close acquaintances from the “other” group. It is especially remarkable that for many participants who grew up in Estonia, Keelegrupp was the first opportunity to do so. Many have achieved outstanding success at language learning: while some had studied the other language for years, Keelegrupp provided the first occasion on which they could use or polish their skills with native speakers. I have met many Russian speakers who grew up in the Russian-speaking city of Narva or the Russian-speaking neighborhood of Lasnamäe without encountering many Estonians or experiencing a need to speak Estonian in their lives; the progress I have seen in their language learning in Keelegrupp has been incredible. Although they are more likely to make grammar mistakes than classroom learners who had primarily focused on grammar, Keelegrupp participants are able to use the language to

communicate with native speakers without feeling intimidated. After all, they also struggle with the foreign language and make mistakes. Certainly, I cannot speak for all the visitors who might have participated in the group meetings once and then on some reason never came back—it might be that the group format did not work for them.

The group has achieved aims which were not emphasized by its founder and are not usually recognised as problematic when it comes to minority groups' segregation. For instance, for some newcomers, the group is a primary source for informal integration and expanding communication circles in a new country, enabling connections not only within the majority group but also within their own minority groups, where they can learn from the experiences of earlier migrants and gain strategies to deal with common difficulties encountered in a new country. The initiative relies heavily on the potential of civil society and encourages minority groups to contribute to collective action to solve a common social problem. Contrasted with the millions of euros spent on ethnic integration of Russians in Estonia, the initiative does not require financial resources and only relies on volunteering.

The structure and experience of Keelegrupp as one of the most successful social initiatives in the field of ethnic integration in Estonia is useful for other countries experiencing difficulties in ethnic integration, not least the neighboring Baltic states, which share a similar Soviet history and its consequences. The Keelegrupp structure and experience are possible to transfer to these similar contexts, as this kind of initiative provides simple solutions demanding almost no resources yet acts as an ideal pathway for integration, as the point of integration is no longer seen as only speaking the language. While language groups and meetups have been useful for the study of minority languages in large European and American cities, the Estonian case study exemplifies another side of such initiatives, which provide multi-sided solutions to the social problems existing in the Baltic region. Primarily allowing for language socialization of the main ethnic minority, they, among other achievements, empower both the majority and the minority populations with an extra benefit: the opportunity to contribute to the elimination of existing interethnic tensions and divisions.

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Notes

- 1 The Language Act contains some exceptions, though, e.g. “in local governments where the majority of permanent residents are non-Estonian speakers, the language of the permanent residents constituting the majority of the permanent residents of the local government may be used alongside Estonian as the internal public administration language of the local government on the proposal of the corresponding local government council and by a decision of the Government of the Republic” (Riigi Teataja 2016).
- 2 Yet there had been other integration-related initiatives in Narva before language clubs; see, for instance Markova 2019.

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