

# Estonian Language Policy: A Perspective of the Belt and Road Initiative

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**Abstract** The article delves into the intricate language policy of Estonia, a nation with a complex history of foreign dominations and occupations. It explores Estonia's commitment to preserving its national language and identity while addressing the linguistic diversity within its borders, particularly the Russian-speaking minority. The article traces the historical evolution of Estonian language policies, examining their impact on national identity, integration, education, and cultural heritage. Furthermore, it highlights the relevance of Estonia's language policy as a model for managing linguistic diversity and cultural preservation within the framework of the "One Belt and One Road" Initiative (OBOR), emphasizing the importance of language in global connectivity and cooperation.

**Keywords** Estonian language policy; linguistic diversity; national identity, the Belt and Road Initiative; language ecology; language resources

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## Introduction

Estonia, a small Baltic nation nestled in Northern Europe, has a rich history and a diverse cultural fabric shaped by various ethnic and linguistic influences. The country's current ethnic and linguistic situation is a reflection of its historical development, geopolitical influences, and policies implemented over the years.

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Estonia has been dominated by foreign powers through much of its history. In 1940 it was incorporated into the U.S.S.R. as one of its constituent republics. Estonia remained a Soviet republic until 1991, when, along with the other Baltic states, it declared its independence. The Soviet Union recognized independence for Estonia and the other Baltic states on September 6, 1991, and United Nations membership followed shortly thereafter. Estonia set about transforming its government into a parliamentary democracy and reorienting its economy toward market capitalism. It sought integration with greater Europe and in 2004 joined the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) and the European Union (EU).<sup>1</sup>

Estonia acknowledges the importance of maintaining a multicultural society while promoting the national language and identity. Efforts are underway to ensure that both Estonian and Russian-speaking communities coexist harmoniously. Cultural festivals, language courses, and community initiatives have been established to foster understanding and interaction between different ethnic groups. The aim is to create an environment where people can embrace their ethnic heritage while contributing to the shared national narrative. One of the key challenges in Estonia's ethnic and linguistic landscape is the integration of the Russian-speaking minority. Many older generations of Russians might not be fluent in Estonian, and this language barrier can create socio-economic disparities and hinder effective communication. Estonian governments have implemented policies to encourage language learning and integration, such as offering citizenship to long-term residents who demonstrate proficiency in Estonian. However, these efforts have been met with varying degrees of success and controversies.

The country's commitment to maintaining its national language and identity, while acknowledging its diverse ethnic makeup, is a delicate balancing act. By recognizing the importance of cultural diversity, implementing inclusive policies, and encouraging language integration, Estonia strives to create a harmonious society where people from various backgrounds can coexist, contribute, and thrive together. This essay explores the dynamics of ethnicity and language in Estonia, highlighting its unique characteristics, challenges, and efforts to promote cultural diversity and social cohesion.

### **Historical Context: Foreign Domination and Estonian National Awakening**

Throughout its history, Estonia experienced periods of foreign domination by various powers, including the Danish, Swedish, German, and Russian empires. These occupations had a significant impact on the linguistic and cultural landscape

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1 See "Estonia," Wikipedia <<https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Estonia>>.

of the country. During these periods, attempts were made to impose the languages of the ruling powers, often at the expense of the Estonian language and culture.<sup>1</sup>

The 19<sup>th</sup> century witnessed the rise of the Estonian national awakening, a movement aimed at preserving and promoting the Estonian language, culture, and identity. This period marked a turning point in the recognition of the Estonian language as a vehicle for expressing national sentiment and fostering a sense of unity among the Estonian population. Prominent figures, such as Friedrich Reinhold Kreutzwald and Jakob Hurt, played crucial roles in the development and preservation of the Estonian language and folk culture.

The Soviet occupation of Estonia during World War II brought significant challenges to the Estonian language and culture. Russian became the dominant language of administration and education, and there were attempts to assimilate the Estonian population into the Soviet framework. This period marked a struggle to preserve the Estonian language in the face of linguistic pressure and political dominance.

Estonia regained its independence from the Soviet Union in 1991. Language played a pivotal role during this period, serving as a symbol of sovereignty and national pride. The re-establishment of the Estonian language as the official language underscored the country's commitment to preserving its cultural heritage and asserting its identity on the international stage.

Estonia's language policies of post-independence have aimed to strike a balance between promoting the Estonian language and ensuring the integration of linguistic minorities, particularly the Russian-speaking population. The Estonian government has implemented measures to encourage language proficiency among residents, with citizenship requirements often including language competency. Efforts have been made to provide language education and support to non-Estonian speakers to facilitate their integration into society.

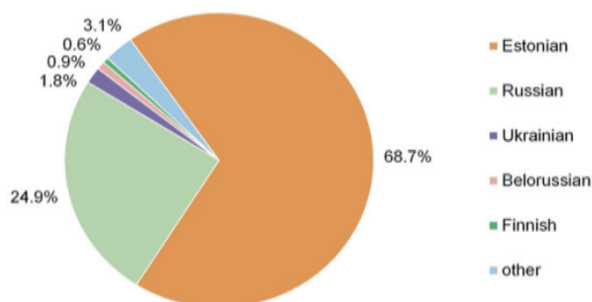
Estonia's membership in the European Union has further emphasized the importance of multilingualism. While Estonian remains the official language, English has gained prominence as a language of international communication and business. The country's education system has adapted to these changes by offering a range of language learning opportunities, enabling students to be proficient in multiple languages. Estonia has a complex ethnic and linguistic situation. According to the 2020 statistics, around 68% of the population are ethnic Estonians, while around 24% are ethnic Russians. The remaining 8% consists of Ukrainians,

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1 See Mart Rannut, *Language Planning in Estonia: Past and Present*, Tallinn: Tallinn Pedagogical University, 2004.

Belarusians, Finns, and other nationalities.

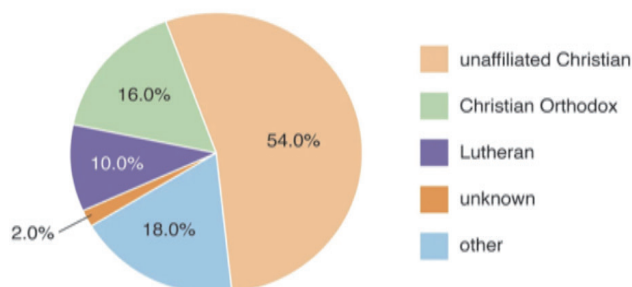
**Estonia ethnic composition (2018\*)**



Estonia: Ethnic Composition<sup>1</sup>

Estonian, the official language of the country, is a member of the Finno-Ugric branch of the Uralic language family. More than two-thirds of the populace speak Estonian as a first language; about an additional one-fourth speak Russian as their first language (mostly in the northeast), though few Estonians over age 60 or under age 20 speak the language. There is no state religion in Estonia, and many of the people are either nonreligious or atheist. The Christian majority includes a large slice of unaffiliated Christians, along with significant Evangelical Lutheran and Eastern Orthodox communities, as well as lesser numbers of Baptists, Methodists, and Roman Catholics.

**Religious affiliation (2011)\***



Estonia: Religious Affiliation

Compared with other European countries, Estonia has a large percentage of foreign-born residents and their children. Only about two-thirds of the population

1 <https://www.britannica.com/place/Estonia#/media/1/193535/209822>

are ethnic Estonians. Russians are the most significant minority, comprising about one-fourth of the citizenry. Ethnic tensions between Estonians and Russians have been present since Estonia regained independence from the Soviet Union in 1991. The main cause of tension is the legacy of Soviet occupation, where many ethnic Russians were brought to Estonia and given privileges over the Estonian population. This has led to feelings of resentment and discrimination among some Estonians towards the Russian minority.

These tensions have had an impact on Estonian politics and society. The Estonian government has implemented policies aimed at promoting the use of the Estonian language and the integration of ethnic minorities into Estonian society. However, there have been criticisms that some of these policies have been discriminatory towards ethnic Russians. The issue of citizenship is also a contentious one. Many ethnic Russians who were born in Estonia before independence are considered stateless and do not have the right to vote in national elections. This has led to accusations of discrimination and has been a source of tension between the two communities. While efforts have been made to promote integration and reduce discrimination, more work needs to be done to address these issues and promote social cohesion.

### **The Development of Language Policy in Estonia**

Language policy plays a crucial role in shaping the cultural, social, and political landscape of a nation. Estonia has a rich history of language policy developments that have been influenced by various historical events and changing political regimes.

The period from 1918 to 1940 marked the first phase of Estonia as an independent nation after centuries of foreign rule. Language policy during this time aimed to establish Estonian as the official language and promote its use in all aspects of public life. This policy was driven by a desire to assert national identity and cultural independence. Educational reforms were introduced to ensure Estonian-language instruction in schools, and government documents and institutions operated primarily in Estonian. The key elements of Estonia's language policy during this period can be summarized as follows:

**Promotion of Estonian as the Official Language:** One of the foremost objectives of Estonia's language policy during this era was to establish Estonian as the official language of the newly independent state. Estonian had long been suppressed during the rule of foreign powers, such as the Russian Empire and the Baltic German nobility. To assert its national identity, Estonia sought to ensure that Estonian was

the language used in government institutions, administration, and the legal system.

**Educational Reforms:** Language policy in this period included significant educational reforms aimed at promoting the use of Estonian. Estonian-language instruction was introduced in schools to ensure that the younger generation could communicate effectively in their mother tongue. These reforms were vital for preserving the Estonian language and culture.

**Cultural Promotion:** The Estonian government actively supported cultural endeavors that promoted the Estonian language. The establishment of Estonian theaters, libraries, and cultural institutions contributed to the revival of Estonian culture. The government provided funding and resources to promote Estonian literature, music, and the arts.

**Language Legislation:** Estonia enacted language legislation to formalize its language policy. These laws reinforced the use of Estonian in official documents, public institutions, and the judiciary. Language planning and language protection measures were introduced to ensure the vitality of Estonian in the face of potential threats.

**Protection of Minority Languages:** Estonia was home to several linguistic minorities, including Baltic Germans and Russians. The Estonian government pursued a balanced approach by protecting the linguistic rights of these minority communities while prioritizing Estonian as the national language. This approach aimed to maintain harmony and inclusivity within the newly independent nation.

The language policy in Estonia during the period of 1940-1944 was greatly influenced by the tumultuous events of World War II and the occupation of Estonia by foreign powers. The Estonian language faced challenges during both the Soviet and German occupations, with varying degrees of suppression and promotion depending on the occupying power.

In 1940, the Soviet Union occupied Estonia as a result of the Molotov-Ribbentrop Pact, a non-aggression treaty between the Soviet Union and Nazi Germany. During this period, the Soviet authorities implemented a policy of Russification, which aimed to promote the Russian language and culture in the occupied territories. Estonian was still officially recognized, but there was a push to increase the use of Russian in various aspects of public life, including education and administration.

In 1941, Nazi Germany invaded the Soviet Union and occupied Estonia. During this period, the German authorities reversed the policies of Russification and instead promoted the use of Estonian. Estonian was reinstated as the official language, and efforts were made to restore Estonian cultural and educational

institutions. However, this period was short-lived, as the Soviet Union reoccupied Estonia in 1944.

After the Soviet Union reoccupied Estonia in 1944, the policies of Russification were once again enforced. Russian became the dominant language in many spheres of public life, and Estonian cultural and educational institutions were once again subjected to heavy censorship and control by Soviet authorities. The Estonian language was still spoken by the Estonian population, but it was increasingly marginalized in official settings. It was only after Estonia regained its independence in 1991 that Estonian could fully reassert itself as the official language and a symbol of national identity in the country.

The language policy of the Republic of Estonia since 1991 has focused on the preservation and promotion of the Estonian language as a crucial element of national identity and cohesion while also respecting the language rights of ethnic minorities. These policies have played a significant role in shaping Estonia's modern identity and facilitating the integration of its diverse population. Here are key aspects of Estonia's language policy post-1991:

**Estonian as the Official Language:** The Estonian language was reaffirmed as the official language of the country in the Constitution of Estonia (adopted in 1992). This means that Estonian is the language of government, administration, and the legal system.

**Estonian Language Education:** The Estonian government has invested significantly in the Estonian language education system. Estonian is the primary language of instruction in schools, and students are required to learn Estonian to be well-integrated into society. Education in the Estonian language is essential for obtaining higher education and participating in various professions.

**Language Integration Policy:** Estonia has implemented policies to promote the integration of its Russian-speaking minority into Estonian society. This includes offering language courses and opportunities for non-Estonian speakers to learn the language. The goal is to ensure that all residents of Estonia can communicate effectively in Estonian.

**Language Requirements for Citizenship:** Estonia has language requirements for obtaining citizenship. Applicants for citizenship must demonstrate proficiency in the Estonian language, which includes passing language exams.

**Protection of Estonian Language:** Estonia has enacted laws to protect the Estonian language from linguistic interference. For example, there are regulations governing the use of the Estonian language in advertising and public signage.

**Bilingual Education and Language Rights:** Estonia recognizes the rights of

its ethnic minorities to use their native languages in education and cultural life. Bilingual education programs are available for these minority groups, including the Russian-speaking population.

**Digital Services in Estonian:** The Estonian government has made efforts to ensure that digital services and e-governance platforms are accessible in Estonian, making it convenient for citizens to interact with the government in their native language.

**Cultural Promotion:** Estonia actively promotes its cultural heritage, including its language, through various cultural programs, festivals, and initiatives to preserve and celebrate the Estonian language and traditions.

The historical development of language policy in Estonia reflects the country's struggle for cultural and national identity in the face of foreign occupations and geopolitical changes. From the early years of independence to the Soviet era and finally to the present day, language has been at the heart of Estonia's identity. The preservation and promotion of the Estonian language, along with a commitment to minority language rights, have been central to Estonia's post-independence language policy. This journey serves as a testament to the resilience of language in shaping a nation's history and future.

### **The Impact of Estonian Language Policy and Its Enlightenment to the “One Belt and One Road” Initiative**

Language is a fundamental aspect of a nation's identity and plays a significant role in shaping its cultural, social, and political landscape. Estonia's unique language policy that has not only preserved its linguistic heritage but also provided valuable insights into the broader context of language diversity and cultural preservation. The language policy of Estonia can be seen as a model of linguistic preservation which is rooted in its historical struggles for national identity and independence. Despite periods of foreign rule and influence, Estonians have fiercely protected their language, a Finno-Ugric language, quite distinct from the Indo-European languages spoken by their neighbors. The Estonian language policy has evolved over time but has consistently aimed at preserving and promoting the Estonian language.

Estonia places a strong emphasis on language education, with Estonian being the primary medium of instruction in schools. This policy ensures that future generations are fluent in their native tongue, strengthening their cultural identity. Meanwhile, Estonia supports cultural initiatives and institutions that promote the Estonian language, such as theaters, literature, and media outlets. This not only preserves the language but also enriches the cultural fabric of the nation. As a



multi-ethnic and multilingualism country, Estonia has also implemented policies to integrate linguistic minorities while maintaining the dominance of the Estonian language. This balances the need for social cohesion with linguistic preservation. With the advancement of technology Estonia has leveraged digital means to promote the Estonian language, making it an integral part of its e-governance system. This has set an example for other nations looking to adapt to the digital age while preserving their linguistic heritage.

Estonia's language policy has had several significant impacts on the country, its society, and its people. These impacts have shaped Estonia's identity, education system, and governance. Some key effects of Estonian language policy can be seen as follows:

**Preservation of National Identity:** Estonia's language policy has played a crucial role in preserving the country's national identity. The Estonian language is not only the official language but also a symbol of independence and cultural heritage. The policy has helped maintain a strong sense of Estonian identity and pride among the population.

**Integration of Society:** Estonia's language policy, including language education and integration efforts, has helped bridge linguistic divides within the country. It has facilitated the integration of Russian-speaking minorities into Estonian society, fostering a more cohesive and inclusive society.

**Economic Competitiveness:** Proficiency in the Estonian language is essential for participating in the country's workforce and economy. Language policy has ensured that all residents, regardless of their ethnic background, have access to education and employment opportunities in the Estonian language. This has contributed to Estonia's economic competitiveness and innovation.

**Educational Excellence:** Estonia's focus on Estonian-language education has led to a strong education system. Students are educated primarily in Estonian, and this has contributed to high literacy rates and academic achievements. The Estonian education system has received recognition internationally for its quality.

**Political Stability:** Language policy has played a role in maintaining political stability in Estonia. A shared language contributes to effective governance and communication between the government and the people.

**Preservation of Language Diversity:** While promoting the Estonian language, the country's language policy also respects the rights of ethnic minorities to maintain and develop their native languages and cultures. This approach contributes to linguistic diversity and cultural richness within Estonia.

**Cultural Heritage:** Estonia's language policy has contributed to the preservation

and promotion of its cultural heritage, including literature, music, and folklore, all of which are deeply rooted in the Estonian language.

**Digital Innovation:** Estonia's commitment to making digital services accessible in Estonian has fostered a culture of innovation and e-governance. The country is known for its advanced digital infrastructure and services, making it a leader in the field.

**European Integration:** Proficiency in the Estonian language is often a requirement for citizenship and participation in European Union institutions, which Estonia joined in 2004. Language policy has helped facilitate Estonia's integration into European structures.

Estonia's language policy has not only preserved its linguistic heritage but has also contributed to national unity and international engagement. It has played a pivotal role in shaping the modern Estonian state and society. As one of the countries participating in the "One Belt and One Road" Initiative (OBOR), Estonia presents a model of finding a balance between cultural preservation and global connectivity, which provides valuable insights for nations to navigate the challenges and opportunities presented by OBOR while celebrating their unique linguistic and cultural identities.

The "One Belt and One Road" Initiative, also known as the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), is China's grand plan to promote global economic connectivity and cooperation.<sup>1</sup> It involves infrastructure development projects spanning Asia, Europe, and Africa. While the primary focus of OBOR is economic, it also carries significant cultural and linguistic implications. Many OBOR countries have rich linguistic diversity. Estonia's approach to language integration can offer insights into managing linguistic diversity while promoting a national language. Statistics have shown that the language issue should be taken into consideration in the practice and research of OBOR. The research on language, as a fundamentally important starting point, is a key issue as well as a bridge in the software development of the Belt and Road Initiative, and thus should not be ignored.

As Bernard Spolsky observes, "Language policy is about choice. It may be the choice of a specific sound, or expression, or of a specific variety of language. It may be the choice regularly made by an individual, or a socially defined group of individuals, or a body with authority over a defined group of individuals" (217). In looking at the language policy of a state or other unit, it is appropriate to start off with an effort to capture the complex language situation. This involves analyzing the existence and nature of the named and unnamed varieties used in it, and their

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1 See [http://www.Ndrc.Gov.cn/gzdt/201510/t20151022\\_755473.html](http://www.Ndrc.Gov.cn/gzdt/201510/t20151022_755473.html)( accessed: 09 /08/2023).

demographic, territorial and functional distribution in the unit. An ecological approach requires going beyond the linguistic to the relevant social, political, ethnic, religious, economic and cultural make up of the unit and the way that each of these factors interacts constructively with the linguistic.

Language policy must take into account the significance of language to individuals, nations, societies and nations. The language policy of OBOR focuses on the cultivation of language service talents and the strategic reserve of key languages, with the purpose of improving national language ability, enhancing national language strength, maintaining national language security, and meeting the urgent need for language in the construction of the “Belt and Road.” In the multicultural context of OBOR, only by monitoring and studying the language situation of these countries and Chinese border areas can we understand the language usage habits of these countries and regions and the communicative value and core function of a certain language, and also have a deep understanding of their culture and thinking habits. Thus, it provides a strong basis for our country to deal with common language, non-common language, determine a few key languages and personnel training model, and lays a good foundation for our country to formulate a scientific and effective language policy.

The Belt and Road Initiative is intertwined with globalization the system of which is complex. In formulating language policy, the impact of the globalization process has to be taken into account. Adams and Carfagna once described globalization as “connecting the dots, finding patterns and relationships between seemingly unrelated ideas or events” to consider the world as a whole instead of broken into separate independent nations and individuals (1). Globalization drives people to contact each other, and in this cross-regional communication system, a communication medium is needed. For now, the general solution is to make English the universal language. However, in the dialogue with countries along the “Belt and Road,” English as a communication tool can only be used as an alternative language. In some domains, English is undoubtedly the world’s lingua franca, but in global exchanges and trade, it is difficult to ignore the multilingual and multicultural reality of the world, and ignore the native languages and values of neighbors, allies and trading partners.

The formulation of language policy is not only influenced by the external environment, but also closely related to the understanding of the function and value of the language itself. With the continuous improvement of the strategic position of language, people have a deeper understanding of the nature and function of language, the relationship between language and society, politics, economy, religion

and culture. According to Sue Wright, “Language builds human societies, solidarity and cooperation but it also plays a crucial role in the distribution of power and resources within a society and among societies” (7). Whether language is regarded as a symbol of identity, a resource, or an expression of rights, in other words, language policy is formulated for the efficiency of communication, for the purpose of strengthening the identity of national and national culture, or for the rational allocation of resources to produce various benefits, and so on. Policy making is always directed towards one or a combination of several important aspects.

The language ecology along the “Belt and Road” is complex, with more than 50 official languages and a small number of minority languages. To give full play to the resource advantages of languages, it is necessary to make a comprehensive judgment on their communicative value, economic value, cultural inheritance and other values, and rationally develop and optimize the allocation of language resources based on market demand and scope of influence to maximize their benefits. At the same time, it is necessary to balance the relationship between the official language, minority languages, common languages and non-common languages so as to avoid the uniformity of language selection and language resource allocation, and provide people with the opportunity and right to learn multiple languages, so that they have the possibility of independent choice and the diversity of development in construction of the “Belt and Road.”

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