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4.1. The role of language in Estonian national identity

Martin Ehala

Introduction

After Estonia restored its independence, and in particular in the last decade, Estonians have become increasingly transnational. Since for Estonians their language is a key feature of national identity, maintaining and preserving the Estonian identity abroad is closely related to the continued use of the language. However, history has shown that preserving one's native language in a new linguistic and cultural space is not an easy task. Even if the desire to preserve the language is strong, and Estonian is the language spoken in the home, with each generation there is an increase in the influence of the culture and the identity of the host country on a person's self-image, and on the shared sense of multiple-identity.

However, the preservation of the language and identity also depends very much on how strong the different Estonian communities abroad are. In the same way as an individual's quality of life in Estonia is determined by the size of his or her local community, whether there is a pre-school and a school nearby, recreational activities offered by the community centre and ease of access to theatres and cinemas, just so does the vitality of transnational Estonian communities depend on the size of the community and how active its members are.

The first part of the article focuses on different ways of defining national identity and how these differing definitions influence understanding of the essence of Estonianness. The objective of the analysis is to demonstrate how the combining of different identity types might serve as a basis for a broad-based understanding of Estonianness, i.e. the *Greater-Estonia* identity. The second part of the article explains the notion of multiple identity and discusses the strategies of different generations of Estonian expatriates for managing multiple identities. The third part gives an overview of different types of transnational communities and their impact on the preservation of identity and language.

4.1.1. Methods of defining identity

Aune Valk's analysis in this chapter (see Valk 2017, this Report) highlighted several possible approaches for defining national identity, as well as the fact that for many ethnic groups language is the main distinguishing feature. However, the Estonian language is neither the only, nor even an inevitable part, of the Estonian identity, at least not for all Estonians, as shown by Valk (2017, this Report). A large proportion of 'home Estonians' (*kodueestlased*) and Estonian expatriates feels that even basic knowledge of Estonian is sufficient to be an Estonian and that one can actually be Estonian without speaking the language at all. Of the 'second wave' of expatriates, 84% agreed with that statement, whereas only 34% of the 'third wave' expatriates agreed (Ojamaa & Karu-Kletter 2014). In Estonia, 47% of ethnic Estonians and 48% of non-Estonians agreed with the statement (Valk 2014). Naturally, there are purists among the Estonians (both domestic and expatriate) who see an accent or influences of other languages as weakening someone's Estonian identity, but in general older generations of expatriates hold back on criticising

the language skills of younger generations in order not to discourage them from using the Estonian language (Ojamaa & Karu-Kletter 2014).

While language as a feature of identity is largely based on ethnicity, nationality (citizenship) as a feature of identity is based on the state. Language skills and nationality do not fully overlap in any country and tension between ethnic and state identity is well-known to all modern nation states. However, ethnic Estonians (both in the diaspora and those living in Estonia) do not distinguish between ethnic identity and identification with the state as a rule (Valk 2014), because the Republic of Estonia is seen and perceived as a self-expression of ethnic Estonians.

It is another thing altogether for speakers of Estonian as a second language – identifying oneself with the Estonian state and one's ethnic identity are two different things. As recent surveys have shown (Valk 2014), for the Russians living in Estonia identifying oneself with the Estonian state is predicted by identifying as an Estonian-Russian or as a speaker of Estonian plus satisfaction with one's life. The latter is strongly dependant on the level of Estonian language proficiency; however, a good command of Estonian is not sufficient to identify oneself with the Estonian state – what is important is a self-identification that is linked to Estonia. About one in three Estonian-Russians can be characterised in this way (Valk 2017, this Report).

It is undeniably in the interests of the cultural vitality of Estonia to be as flexible as possible regarding the correlation of language and nationality in the Estonian collective identity: Estonian is the native language of only part of the citizens; the other part use it as a second language. At the same time, there are many non-citizens, in particular among Estonian expatriates, for whom Estonian is their mother tongue, while there are also many citizens who do not speak Estonian (such as the descendants of Estonian citizens who were born and raised abroad). While neither language nor citizenship in itself will ensure emotional connection to the Estonian national identity, both definitely contribute to its formation.

Besides one's mother tongue and citizenship, national identity can also be defined by bloodlines. Traditionally, such a definition is used by orthodox Jews. According to Orthodox Judaism, a person's Jewish identity is passed down through the maternal line, regardless of the person's language skills, nationality or cultural background; however, this has never been a standard (Diamond 2014). Native American tribes also continue to use 'blood quantum laws' to determine who is eligible for membership in the tribe: a prerequisite for being a member of a tribe is a Native American ancestor, whereas for some tribes it is sufficient to have a 1/32 degree blood quantum, which corresponds to having one full-blooded great-great-great-grandparent.

The majority of European nations, however, do not define national identity by bloodline. At the same time, ethnic roots are recognised as a possible feature of national identity even if the person neither speaks the language nor is a citizen. As new generations of Estonian expatriates are born, the number of people of Estonian origin who value their Estonian identity, yet do not speak the language, is increasing.

This is all the more so because preserving a language is difficult, especially if a person

comes from a mixed family with only one parent speaking the language of the titular nation. Accepting the inevitable, Estonian expatriates tend to recognise as Estonian also those who do not speak the Estonian language, as long as there is a wish to learn, and offer an example of Jews, Lithuanians and Poles who have lived in the U.S. for generations and are only familiar with some ritual expressions, yet consider their original identity important (Ojamaa & Karu-Kletter 2014).

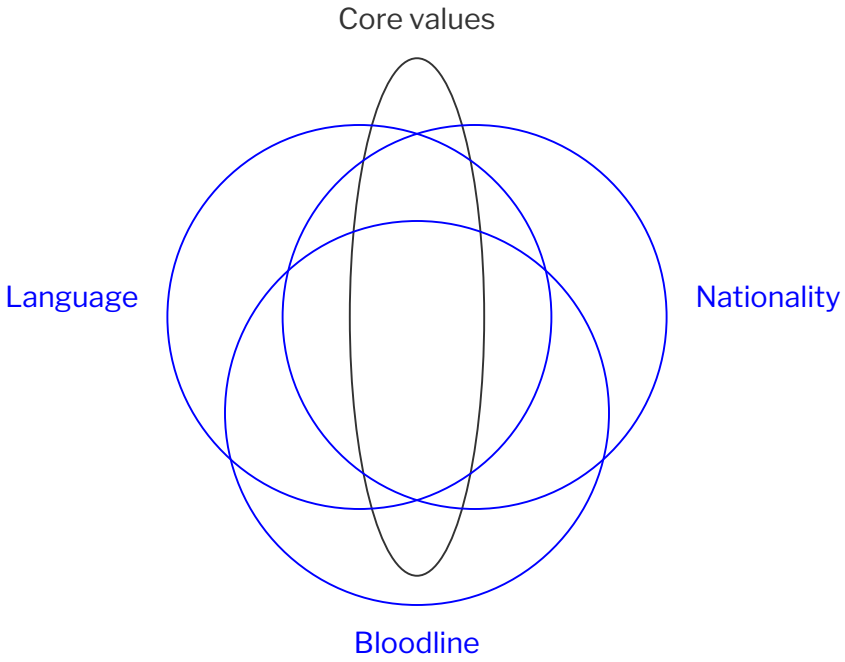
For the majority of the third-generation Estonian expatriates their Estonian origin has become the main part of their Estonian identity, as the knowledge of the Estonian language has weakened or even disappeared. Estonian origin is important also in the case of the third emigration wave: it is a sort of cultural capital, or baggage which is impossible to get rid of, and is frequently expressed by respondents with an affirmation echoing a beloved patriotic song: 'Estonian I am - and Estonian I will remain' (Ojamaa & Karu-Kletter 2014).

Finally, there is a fourth important factor in determining one's national identity: a cultural factor, i.e. the core values of an identity. This feature is also very important for Jews whose identity is largely based on their national religion. National religion as a core value of identity is also used by other nations. For example, Greek Orthodoxy is an important factor that helps to preserve the Greek national identity of the Greek diaspora in Australia. Cultural core values also help to preserve Afrikaans in South Africa, where the common language of communication is English.

Core values are also important for Estonian identity; their direct manifestation is the tradition of song festivals, which help to create an emotional connection for people of Estonian origin with their Estonian identity and thus affect self-definition. Second-generation emigrants have, for example, said that participation in a song festival was a turning point that helped them to maintain or discover their Estonian identity. Subjective self-definition is important for Estonian expatriates, even if a person is not always instantly identifiable as Estonian. What is also important, besides self-definition, is love for Estonia, i.e. emotional connection. This feeling is particularly strong among second- and third-generations of expatriates, while those born and raised in Estonia mentioned it less frequently, probably because knowing the language and their cultural background feels natural and intrinsically a part of life (Ojamaa & Karu-Kletter 2014).

Emotional connection with Estonian identity and core values is important not only for individuals of Estonian origin. Song festivals can have an emotional impact also on those who are of a different origin, nationality or perhaps do not even speak Estonian at all. Connected in this way are a large number of foreign partners of Estonians living in Estonia or abroad, who are in close contact with the Estonian culture, either through their partner or because they are interested in it.

Figure 4.1.1. Methods of defining national identity



Source: Figure by the author

As shown in Figure 4.1.1, national identity can be defined in a number of ways. These features or their combination may serve both as a person's basis for national self-identification and as a criterion used by others to recognise – or reject – such self-identification. National identity, as with any other collective identity, is never just a question of self-identification – it has to be recognised by the community. For example, to be a Native American, self-identification as such is not sufficient – other Native Americans need to recognise such self-identification as genuine.

The choice of the features on the basis of which an individual's self-identification is recognised is central to the determination of identity. Traditionally, the Estonian national identity has been quite language-centred; therefore many people who, despite their modest language skills, feel emotionally connected to Estonia remain marginalised or are even rejected by the Estonian-speaking majority. In today's globalised world, such a narrow definition of identity may no longer be sustainable. Given demographic changes, an Estonianness that is based only on linguistic identity is doomed to gradually disappear.

A broader, 'Greater-Estonia' identity, which includes both Estonians in Estonia and Estonian expatriates, would allow a significantly larger number of people to be actively involved. Such an identity would include ethnic Estonians based on language and culture (whether they are Estonian nationals or not) and also people of Estonian origin (regardless of their nationality and whether they speak Estonian or not) as well as those who are only emotionally connected to Estonia, i.e. share Estonian core values, even if they have no Estonian roots, do not speak Estonian and are not Estonian nationals. Naturally, the aim of the development of the Estonian identity should be the creation of an emotional connection between the identity and the people who are in one way or another connected to Estonia and may, therefore, consider the creation and

strengthening of such a connection enriching. In other words, a broader definition of Estonian identity would increase the number of Estonians and broaden the notion of Estonianness.

It could be argued that the world is moving towards the abandonment of collective identities and, therefore, the development of the Estonian identity may seem obsolete. Unfortunately, there is no answer to this question. What is clear is that the need for collective identity decreases in a safer world and increases in unstable times. It is difficult to predict what will happen in the coming decades. Even in the most cosmopolitan scenario, it will take at least a couple of generations for national identities to disappear. In the meantime it is quite certain that increasing transnationalism will lead to the emergence and spread of various double and multiple identities. This is why developing Estonianness should also be staked on multiple identities, unless we want it to end up as an exhibition at the Estonian National Museum in Raadi.

4.1.2. Multiple identity

Because people belong simultaneously to different groups, they subscribe to not just one but to a number of collective identities. These identities are arranged into various dimensions, such as gender, race, ethnic origin, language, age, religious beliefs, profession, etc. Each of these allows for a certain number of collective identities.

The majority of people subscribe to only one identity in each dimension: a man or a woman (but not both); a Muslim or a Christian (but not both), etc. However, not infrequently, it is possible to subscribe to more than one identity within the same dimension. For example, a person may feel that they belong to two ethnic groups at the same time. This is a multiple identity.

Roccas and Brewer (2002) argue that multiple identity can lead to a greater sense of complexity in social identity and that more complex identities are inherently conflictual and people try to minimise the conflict by different cognitive means. The authors describe four main strategies individuals use to manage and to reduce the conflict between multiple social identities: intersection, dominance, compartmentalisation and merger (see Figure 4.1.2):

Figure 4.1.2. Managing multiple identities

Source: Roccas and Brewer 2002:90

The easiest way an individual can manage multiple identities is to define their identity as the intersection of different group memberships and to see the people who share the same set of variables as their in-group. Such identification is common among the second generation expatriates who, while abroad, feel that they are Estonians and while in Estonia feel that they are representatives of their country of residence. This means that they struggle to fully identity with their national group. However, they have a strong sense of solidarity with other second generation expatriates across the world: they share the same life and identity experience, the same expatriate culture and identity (see

Ojamaa & Karu-Kletter 2014: 188). The tradition of international ESTO-Day festivals has definitely contributed to the emergence of such an identity.

Domination is a more complex identity-management strategy. An individual adopts one primary group identification to which all other potential group identities are subordinated. For instance, a female lawyer may assign primacy to her professional identity, while all other identities (ethnic origin, gender, marital status, etc.) assume minor importance. This type of identity is common for many third-generation Estonian expatriates for whom the national identity of their country of residence is primary and the Estonian identity is perceived mainly in terms of historical roots. Such an identity may also characterise first-generation emigrants for whom the Estonian identity was primary. Living in a foreign country for a long period and adapting to its culture has added a new identity layer which, however, cannot compete with the main identity. There are also those among first-generation expatriates who have not developed multiple identities despite the fact that they have lived abroad longer than in Estonia (Ojamaa & Karu-Kletter 2014).

Next in complexity is the compartmentalisation strategy. With compartmentalisation, different identities are isolated and activated separately depending on the social situation or context. For instance, a bilingual person can completely identify with one cultural and language environment, without activating the other identity, and vice versa. Such identity management is characteristic of some second-generation Estonian expatriates (in particular those born after WW2), who were raised in an Estonian speaking family, yet could not avoid the language and identity of their country of residence. This strategy is also adopted by those representatives of the latest emigration wave, who left re-independent Estonia in childhood or were born abroad, but were raised in an Estonian family, went to school in Estonia (for at least a couple of years) and visit Estonia often. As a result of growing up in two different language and cultural environments, they have friends both in Estonia and in their country of residence and they feel confident in both cultural and language environments.

The most complex strategy of managing multiple identities is merger. In this mode, multiple identities are combined and integrated into one and everybody sharing one of the identities is included in the person's in-group. Such identity is characteristic of some of the third-wave emigrants - those with higher income, level of education and mobility and who merge their national and cosmopolitan identities with that of their new country of residence (Ojamaa & Karu-Kletter 2014). This merger of identities is less common among unskilled workers who are seen as immigrants of a certain ethnic background, rather than digital nomads with a flexible and cosmopolitan identity.

People tend to reduce the cognitive complexity of the world in order to navigate in it with less difficulty and with greater clarity. This means that complex multiple identities also tend to become simpler, which mostly leads to their disappearance. It is true that the speed of these processes depends on a number of factors, such as compatibility of core values, share of mixed marriages and the character of the transnational community.

4.1.3. Types of transnational Estonian communities