

Estonia Today

FINNO-UGRIC PEOPLES

According to recent studies, the peoples that speak Finno-Ugric languages have lived in Europe for about ten millennia. It seems that before the Great Migration, primarily Finno-Ugric languages were spoken in Eastern and Central Europe. Today, almost 25 million people belong to the Uralic (Finno-Ugric and Samoyed) language family, living within an area that stretches from Norway in the West to the Ob River region in the East, and to the lower reaches of the Danube in the South. Thus, various Finno-Ugric enclaves can be found within this massive domain. These groups are generally surrounded by people speaking Indo-European (Germanic, Slavic, Romance) and Turkic languages.

Statistics and Political Status

Speakers of Finno-Ugric languages represent about 24 different peoples, whose political fate and status vary greatly. Despite the fact that they are the aboriginal inhabitants of the territories they live in, most of them have never had their own nation state. Only about 15 million Hungarian, 5 million Finnish, and 1 million Estonian speakers have their own independent states. The Saamis, on the other hand, live in the territories of four different countries. The Western Saamis (in Norway, Sweden, and Finland) have been successful in not only preserving but even developing their culture and ethnic identity. The first Nordic Saami conference was held in 1953. During the 2nd conference, the Nordic Saami Council was founded, uniting central Saami organisations from Norway, Sweden and Finland. In 1992, the Russian Saamis joined as well and the Council was renamed the Saami Council. Together with the First Nations of Northern America, the Western Saamis founded the World Council of Indigenous Peoples in 1975. In Finland, Norway and Sweden, the Saami Parliaments (since 1973, 1989, and 1993, respectively) are working as advisory bodies to their national governments. Books, newspapers and magazines are published in the Saami languages. Through the co-operation of Saami Radios of Nordic Countries, there is all-Saami radio network broadcasting 24 hours a day. The first doctoral thesis was defended in the North Saami language in 1999, and secondary education in Saami is available in the Saami territories of Finland, Sweden and Norway. In Russia, the Saami language is taught as an elective.

In Norway, the Finnish speaking Kvens are recognised as a national minority. Meänkieli (a Finnish dialect) has regional language rights in Sweden.

Although on the western shore of the Baltic Sea in Latvia the Livonians (or Livs) have been constitutionally recognised as an indigenous people, the Livonian language is taught only at the university level. There are some Livonian books published in Latvia, and there was a cultural magazine in Livonian at the end of the last century. In the 1990s, there were fewer than 20 Livonian-speaking natives.

The main territory traditionally inhabited by the Setos is now under the control of Russia, but most of the Seto population has emigrated to Estonia. Although they speak the Southern Estonian language, Setos are noticeably different from Estonians ethnologically and

have claimed a separate ethnicity. This is not recognised by the Estonian state, but Estonia still supports Seto culture and language with a special fund. Books, newspaper and CDs are all published in the Seto language.

The remaining 17 out of the 24 different Finno-Ugric peoples live in Russia. There are 3 peoples who live both in and outside the territory of Russia (Saamis, Finns and Setos). According to the Russian census data of 2002, the number of Finno-Ugrians has decreased dramatically since the 1989 census, from 3.3 million to 2.7 million. The largest Finno-Ugric peoples have their own so-called republics (the Karelians, the Mordvins, the Maris, and the Udmurts) or autonomous regions (the Khantys, the Mansis, and the Nenets), in all of which they are minorities. The Vepses (or Vepsians), Ingrian Finns, Izhorians, and the Selkups (Ostyak Samoyeds) have no territorial autonomy of any kind.

According to the level of autonomy, different peoples have different rights in Russia. Only the republics have the right to a second official language besides Russian. All Finno-Ugric republics have their own languages as official except Karelia.

There are some Finno-Ugric peoples in Russia, the Votes (Vadjalain), Izhorians, and Enets (Yenisey Samoyeds), in whose case we can no longer speak about the threat of assimilation. Rather, they have already been assimilated by the prevailing Russian culture and language, so that only the elderly people can understand their ethnic language anymore.

The number of people actually speaking Finno-Ugric languages in Russia has decreased between 1989 and 2002 by about 257,200, or more than 10%, and this number is declining constantly. There are many factors that hamper the growth of the Finno-Ugric peoples' self-awareness. The main ones seem to be urbanisation, modern demographic shifts and migratory trends, mixed marriages, and underdevelopment of the urban culture of Finno-Ugrians. Recently there have been growing xenophobic tendencies, which do not support the preservation of the national identity of minority nations. All these factors prevent the Finno-Ugric peoples from developing a satisfactory way of life appropriate to their ethnicity. Another very important factor is the continuous downgrading of native language education. The Finno-Ugric peoples in Russia have had very limited opportunities, if any, to preserve their languages



and cultures, though of course the situation differs from region to region.

Recently new threats to the preservation of the languages and cultures of the Finno-Ugric peoples in Russia have emerged. One of these relates to changes in the Language Act of the Russian Federation, which now stipulates that all official languages in Russia must be written using only the Cyrillic alphabet. The act excludes the possibility that Vepsian and Karelian, which use the Latin alphabet, could be official languages. Another threat stems from planned changes to the borders of ethnic territorial regions, which will probably increase the social pressure for the assimilation of the indigenous Finno-Ugric peoples. For instance, the Komi Permyak Autonomous Region, the Permian Komis' area of inhabitancy, was the first area to be consolidated with the neighbouring Russian-speaking region (Perm Oblast). Now the consolidation of the Nenets Autonomous Area with the Arkhangelsk Oblast is underway as well.

In the past few years, support for the interests of Finno-Ugric peoples in Russia has increased. The Finno-Ugric Cultural Centre of the Russian Federation was established in Syktyvkar (Komi Republic), President Vladimir Putin participated in Finno-Ugric festival in Saransk in 2007, and the Association of the Finno-Ugric Peoples of Russia was re-established.

The Finno-Ugric Mentality and the Role of Language

Despite the various similarities among the Finno-Ugric languages, they are not mutually understandable. An Estonian can understand some Finnish, an Udmurt can understand some Komi, but the speakers of more remote languages have to make a special effort to trace common words in order to find evidence of their kinship. Nevertheless, belonging to the same language family is the most significant unifying feature of the Finno-Ugric peoples. The kinship of the Finno-Ugric languages can be especially detected in their analogous constructions. This distinctive construction of their languages has influenced the Finno-Ugric peoples' frame of mind, and the way they perceive the world around them. This facilitates mutual understanding between Finno-Ugric peoples. At the same time, the specifically boreal attitude of the Finno-Ugric peoples enriches world culture by adding a unique way of thinking. Unlike Indo-Europeans, people thinking in the Finno-Ugric languages would, for instance, tend not to consider nature as an object, but rather, as a partner for coping with life. Nor are the cultures of the majority of Finno-Ugric peoples aggressive – throughout history, they have always tried to accommodate new neighbours, to the point where they had to migrate in order to maintain their own identity.

The Finno-Ugric peoples' differing racial, religious, and cultural characteristics

Western Finno-Ugrians belong to the Caucasian race. But the closest relatives of the Hungarians, the Khants (Ostyaks) and Mansis (Voguls) in Siberia, as well as their neighbours the Samoyeds, represent the Uralic race, having both European and Mongolian physical characteristics.

The culture of the Volga-Finnic, Permian, and minor Balto-Finnic peoples is strictly agrarian, since due to several historic, political, and cultural reasons, they have had no opportunity to develop their own urban

culture. Throughout the centuries, the culture of the Khants, Mansis, and Samoyeds, which is based on hunting, fishing, and reindeer husbandry, has adapted itself to life in extreme Siberian conditions. But unfortunately, it is extremely vulnerable to the negative influences of modern industrial culture.

As to their religion, most Finno-Ugrians are Christians of various denominations. Estonians, Finns, and Western Lapps are Lutherans, whereas Hungarians are mostly Catholics, although some are Calvinists or Lutherans. Finno-Ugrians living in the European part of Russia are mostly Orthodox, but the Udmurt and Mari people have preserved their ancient animistic religion. Also, the Finno-Ugrians in Siberia, as well as the Samoyeds, are to this day shamanists.

International Co-operation

Over the course of time, the unity of Finno-Ugric peoples has had a considerable impact on their cultural emancipation. Finns, for instance, have been influenced by their relationship with Hungarians, and in turn have supported their next-door neighbours, the Karelians. Estonians have used Finns as an example to emulate, and have received varied assistance from them. With the help of Finns, Estonians, and Hungarians, the Livonian (or Liv) ethnic consciousness and literary culture in Latvia was brought back from oblivion during the period between the two World Wars. Awareness of their kinship with the Finns, Hungarians, and Estonians is presently crucial for boosting the self-awareness of the Finno-Ugrians living in Russia. And moral as well as material aid from their "linguistic brethren" in the outside world is crucial for the preservation of their languages and cultures.

The main forum of the Finno-Ugrians is the **World Congress of Finno-Ugric Peoples**, which has taken place every four years since 1992. The permanent body of the Congress, the Consultative Committee of Finno-Ugric Peoples, is represented in the working groups of the United Nations Commission on Human Rights. The World Congress states that its primary objective is the preservation and development of the Finno-Ugric peoples and their cultures as part of the heritage of mankind as a whole. The rights of national minorities are not a matter concerning a single country's domestic policy, but the whole international community. As a matter of fact, the international community is already paying significant attention to the situation of the Finno-Ugric indigenous peoples in the Russian Federation. The Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe has repeatedly drawn attention to the precarious situation of the Finno-Ugric peoples in Russia. The EU has also brought this topic to the attention of the Russian authorities within the framework of the EU-Russia human rights dialogue. The problems of indigenous peoples are a matter of serious concern also for the UN, which proclaimed the Second International Decade of the World's Indigenous People and adopted the Declaration on Rights of Indigenous Peoples on 13 September 2007.

The Estonian Kindred Peoples Programme

Estonia supports the development of various other Finno-Ugric peoples by providing cultural, educational, and economic resources, as well as by co-operating with both the Russian central government and the appropriate local officials to help improve the opportunities of the Finno-Ugric peoples to preserve

their languages and cultures. The Kindred Peoples Programme was launched by the Estonian Government to support the efforts of the indigenous Uralic (Finno-Ugric and Samoyed) peoples living in the Russian Federation and the Republic of Latvia in developing their languages and cultures. The Programme also

includes co-operation with the Saami people of Russia, Norway, Sweden, and Finland. The Kindred Peoples Programme partly overlaps with the United Nations Decade of Indigenous Peoples and constitutes Estonia's contribution to the Decade.

The Finno-Ugric peoples

People	Population	Increase / decrease, 1989 to 2002*	Countries inhabited
Hungarians	15 000 000		Hungary, Romania, Slovakia, Austria etc
Finns	5 000 000		Finland, Sweden, Russia, Estonia
Estonians	1 000 000		Estonia
Mordvinians (Erzyas and Mokshas)	845 000	-22%	Russia
Udmurts	637 000	-11%	Russia
Maris	605 000	-6%	Russia
Zyryan Komis	293 000	-13%	Russia
Permian Komis	125 000	-15%	Russia
Karelians	93 000	-26%	Russia
Saamis	55 000 – 100 000		Norway, Sweden, Finland, Russia
Nenetses	41 000	+28%	Russia: Siberia
Khantys	29 000	+32%	Russia: Siberia
Csángos	20 000		Romania
Mansis	12 000	+50%	Russia: Siberia
Kvens	10 000		Norway
Vepsians	8 000	-23%	Russia
Selkups	4 000	+11%	Russia: Siberia
Setos	3 200	(not counted in 1989)	Russia, Estonia
Besermans	3 000	(not counted in 1989)	Russia
Nganasans	900	-31%	Russia: Siberia
Ingrians (Izhorians)	700	-12%	Russia
Enetses	300	+50%	Russia. Siberia
Livonians	250		Latvia
Votians	100	(not counted in 1989)	Russia

* The Russian Federation's 2002 population census figures were compared with those of the USSR's 1989 census for the Russian SFSR. It is not possible to trace the dynamics of other peoples in a uniform way because of the absence, inadequacy or dissimilarity of the available data.

Documents of the Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe and of the European Parliament on Finno-Ugric peoples (see: <http://assembly.coe.int/>):

Resolution 1171 (1998). Endangered Uralic minority cultures

Recommendation 1521 (2001). Csango minority culture in Romania

Recommendation 1775 (2006) Situation of Finno-Ugric and Samoyed peoples

Doc. 8126. 2 June 1998. Endangered uralic minority cultures. Report. Committee on Culture and Education. Rapporteur: Mrs Tytti Isohookana-Asunmaa, Finland, Liberal, Democratic and Reformers' Group.

Doc. 11087 26 October 2006. Situation of Finno-Ugric and Samoyed Peoples. Report. Committee on Culture, Science and Education Rapporteur: Mrs Katrin Saks, Estonia, Socialist Group.

More information:

NGO Fenno-Ugria Foundation: <http://www.fennougria.ee>

Youth Association of Finno-Ugric Peoples: <http://www.mafun.org/>

The Endangered Uralic peoples (Short reference guide, 1996) <http://www.suri.ee/eup>

The Finno-Ugric Culture Centre of the Russian Federation (in Russian): <http://www.finnougoria.ru/>