

# Estonia Today

## THE TEACHING OF ESTONIAN LITERATURE IN ESTONIA'S RUSSIAN-LANGUAGE SECONDARY SCHOOLS

*On 1 September 2007, Estonia's Russian-language secondary schools (grades 10 through 12) will have to begin teaching at least one subject in Estonian at the 10th grade level, and the government recommends that this subject be Estonian literature. This transition affects, primarily, the nation's 58 state run Russian-language secondary schools. The aim of this transition to the teaching of subjects in Estonian is to make sure that young people, whose mother tongue is not Estonian, will become proficient in the country's official language, so as to ensure that they will be equally well prepared as well as have the same choices and opportunities, when going on to Estonian institutes of higher education, and later, when competing in the job market, as the graduates of Estonian-language secondary schools.*

*These changes do not affect Russian-language primary education (grades 1 through 9), that the Estonian state ensures and finances to an extent rarely seen in other European countries. All 58 Russian-language secondary schools have confirmed their readiness to begin teaching Estonian literature in Estonian. In addition to them, the five Russian-language private schools have expressed their wish to start teaching Estonian literature in Estonian, although, according to the law, they are not obligated to do so.*

- *In Estonian comprehensive schools it is possible to obtain an education, till the completion of the secondary level, in either Estonian or Russian. During the 2006/2007 school year it was possible to study in Russian in 102 elementary and secondary schools (municipal and private schools combined), 63 of which offered a Russian-language secondary level education.*
- *In addition to Estonian-language and Russian-language schools, it is also possible, in Estonia, to study in English and Finnish (in private schools). In the state-run Tallinn Jewish School, where the language of study is Russian, there are, supported by the state of Israel, classes for the teaching of Hebrew as well as Jewish history and culture. The languages of other minorities can also be studied, as a separate subject, in many schools.*
- *During the 2006/2007 school year, about 33,300 students attended Russian-language comprehensive schools, which constitutes about 20% of the whole Estonian comprehensive school student body.*
- *About 3,540 teachers are employed in Russian-language schools.*
- *During the 2006/2007 school year, more than 3,800 students attended ninth grade in Russian-language comprehensive schools. Since, usually, a third of the ninth graders attending Russian-language schools continue their education in trade/vocational schools, about 2,500 students will be participating in the launching of the transition to the teaching of one subject in Estonian.*
- *The majority of Russian-language schools in Estonia are already implementing partial teaching in Estonian, especially in the sphere of the humanities. Of the other-language schools, which have already implemented the teaching of some subject or subjects in Estonian, almost 70% plan to gradually increase this capacity.*

One of the main objectives of the Estonian educational system is to create a uniform community space where communication is based upon a language of intercourse that would, primarily, be the nation's official language - Estonian. In the context of communication between various nationalities, the broadening of general horizons as well as positive linguistic and cultural attitudes are essential. The younger generation of Estonia's ethnic minorities, that has received its secondary and higher education in Estonian, can thus, to a greater extent than ever before, be drawn into the cultural, political, and economic dialogue within the Estonian community.

Estonian schools, according to the Primary and Secondary School Act, are obligated to provide, in conjunction with the government and the local administration, students who are acquiring a primary education, whose mother tongue is other than the language in use at the school, with the opportunity of learning their own mother tongue. So as to ensure that those young people who are taking the big step towards adulthood, but whose mother tongue is not Estonian, have equal opportunities for obtaining a higher education, and for coping successfully in the job market,

the transition will be started on 1 September 2007 to teach some subjects, in the Russian-language secondary schools, in Estonian.

The preparations for the transition to teaching in Estonian were begun years ago -- the Primary and Secondary School Act was adopted already in 1997. The practical bases for the transition were the amendments, approved by the Government on 7 June 2007, to the "National Primary and Secondary School Curriculum". The transition will start with the teaching of one subject in Estonian, with one subject being added every following school year. The transition process has been designed to be flexible, and the final objective of the transition is to teach, in the previously Russian-language secondary schools, 60% of the curriculum in the official language, that is, in Estonian.

The students' ability to acquire knowledge in the subjects which will be taught in Estonian will not suffer -- experiences with bilingual learning have shown that the knowledge acquired in the subjects studied, as well as language skills in the mother tongue, of children learning in another language do not differ from the knowledge and



skills of children studying in their mother tongue. The teachers are being appropriately prepared with both refresher and language courses.

According to the National Curriculum, literature is taught in secondary schools by means of 9 courses, of which Estonian literature is one, consisting of 35 lessons. Spreading this out over the school year, this means 1 lesson a week. The schools are best prepared to cope with the transition to teaching in Estonian by means of this particular Estonian literature course – an appropriate text book has been prepared, and more than 60 teachers have received suitable training. At the same time though, schools do have the right to launch their transition process with another compulsory subject of their choice. The objective was to make the starting of the transition process as flexible as possible. All 63 Russian-language secondary schools have confirmed their readiness for the transition.

The transition action plan calls for 5 subjects – Estonian literature, social studies, geography, history of music, Estonian history – plus 2 subjects to be chosen by each individual school, which will, although gradually, all be eventually thought in Estonian. The decision concerning in what order these transition subjects will begin to be taught in Estonian will be made by the end of 2007, based upon the principle that the quality of education in Russian-language schools must not suffer. The transition to teaching in Estonian may be carried out at a quicker pace if the particular school in question, along with its students and teachers, of course, is ready to do so. The Ministry of Education and Research has also begun the extensive training of the teachers of Russian-language schools in connection with the other aforementioned school subjects.

Actually, by now, most Estonian Russian-language schools have already begun to teach 1 to 5 subjects in Estonian. During the school year 2006/2007, some subject or subjects were taught in Estonian, in most Russian-language schools. And of the other-language schools where teaching in Estonian has already been implemented, almost 70% plan to gradually increase this capacity.

### **The support of the target groups for the transition**

The students' round table discussion that took place in 2006 concerning education showed that, generally speaking, young people had a positive attitude towards the plans for transition, and that, in their opinion, the Education Ministry had made a good choice concerning the subjects to be eventually taught in Estonian. The principals in the Russian-language schools have confirmed their conviction that the teaching of subjects in Estonian will improve the students' Estonian language skills, will broaden the students' educational opportunities, and will increase the competitiveness of the graduates of Russian-language schools in the job market.

The evaluations of the Russian-language schools themselves of their readiness to switch over to Estonian-language instruction have been noted twice, in November of 2004 and 2006. The aim of the two studies was to determine the existing situation concerning Estonian-language instructing in Russian-language schools, as well as the attitudes of various interest groups towards the upcoming transition of 2007, and their actual readiness for its implementation. The interviewees of the research projects were the principals as well as the directors of studies and the teachers of

specific subjects, plus the students of the Russian-language schools.

In the course of the time span between the two studies, there was an improvement in the prevailing attitude, in the Russian-language schools, towards the transition as well as an increase in the readiness for it. There had been an improvement in the teachers' self-evaluation of their Estonian language skills and their readiness to teach their subject in Estonian. The percentage of teachers in Russian-language schools who teach in Estonian had increased. There had been an increase in the willingness to admit that there is a necessity for the transition to Estonian-language instruction in Russian-language schools, and in the positive attitude towards this. If, in 2004, 83% of the principals of Russian-language schools had found teaching in Estonian to be "very necessary" or "rather necessary", then, by 2006, this percentage had increased to 94%.

Although the general environment, for the transition to Estonian-language teaching, had essentially improved, there, nevertheless, still were several concerns that needed to be dealt with. Just as in 2004, both the principals and the teachers felt, in 2006, that the most negative aspect of the transition to Estonian-language instruction would be the increased burden and psychological stress placed upon both students and teachers.

### **State support for the transition**

So as to be able to implement the transition process, on the governmental level, most efficiently, the Department for the Education of Ethnic Minorities was created in the Ministry of Education and Research in 2006. The Ministry of Education drew up an Action Plan for the transition to partial Estonian-language teaching. The Action Plan was approved by the Government on 9 March 2006. According to the Plan, the main activities are the conducting of appropriate refresher courses for the teachers of specific subjects and the principals of the Russian-language secondary schools, the formulating of a teachers' motivation system, as well as the obtaining of appropriate textbooks and teaching aids. The Action Plan calls for the financing of the Estonian-language teaching programme, till 2010, to the extent of 70 million EEK (4,5 million EUR).

One of the most extensive undertakings that is helping to prepare the Russian-language secondary schools for the transition is the project "The Increasing of Teachers' Competitiveness in Other-Language Schools", which was established with the support of the European Social Fund. The project, which began in April 2006, is to last until June 2008. It is being carried out by the Non-Estonians' Integration Foundation, in conjunction with the Ministry of Education and Research, as well as in partnership with various institutes of higher education. In April, the Foundation established a cooperative relationship with various universities so as to conduct refresher courses for 240 teachers of specific subjects and 60 advisors. This free-of-charge schooling offers teachers a chance to improve their subject-specific Estonian language skills, as well as includes a course dealing with the principles of teaching a subject in a foreign language and also with the concept of multicultural education as such.

The studies of non-Estonian speaking university students are being helped along with a linguistic support programme. The methodology of bilingual studying is being formulated for specific subjects. As are appropriate pedagogical materials for teachers working in a

multicultural environment, that apply to the humanities and social sciences, as well as to natural science and the exact sciences. And teachers, whose mother tongue is not Estonian, are constantly receiving appropriate follow-up training and refresher courses, including coaching in practical Estonian.

From the fall of 2007 on, there will be three national regional counselling centres for secondary schools and universities. In the fall, a monitoring system will also be implemented, which will follow the development of the transition process in the schools by coordinating and analysing the feed-back from the project, as well as provide counselling for the schools.

Additional information:

- Ministry of Education and Research  
<http://www.hm.ee/index.php?046922>
  - Non-Estonians' Integration Foundation  
[www.meis.ee](http://www.meis.ee)
  - Language Immersion Centre  
<http://www.kke.ee/index.php?lang=eng>
  - National Examinations and Qualifications Centre  
[www.ekk.edu.ee](http://www.ekk.edu.ee)
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