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REVITALISING LANGUAGES AND SAFEGUARDING CULTURAL DIVERSITY

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D2.1 Report on past and present language policies including reasons for becoming an endangered language



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1 Executive Summary

This deliverable aims to present a report on the dynamics of the past and present language policies that shape the use, preservation, and revitalization of the five RISE UP minoritized language communities, namely Aranese, Aromanian, Burgenland Croatian, Cornish and Seto, across diverse contexts in Europe.

The report draws upon Spolsky's (2004, 2009; 2019) approach to language policy, foregrounding language management and paying lesser attention to the two other dimensions of his model, namely language practices and language ideologies. Yet, language management is approached from a broad perspective, covering sociocultural, geographical, political, economic and linguistic factors. As a result, minoritized languages are situated within historical and contemporary contexts, contributing to the analysis of how past and present events such as colonization, state-building, and migration have shaped present-day language communities. The present-day situation of minoritized languages and their speakers is overviewed as well. The report offers data on speaker numbers, language proficiency, and demographic shifts, including migration trends and population density. It also addresses the extent of language use in public domains, as well as the availability of language products. In its analysis of current language policies, the report considers multiple governance levels, from local to state to international, and highlights how legal frameworks, state-level decisions, EU policies, and the efforts of international organizations shape the communities.

The report is based on a literature review and community insights, mostly provided in the shape of responses made available to the researchers. The report has adopted the Seto case in Estonia as a starting point. Other cases have been used to elaborate on the points made.

The report indicates that a great deal of past and present policies have impacted language use and transmission in the communities, and as such they have worked as language policies, i.e. educational and regional policies are not intended to change language use but they often do. The preservation and revitalization of minoritized languages have to be understood within a broader context of historical marginalization, shifting demographics, and contested identities. These communities have faced the pressures of assimilation and symbolic recognition, while navigating the complexities of language legitimacy, shifting borders, and institutional neglect. Language policies aimed at revitalization and maintenance have to address lived realities, structural inequalities, and community-specific aspirations.

The deliverable is linked to other deliverables of the RISE-UP project, including D2.2 Report on need for further research and as such it contributes to the EU policy goals of linguistic diversity, cultural heritage protection and social inclusion in multilingual societies.

Contents

1	Executive Summary	4
2	Introduction	8
2.1	Overview: what is (minority) language and language policy?	8
1.2	Relation to other tasks and deliverables	8
3	Historical and contemporary context	10
3.1	Natural and political geography	10
3.2	Migration: outward and inward	12
3.3	Languages: cognate languages, language contacts, and legacy standards	13
3.4	Naming the ethnic group.....	15
3.5	Cultural, socio-economic, and political developments in neighbouring communities.....	15
3.6	Activism	17
3.7	Narratives of linguistic, kinship and other allegiances	18
3.8	Language as heritage, language as commodity.....	20
4	Current language and speaker situation.....	22
4.1	Speaker situation.....	22
4.2	Language situation	24
5	Current language policies	27
5.1	Local governance and language	27
5.2	State language policies: language acts, legal debates and law dynamics	28
5.3	Other state policies which work as language policies	30
5.4	The EU policies and other international organizations and initiatives related to language	32
6	Conclusions	35
	References	36

Tables

Table 1. D2.1 Input from other tasks and deliverables.....	9
Table 2. D2.1 Output for other tasks and deliverables	9

Acronyms & Abbreviations

Term	Description
GDPR	General Data Protection Regulation
D	Deliverable
T	Task
WP	Work Package
LP	Language Policy
L1	First Language
MOI	Medium of Instruction
ICH	Intangible Cultural Heritage

2 Introduction

2.1 Overview: what is (minority) language and language policy?

The endangerment of indigenous and minority languages is partly as a result of past and ongoing policies that have suppressed and/or marginalized these communities and failed to support the use of their indigenous and/or minoritized language. In this report, we adopt the approach advocated by Haley De Korne (2021: 3–4), in which she argues that “minority language should not be understood as an objective label relating to a low number of speakers or reduced territory, but rather a socio-political condition defined by a lower or minoritized status relative to other languages and subject to constant negotiation and shift”. Specific to human condition, i.e. “the inescapable tension between linguistic diversity on the one hand, and societal (e.g. political, economic, environmental) interdependence on the other”, language has a myriad of definitions (Peled 2014: 301). At the minimum, language has been conceptualised as a system of cognitive representation inherent to the human species, abstract entity attributed as a symbol to a whole culture or country or a form of action (for an overview see Cook 2010). By and large there are binaries of structural (or positivist) and post-structural or essentialist and constructivist understandings of language (and language acquisition) (Garcia et al. 2016; De Korne 2021). Depending on how language is understood, the definition of language policy varies too. The authors of the report adopt Bernard Spolsky’s (2004, 2009; 2019) approach to language policy, foregrounding language management, but paying lesser attention to the two other dimensions of his model, namely language practices and language ideologies.

Given the vast variability of language situations and the limited scope for broad generalizations in the scholarly field of language policy, the report uses the Seto case in Estonia as a starting point, incorporating examples from other language communities covered by the project: Cornish in the United Kingdom, Aranese in Spain, Burgenland Croatian in Austria, and Aromanian in Romania, Greece, North Macedonia, Bulgaria, Serbia, and Albania.

1.2 Relation to other tasks and deliverables

Deliverable D2.1 engages with WP2’s objectives of giving an overview of language policy landscapes, considering selected case studies and mapping stakeholders in the area of language (and) minorities at an (inter)national level. WP2 is connected to other work packages by serving as the theoretical underpinning of the RISE UP project. The agreement of key concepts for the RISE UP project in spring 2024 was led by University of Tartu team member Christiana Sammal. These concepts (new speakers, linguistic risk taking, linguistic safe spaces, translingual practice) emerged from our tasks T2.1 Analysis of past and present language policies and T2.2 Identification of stakeholders in the field of language and minority policies, as well as T3.1 Analysis of reasons for becoming an endangered language and T4.2 Evaluation of identified practices. Key concepts help create a unified theoretical environment for the whole project.

Our deliverable D2.1 is also interconnected with other work packages for expertise on the pilot case studies (Aranese, Aromanian, Burgenland Croatian, Cornish) connected to other participating institutions. Our work on language policies is guided by the belief that language varieties exist in various socio-political contexts and the ways to empower linguistic communities should stem from

attention to the speakers' needs and opinions. Therefore, D2.1 is informed by the input from our partners for expertise on the social, political and historical contexts of case study language varieties.

University of Tartu team's task T2.3 Identification of need for further research and the related deliverable D2.2 is also informed by mutual collaboration of all work packages. More specifically, the D2.1 will feed into D2.2, but it will also depend on the input from T3.1 (Analysis of reasons for becoming an endangered language), T3.2 (Definition of an European language preservation ecosystem) and T3.3 (Development of guidelines) as well as T4.2 (Evaluation of identified practices) for spotting the gaps in research that need to be addressed in further studies.

WP2 field data among the Seto community as well as our community expertise acquired through the knowledge and networks of our community representative Ode Oras also provide input for WP5 local deployment T5.2 involvement of local cultural and creative sector and T5.3 case study piloting. Likewise, WP6 Design of digital toolset receives input from WP2 case study expertise and WP7 Dissemination and stakeholder engagement is supported by our engagement with the Seto community and University of Tartu dissemination efforts.

Receives inputs from:

Table 1. D2.1 Input from other tasks and deliverables

Deliverable	Due Date	Input for D2.1
T2.1	/	Analysis of past and present language policies
T2.2	/	Identification of stakeholders in the field of language and minority policies
T3.1	/	Analysis of reasons for becoming an endangered language
T4.1	/	Stock taking: Ethnographic research on practices, tools and methods
T5.1	/	Identification of pilot case studies and groups of local stakeholders

Provides outputs to:

Table 2. D2.1 Output for other tasks and deliverables

Deliverable	Due Date	Output from D2.1
D2.2	31.1.2026	Report on need for further research
D3.2	30.11.2025	Guidelines for language revitalisation
M7	30.7.2025	Policy round table

3 Historical and contemporary context

Below are the key conditions, processes and past policies that have led to the indigenous languages – Seto, Aromanian, Aranese, Cornish, and Burgenland Croatian – becoming endangered.

3.1 Natural and political geography

The settlement area, living in peripheral and marginalized spaces

All of the communities have settled down in Europe, and their settlement area has been located away from power centres: the region in which the Setos traditionally live has historically been a marginalized space, hundreds of kilometres away from Tallinn and Riga, meaning that it has been considered on the receiving end of efforts to classify and civilize. Similarly, Cornish speakers are mostly found away from London, Aromanian away from any of the capitals of states in which the community finds itself, Aranese away from Madrid or Barcelona, and Burgenland Croatian away from Vienna, Budapest or Zagreb. Furthermore, the Aranese speaking community lives in a mountainous area, as Val d'Aran is a valley located in the Central Pyrenees; it can be considered a geographically marginalized area, as it is surrounded by high peaks, which are covered in snow in winter (meaning lack of accessibility in the past) (Visit Pirineus, 2025). On the other hand, the valley "offers a 'gateway' through the mountains in the centre of the Pyrenees" (Subirà and Huquet 2000:141). Cornwall's natural border with Devon is that of the River Tamar, which forms the divide between the Celtic Cornwall and the rest of England (Encyclopædia Britannica, 2025). In the case of the Aromanian community, it has either moved around itself, or was forcefully displaced to different areas following the Balkan Wars in the late 19th and early 20th century (Council of Europe, 1997). Romania (or Dobruja) is the most recent place that the Aromanian community has settled in, between 1925 and 1930 (Clark, 2015). The temporality of their settlement adds a further layer of marginality, having brought about disruptions in the way of life on many levels. The Burgenland Croats have faced forced migration as well when they were evacuated by their Hungarian landlords from the borderlands near the Ottoman Empire to Burgenland in the 16th century (Breu, 1970).

However, living in peripheral and marginalized spaces has not only resulted in social, cultural, and economic challenges and obstacles, but has also provided the communities with the space needed to maintain their way of life and foster strong community ties, at least for certain periods of time. For example, an anthropologist Aet Annist (2015) writes that the Setomaa has been a space where cultural practices are both maintained and reinterpreted, serving as a site of continuity and change.

Imperialism/colonialism

Imperialism in Europe has had significant internal impacts on indigenous and minoritized communities. The Setos, the Cornish, the Aranese, the Burgenland Croats and the Aromanians have lived under various imperial rules throughout the centuries. The Setos lived under the rule of the Russian empire for the largest part of their existence, the Cornish under the British Crown, the Aranese under Spanish rule, the Aromanian under Ottoman rule, and the Burgenland Croats under the rule of the Habsburgs. The imperial policies towards indigenous communities have differed across empires as well as in different times; nevertheless the impact of imperial policies tend to resemble the colonial experiences outside of Europe, for example, evoking territorial domination, cultural suppression, and marginalization. Among the communities considered here, the Croats in Burgenland may have had a

different experience, as they were in the same socio-political position as the Germans in their settlement area from the 16th century to 1918 (Jordan 2016).

However, the imperial rules have also had (incidental) positive benefits for the preservation of indigenous communities. For example, cultural preservation through autonomy charters as is the case with the Aranese community in Val d'Aran under the Crown of Aragon (Turell 2001), or the Burgenland Croats in the Habsburg lands (Ščukanec 2014). Empires might have provided the communities with access to infrastructure and economic opportunities, for instance, Aromanians were well-established traders in the Ottoman Empire, and Cornwall, which has been open to the sea and a base for ports. This has brought the community in closer contact with the migration of people and goods, incl. technologies; Cornwall is also an area which was historically home to mining. This means that the impact of the geographical isolation of Cornwall has been reduced by adding infrastructure to cater to imperial needs.

Nationalism and nation-state building

Nationalism has further contributed to the marginalization and assimilation of minoritized language communities, in the case of the Setos due to the dominance of the Estonians. For example, indigenous communities have been marginalized with the narrative that they speak only a dialect. The Setos in Estonia have been considered to speak a dialect of Estonian, and the Aromanians in Greece have been called Greeks who speak a dialect instead of being a separate community with their own language (Kahl 2003). The ideal of “one nation = one language” has led at times to forbidding home languages from schools or simply excluding them from formal education (Skutnabb-Kangas 2000). The centralization efforts of nation states have led at times to a decrease in the political autonomy of communities which have enjoyed it earlier, as is the case with Aranese (Boletín Oficial del Estado, 2018). Similarly, the rise of nationalist ideas in the Habsburg Empire led to discrimination against non-dominant groups such as the Burgenland Croats, and the spread of nationalism in Austria led to their assimilation into more dominant groups (Jordan 2016). However, indigenous nationalism has emerged as a response (Murphy 2004, see also below), for instance Cornish activism has led to their recognition as a national minority (Saltern 2011). See also Section 2.6.

Shifting borders and their permeability

Living on the margins of polities has also meant that these areas have been settings for conflicts between different polities throughout history. Such conflicts have shaped the borders and the allegiances of these communities, also leading to their divisions. During the 20th century, in particular, significant political territorial changes and developments took place in Europe. For example, the border between the Republic of Estonia and the Soviet Union was first drawn in 1920. Two decades later, the territory of Estonia was incorporated into the Soviet Union and the state border no longer existed. Finally, the end of the Soviet Union, the restoration of the Republic of Estonia, and the accompanying border re-drawings in the early 1990s meant that the Seto land, called Setomaa, was split between Russia and Estonia. It had significant consequences for locals, everyday lives, impacting land ownership and the feasibility of visiting relatives, friends, and cemeteries (see also Saar 2003). Similarly, the Croatian-speaking community found itself split in two after the treaty of Trianon was signed in 1920 and the decision on the separation and border between Austria and Hungary was made (Ablonczy, 2020). The Aranese community was divided between two states even earlier: the Franco-Spanish border was established by the Treaty of the Pyrenees in 1659. Following that year there were slight

adjustments to the border, however, none of these changed the situation of Aranese (Cooper, 1970). Still, being divided between two states has had a considerable impact on the community as the two states have diverging stances regarding minoritized languages. As far as Aromanian is concerned, the history of the Balkan states is known to have been tumultuous, with frequently changing borders.

State borders may carry different meanings for communities, depending on their permeability. On the one hand, the current Estonian and Russian border that runs through the historical settlement area of the Seto community is also the border between the EU and Russia. It is a strict border as its crossing is difficult and generally inaccessible and it is a firm restriction on cross-border cultural exchange. On the other hand, the EU integration has softened the border effect on communities living within its borders since cross-border cooperation is enabled to a great extent. The movement of people and goods is much freer within the Schengen area in which the Aranese community live.

Within states, borders have been used by nation states to cultivate and spread the dominant cultures and languages, thus indigenous communities might have been left in unfamiliar political units that include more territories and people than the original settlement area and the indigenous community.

- **Political marginalization has shaped both the preservation and decline of the communities. It is paradoxical: while marginalization has led to isolating and suppressing these communities, it has also contributed to preserving certain aspects of their culture and language by shielding them from rapid assimilation. These communities have experienced life on the margins also from the perspective of the political division of the world due to the fact that borders, which might run through settlement areas, are not just geographic but also cultural, political, and psychological dividers.**

3.2 Migration: outward and inward

Out-migration from the marginalized settlement areas has been common in these communities. To some extent, out-migration has been motivated by better opportunities elsewhere, migrating from rural to wealthier urbanized areas. The Setos, for example, moved to urban cities after WWII, during the Soviet times. Moreover, these indigenous communities have also experienced forced migration in the past. In addition to the forced displacements of the Aromanians, the Setos were displaced along with other Estonian residents during the Soviet deportations during and after WWII. The Seto out-migration has led to the decline in the traditional Seto culture and language skills as, in many cases, maintaining strong community ties has become difficult in new settlement areas (that are often big towns) and assimilation to dominant national cultures has occurred. Outward migration scenarios are similar in other communities.

To some extent, in-migration to the settlement areas of indigenous communities exists. For example, Seto revival has attracted people to Setomaa, both those with Seto origins as well as those who have no Seto roots in their families. This has brought some new speakers to Setomaa (who previously had little exposure to a minority language, but consciously decided to adopt it as a regular means of communication) (see also O'Rourke and Pujolar 2015: 1). Similarly, Val d'Aran has been attractive to immigrants due to industries and available workplaces. In the case of Val d'Aran, it has been mountain tourism which has brought workers to the area, mostly seasonal workers (Vaccaro and Beltran, 2009). Immigration into Cornwall is also currently strongly driven by tourism, but also by second-home ownership. However, during the 18th and 19th centuries, migration to Cornwall was due to work in

the mining industry. Such labour immigration has several consequences for the local communities. First, (seasonal) workers might have little interest to learn the indigenous language as they can get by in the region using more widespread languages. Second, due to intermarriages the indigenous language, for example Aranese, is spoken less at home. Finally, both Val d'Aran and Cornwall have undergone economic transformations, becoming post-industrial rural places for (second) home ownership (Weeks, 2022; Vaccaro and Beltran, 2009)¹.

- **Both out-migration and in-migration have reshaped the demographics and cultural landscapes of indigenous communities. Out-migration has often led to weakened community cohesion and language loss due to assimilation pressures in new environments. In-migration has reshaped the demographic and cultural landscapes of indigenous communities and their settlement areas. Revival movements and new speakers may bring renewed interest in local traditions, yet economic shifts and limited linguistic integration of newcomers can erode the everyday use of indigenous languages.**

3.3 Languages: cognate languages, language contacts, and legacy standards

The situation of indigenous languages is closely tied to how it is understood what a language is and where its borders are. The definition of what constitutes a language is oftentimes influenced by colonial and national pasts as well as the dominant conceptualizations, theories and schools in linguistics. Within essentialist approaches to languages, there are two ways to talk about languages as separate entities either by stressing their similarities or differences. For constructive approaches, languages are practices and not entities. Neighboring languages in particular can either constitute a language continuum or are either way in contact with each other, be it via the spread of written word and education, conquest, or migration (Myers-Scotton 2002; Auer 2021: 147; for the distinction between essentialist and constructivist approaches, see De Korne 2021). There are two types of factors which may alter a language and produce contact-induced and standardisation-induced changes (e.g. Thomason and Kaufman 1988).

As a cognate language of Estonian, the Seto language shares the innovations which have made South Estonian varieties differ from all the other Finnic languages. Its core vocabulary is typically South Estonian (Koponen 1998), but especially for modern phenomena, vocabulary is shared and borrowed from common Estonian. There are a considerable number of Russian loanwords in Seto (Must 2000). Both borrowing from Russian and being followers of the Orthodox religion have contributed to the Othering of Seto speakers.

Language contact situation

Aromanian is an Eastern Romance language, which is close to Romanian, but not similar to Albanian, Serbian, Greek, Bulgarian or Macedonian. Based on the data given in the Aromanian report, one can assume that the Romanian state might consider Aromanians to be “români de pretutindeni” (“Romanians from everywhere”) (Ministerul Justiției 2013) in part due to the relatedness of the two

¹ There are some policies to limit outsiders' access/ownership to those minority speaking areas on the way. For example, Cornwall Council is to charge double tax on second homes to free more housing for local people (BBC April 2, 2025). <https://www.bbc.com/news/articles/cj9ejjyeeelo>

languages. In comparison, it is easier to draw a demarcation between Aromanian and languages such as Greek, Albanian or Slavic ones. A similar situation can be seen with Cornish, which is a Celtic language, as opposed to English, which is Germanic. Whilst both languages have been in contact for centuries, Cornish still stands out as distinctively different.

Thus, borrowing and shared vocabulary make the borders between languages less distinct. Often, this is used as a counterargument by policy makers when minority speakers attempt to claim their rights as speakers of distinctive languages. Another similarly important factor is that minority language speakers are often multilinguals who also speak the respective majority or dominant languages, which undermines the urgency of language loss. Furthermore, “social difference and discrimination may be based on any feature of communication, and occur within as well as between speech communities” (De Korne 2021:4), meaning that some speech varieties and speakers may have acquired a higher status as L1 speakers, for example.

To foster the transfer and spread of minoritized languages, which are often spoken rather than written, standardization and modernization efforts are also included in the toolbox of revitalization (Costa, De Korne and Lane 2017; Darquennes and Vandenbussche 2015; Hornsby and Ó Murchadha 2021). There are number of factors, including legacy orthographies which have an impact on the degree to which new standards are accepted (Jones and Mooney 2017: 30). The speakers of minoritized languages, who are often multilinguals and educated in the orthographic conventions of the standards varieties of the majority languages, might have internalized the dominant models of linguistic (phonological, variational, prescriptive) awareness and resist new graphizations (ibid.; cf. Lane 2015; Costa, De Korne and Lane 2017).

Until the end of 19th century the Seto language was only used orally. The first written texts included the collections of Seto folk songs (1904–1907), the readers (1922, 1924), and the Gospels of Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John (1926). During the Soviet period, written texts in Seto were scarcer, but examples include the humor pages or the Seto language samples in the collection of Estonian folklore. Since the late 1980s the numbers and genres of published texts have been on the rise. In 2010 the NGO Seto Institute was founded. Besides other activities, it started publishing the series of Seto readings (e.g. the 2nd edition of the Gospels, a retold version of the epic Peko, a songbook, the titles of songs, fiction, poetry, etc.). Since 1995, the Seto language newspaper “Setomaa” has been published; its spelling has varied. Though given the (one-to-one) written representation of Seto-specific phonemes (e.g. extensive palatalization, glottal stop), for example, there are a number of different graphization choices made which include diacritics and letters which are not used in Standard Estonian orthography, but are used in different outlets (media, readers, series) (Iva 2025). It is not known whether some of those are adjusted to the needs of new speakers or how native speakers accept those.

In the Cornish community, perceptions of new speakers reflect ideological tensions around authenticity, standardization, and linguistic authority. Davies-Deacon (2016) notes that while all current speakers of Cornish are technically ‘new speakers’ due to the language’s historical break in transmission, debates persist around which forms of Cornish are deemed authentic or legitimate. These debates have often centered on orthographic preferences, with different revival movements promoting competing standards and asserting the authenticity of their chosen variety. Sayers (2012) highlights that revival leaders, who are often educated elites, have promoted norms that can marginalize speakers whose usage deviates from the preferred, often new standards. These dynamics reflect deeper struggles over linguistic authority in the absence of native speakers.

- **The boundaries between what is considered a language and what is not are often fluid and shaped by historical contact and sociopolitical forces. This ambiguity is sometimes leveraged to delegitimize the claims of indigenous language speakers, especially when speakers are multilingual and exposed to dominant linguistic norms.**

3.4 Naming the ethnic group

The act of naming the ethnos, whether through endonymic or exonymic ethnonyms, is tied to power and recognition. The latter variation of the ethnonym might be radically different from the former (Koopman 2016: 259). Names are not mere labels but reflect and shape social status and visibility. There is a lack of consensus as to whether ethnonyms can be considered to be proper names, and what types of entities – race, nationality, geographical area, language, and religion – are described by ethnonyms (Koopmann 2016). In Estonian, ethnonyms are not proper nouns but rather they are considered appellations.

Seto (setu in standard Estonian) was initially an exonym, first used in writing in 1860 (Hartmann 1860 as cited in Koreinik et al. 2014:8), designated to describe people living in the border region of southeastern Estonia and northwestern Russia. Earlier, the Setos were referred to as Estonians of Pskov (die Pleskauer Esten in German). The Seto have been also labelled orthodox Estonians in the past, which might be an obscuring of their distinct identity. It is also a glottonym. Aromanians call themselves Armăni or Rămăni, but there are no indications as to how old this ethnonym is. It would seem that the exonym Vlah, however, comes from a Celtic tribal name which entered Slavic from Gothic and Latin and means “foreigner” or “Latin speaker” (Encyclopædia Britannica, n.d.).

Kernow and Kernewek are the Cornish name for Cornwall and the glottonym of Cornish, respectively. The English name Cornwall most likely comes from Proto-Celtic and Old English (“corn-” - horn, headland and “-wall” - foreigner, slave, Bretonic-speaker). Kernow in Cornish apparently comes from the same Proto-Celtic root of “corn-”. It is possible that the name also comes from the Celtic Cornovii tribe (“people of the horn”) (Online Etymology Dictionary, n.d.). Cornwall has a cognate in Brittany: Cornouaille, one of the nine historical regions of Brittany.

The ethnonyms have also been used as abusive terms, for example, The ethnonym ‘setu’ was used as an abusive term in the inter-war period (Jääts 2000) and still may have a pejorative meaning in contemporary spoken Estonian (cf. Sarv and Sarv 2003).

- **The acts of naming indigenous groups carry complex power dynamics, shaping how groups are perceived both by themselves and others. These names are not just descriptors or designators but markers of identity, recognition, and at times, especially when offensive (e.g. ethnic slurs), marginalization.**

3.5 Cultural, socio-economic, and political developments in neighbouring communities

Indigenous communities are affected by cultural, socio-economic, and political developments in both neighbouring dominant and in other minority communities. In all cases, such communities might not actually be neighbouring but form a mixed community.

A formative cultural landmark for the region and the Seto spiritual capital, the Russian Orthodox Petseri (Pskov-Pechory) Monastery was founded in the 15th century. Historically, the religious divide also drew a distinct socio-economic and mental border between the Eastern Orthodox Setos, whose farming land was owned by the Monastery, and their neighbouring Võro speakers who spoke a cognate vernacular but were Protestant Lutheran. In outsiders' accounts of the early 20th century, Setos were constructed through contrasting, yet mutually constitutive prisms. They were described in terms of backwardness, but at the same time the cultural authenticity and survival of their valuable "folk" past was foregrounded (and even exoticised), particularly emphasizing their singing traditions and song lore (cf. Kuutma 1996, 2004; Annist 2013; Kalkun 2014).

Since the second half of the 19th and up to the early 20th century, the gradual Estonian nation-building and emancipation process from Baltic German as well as Russian (incl. German and Russian language) dominance accentuated the role of standardized Estonian language. Consequently, the Estonian nation and standard Estonian were privileged to the detriment of regional and vernacular forms (see Raag 1999). Moreover, one of the most effective (state-building) actions of the newly independent state of Estonia was the plotting of village lands and the introduction of family names in Setomaa in the 1920s. Elsewhere in Estonia, the rural population had surnames by 1835. Before the abolition of serfdom in Russia in 1861, there were only a few Setos with family names; in 1920, 90% of Setos did not have a surname (Aabrams 2025). The Soviet era in the second half of the 20th century re-introduced the dominant role of the Russian language, which re-instated the active protective stance towards standardized Estonian by professional linguists and teachers. In their view, Estonian was considered an endangered language with less than a million speakers, two thirds of the country's population, whereas this ratio was considerably lower at the end of the Soviet era. Under these circumstances, dialects or spoken vernaculars or any language deviance became forbidden in schools, and mass media was published only in standard Estonian and Russian.

Another point that is worth highlighting is that a key aspect of the contemporary Seto situation centres around conservative Estonian nationalism, which, in great part, hinges upon (post)Soviet legacies of institutionalization of essentialized categories of ethnicity and native language (Slezkine 1994). This has been especially apparent in recent debates surrounding the Estonian census, a key political tool employing the right to name, categorize, and construct social reality accordingly (Hirsch 1997; Arel 2002). Statisticians and census experts refused to include Seto as an ethnic category in the 2011 Estonian census; and yet, activists were partially successful in lobbying to having Seto and other Estonian varieties included at all, though not as a language, but under the category "local language forms, dialects and sub-dialects" (Statistikaamet 2021). However, such vehement reluctance to give official approval is caused by the general denial of exceptions that may serve as catalyst to resuscitate claims for the official status of Russian, perceived as detrimental to the agenda of establishing Estonian as the official state language.

Big minorities tend to get more attention also elsewhere, for example, the Aromanians in Romania form such a small minority group that they are not really visible compared to other much bigger minority groups in Romania such as Hungarians, Roma, and Germans. Aranese, on the other hand, is largely supported by the Catalan autonomous community, perhaps as Catalan itself is already a minority language within the Spanish state.

- **Indigenous communities are shaped by complex cultural, political, and socio-economic dynamics also in relation to neighbouring groups, both dominant and minority, through**

shared spaces, religious and linguistic ties, and shifting political dynamics. These relationships can reinforce cultural boundaries but also lead to marginalization when dominant national narratives deny recognition.

3.6 Activism

(Local) language activism can be understood as a social (or political) project “that aims to counter language-related inequalities”, such as marginalised languages and speakers, “and may encompass many different actors, imaginaries, and actions” (De Korne 2021:1). There are varying forms of activism, advocacy, promotion and stance-taking which resist inequalities and/or imagine new avenues towards linguistic equality (ibid. 1). Language activism does not target language alone; it advocates against “many inequalities in which linguistic discrimination plays a role, including economic, political, gender, class and racialized forms of marginalization” (ibid. 3). Minority language movements, in their attempt to counteract language domination and shift or to revitalise language “both disrupt and make explicit connections between code(s) and identity(s)” (Jaffe 2007: np). Language activism may have many goals: advocating for the rights and opportunities of members of minoritized communities – including the right to learn *majority and global languages* (such as English, our italics) – revitalizing endangered languages, and fostering (indigenous) language education (ibid. 11).

The Seto Movement dates back to the national awakening and heritage movement of the late 1980s (Jääts 2000). An increase in awareness of Seto identity and in the political and cultural consolidation thereof can be observed in occasions in which the question of the Estonian and Russian border is raised, such as the collapse of the Soviet Union and the subsequent splitting of Setomaa (Runnel 2002, Jääts 2000; Saar 2003). Activists formed (or re-formed, as they narrated their activity as being a continuation of pre-war political organization) the Seto Congress, a representative body that meets every three years to “discuss and seek solutions to problems related to Setomaa cultural, economic, and political development” (Seto Kongress 2023). In 2002, the Seto Congress declared Setos a distinct ethnic group (*rahvas*) (Sarv and Sarv 2003). The claiming of Seto ethnic particularism is of consequence when accessing rights and privileges related to language, including participation in international indigenous language programmes, as discussed below. A salient contemporary milestone has been the founding of the NGO Seto Institute in 2010, whose goal is to coordinate and promote scholarly work on Setomaa and Seto culture, and share scholarly output with the wider public (Seto Instituut 2023). Another important development was the creation of Estonian Indigenous Languages Cooperation Council in 2020, largely a response to UNESCO’s 2019 proclamation of the International Decade of Indigenous Languages 2022-2032. In light of such a development, the inclination and rationale for the agenda of indigeneity, especially in the Seto case, need further elaboration to explain the instrumental political aspects and to explicate this stance from the Seto perspective.

In 2022, representatives of self-named indigenous communities in Estonia, namely Võro, Seto, Mulgi, Kihnu, and Kuusalu, issued the Värška Declaration, proclaiming the indigeneity of their speech practices (Uralic Centre 2022). First and foremost a response to the UNESCO 2019 proclamation of the 2022-2032 International Decade of Indigenous Languages, the document highlights the importance of revitalizing traditional communicative practices in Estonia within the context of international frameworks of indigeneity. It calls on the Estonian state to define indigenous languages legally and to commit to a national action plan within the UNESCO programme.

In addition, in 2022, the Seto Congress approved the Seto Language Development Plan, with a two-fold vision: 1) to maintain the number of Seto speakers within the coming ten years (2032); and 2) to achieve the recognition of Seto as an indigenous language both in Russia and Estonia. It outlines four development pathways: 1) popularization and support of Seto language, including increased presence of Seto in the public sphere, literature, art, music, and official usage; 2) Setomaa rural municipality's promotion of Seto language preservation; 3) full recognition of Seto language at state and international levels; 4) activities involving children as the key language planning measure.

Every year since 1993, the *Corsa Aran per sa lengua* race is organized to celebrate and defend the language (Marín 2011; cf. Korrika in the Basque Country). There are different organisations such as *Joenessa d'Aran* ('Youth of Aran') and *Lengua Viua* ('Living Language') whose aim is promoting Aran (Subirà and Huguet, 2000: 161).

The Cornish Revival (Dassergh Kernewek) was initiated with the release of Henry Jenner's *Handbook of the Cornish Language* (1904/2012). The revival of Cornish has been based on written materials, and it is currently spoken by around five hundred individuals, primarily in Cornwall and also, to a lesser degree, in the Isles of Scilly, with a number of diasporic speakers in Wales, London and across the world (Sayers et al. 2019; see also Ferdinand 2013, 2019). Cornish heritage has gained relevance in the context of the Celtic revival movements of the 19th and 20th centuries (see also Leersen 1996). Currently, the language is no longer linked to lower-status jobs as it was in the 18th century but is viewed as a powerful symbol of Cornish identity (George 2009).

Minority language activism shares similarities with other forms of social activism, suggesting that there will always be disagreements regarding group definitions and social ideals, whether in policy papers, classroom dynamics, or mainstream culture. De Korne sums this up well (2021: 211-212):

There are some common ways that activists engage in representing, connecting, and creating resources, events, spaces, people, and communicative practices, such as positive representations of **Indigenous language speakers** and communicative practices, and creation of learning spaces and/or materials. There are also differences shaped by contextual factors such as the social positioning of actors and the constraints and affordances of time and visibility. These include tendencies towards production of rapid, mobile resources, versus slow, place-based structures.

- **Language activism operates at the intersection of a quest for self-determination, political recognition, and resistance to marginalisation. It is an effort to reclaim space for minoritized languages and their speakers within broader national and international frameworks.**

3.7 Narratives of linguistic, kinship and other allegiances

There are narratives used to align a community with a larger linguistic family or ethnolinguistic kinship, often based on shared ancestry. Such narratives shape how indigenous communities are imagined, grouped and rated: are languages represented as parts of a (numerically) bigger phenomenon (*pars pro toto*) which may or may not support speakers' identity building and cross-border cooperation on language revitalization. Emphasizing the linguistic or ethnic affiliation of a group is tied to identity politics, nation-building, and language preservation, like pointing out that the Seto are Finno-Ugric, or that Aranese is a variety of Occitan, or that Aromanians speak a Romance language. For example,

emphasizing that the Seto speak a Finno-Ugric language links them to Estonian nationhood and the broader Uralic language family. It gives the language some legitimacy and ethnolinguistic importance. Estonia's support for Seto heritage is partly rooted in this shared linguistic ancestry. But it can also blur their distinctiveness: the Seto have been seen as just speakers of a dialect of Estonian or as a subgroup of Estonians, not as a culturally unique people, undermining the case for separate identity or any kind of autonomy.

Similarly, framing Cornish as a Celtic language gives it cultural prestige and connects it to broader pan-Celtic activism, which has helped with revitalization efforts. The idea of Celtic connection is important for Cornish, as mentioned previously. There is less cooperation in the Occitan-speaking areas nowadays and there is no certain body to make that happen. The 1960s saw the emergence of an Occitan movement (Contreras Romero, 2006); however, little seems to have been achieved by it. Despite the lack of cooperation in comparison to the other language communities presented in this report, the flag of Val d'Aran still shows its connection and belonging to the Occitan family by including the cross of Toulouse, which is the symbol of Occitania. Joubert (2015:185) found that "the building of a 'trans-border' Occitan community has the potential to encourage a brotherly sense of solidarity, but [Aranese] speakers do not identify with such an abstract community". However, there is a legendary pop-folk band Nadau from Béarn which enjoys popularity also across the border in Spain; the band is argued to be "a representative of a New Regionalism in which border cultures and identities are celebrated within New European constructs" (Weston 2012, abstract).

Focusing on the example of Cornish, this emerged as a distinct language during the early medieval era (the 9th-10th centuries), as political ties between Wales and Cornwall weakened (Deacon 2007). Although Cornish began to wane in eastern Cornwall due to the increasing influence of English during the late Middle Ages, it was the primary language spoken by approximately three-quarters of the population in Cornwall until the early modern period (Sayers et al. 2019). From its decline around the late 18th century until the 20th century, Cornish was preserved by a small group of dedicated advocates.

Seto activists and others who identify as Seto commonly employ the discourse of Seto-ness as part of a larger indigenous Finno-Ugric world, to which belong the so-called kindred peoples, based on linguistic grouping, including Baltic Finns (speaking Estonian, Finnish, Karelian, Izhorian, Liv, Veps, Votian), Saami, Volga Finns (speaking Mari, Moksha, Erzya), Permians (Komi, Udmurt), Hungarians, and Ugrians (Khanty, Mansi). This claim has a salient transnational aspect that has become particularly instrumental for Setos and the Seto identity in the past decades, namely indigeneity and Finno-Ugric kinship preceding and transcending nation-states. An institution of World Congresses of Finno-Ugric Peoples has been established, and instrumental guidelines have been adopted in the Declaration of Fundamental Principles, Aims and Objectives of Cooperation of Finno-Ugric Peoples of the World (Fenno-Ugria, nd.). It is note-worthy that the identification factor for those geographically widely dispersed and distant groups is based on linguistic affinities, originally established by academics. In Estonia, activities and initiatives in this framework are led by a prominent and partly governmentally subsidized organization named Fenno-Ugria – an umbrella non-profit organization dedicated to cooperation with kindred peoples, i.e., Finno-Ugric and Samoyedic peoples. Fenno-Ugria was established as an organization in 1927 and re-established after Estonia regained independence in 1991. For the Seto, kinship and shared struggle is claimed with other named indigenous groups (e.g. Mari, Komi, Saami) in different parts of Russia and Northern and Eastern Europe. The mentioned

transnational aspect appears to be connected to imaginaries of rupture, unity disrupted by modern nation-state borders, e.g., for the Seto (Estonia, Russia) or the Saami (Russia, Norway, Sweden, Finland). In 2017, Seto Congress adopted the Declaration of Indigeneity (Seto Kongress, 2017).

Estonian Indigenous Languages Cooperation Council advocacy group includes representatives from Seto, Võro, Mulgi, Kihnu, Kodavere, Kuusalu, and Sõrve language activists and communities. The names used also denote placenames, whereas the listed have all been previously identified by linguists as ‘dialects’ of Standard/Literary/Written Estonian, even though the latter is chronologically a later invention in comparison to those local/regional spoken languages. Historically, Literary Estonian was developed by the Baltic German clergy and linguists, mostly established on North-Estonian varieties by the 18th/19th centuries (see Laanekask and Ross 2008; Ross 2019). The Centre for South Estonian Language and Culture Studies at the University of Tartu was founded in 2000 to enhance Võro, Seto and Mulgi studies (institutionalized knowledge production, naming specifically as indigenous).

- **Narratives of ethnolinguistic allegiances have played a role in shaping the identities, recognition, and preservation of some of the communities. Aligning with broader linguistic families has given the communities and their languages legitimacy and visibility but it can also risk overshadowing the local and reducing communities to subcategories of larger/other groups.**

3.8 Language as heritage, language as commodity

By imagining languages as heritage or commodity, languages may gain value (for commodification see Heller 2010). Lonardi (2021) has reviewed literature on minority languages and tourism and found that minority languages, perceived as authentic by tourists, may contribute to language maintenance. However, there are also problematic issues with commodifying minority languages such as objectified use of minority languages, neglecting minority language communities or community members (ibid.).

Heritage, regarded as “an expansive paradigm, made in myriad practices where the past is valorised for the present” (Critical Heritages of Europe Series prelims), plays arguably as an important role in language maintenance (Ernštreits et al. 2025). The UNESCO 2003 Convention for the Safeguarding of the Intangible Cultural Heritage (ICH) conceptualises language as ‘a vehicle’ for sustaining and transmitting oral traditions and cultural expressions, whereas distinct languages remain outside of the remit of this legal instrument. Recent scholarship and practices to safeguard ICH have largely been driven by an increasing awareness of the need to challenge previous hegemonic heritage discourses celebrating the past, in order to acknowledge the concept of ‘living heritage’ that highlights the processual nature of heritage (see Bortolotto and Skounti 2024). To promote safeguarding, UNESCO established two lists: Representative List of the Intangible Cultural Heritage of Humanity, and the List of ICH in Need of Urgent Safeguarding, both of which document ICH, acknowledge its significance, and motivate countries to take additional steps to protect and revitalize it. Other entities, for example memory institutions such as museums, also play an important role in showcasing languages as part of ICH (Sönmez et al. 2020).

A vital feature of Seto heritage culture happens to be oral – for example, Seto *leelo* – their polyphonic singing tradition, which was inscribed on the UNESCO Representative List of Intangible Cultural Heritage in 2009. Such a global recognition was sought after by Seto community members who saw

the overarching role of singing practices in upholding Seto culture and identity (Kuutma 2010). Seto *leelo*, with its rich archive of collected songs that demonstrate the instrumental significance of creative poetry, is one of the paramount vehicles for retaining Seto heritage language. Therefore, the role of heritage culture as well as cultural expression encompassing verbal communication in any form should not be underestimated from the perspective of retaining or vitalizing endangered languages (see Kuutma and Kästik 2014). Throughout the 20th century, industrialization as well as socio-political ruptures (including border shifts) significantly affected the Seto and their language. Urban growth began in the late 19th century, with the world wars prompting rural-to-urban migration, which took full swing under the Soviet rule. During the tsarist period and WW1, numerous Setos migrated to bigger Estonian towns, while some Seto speakers resettled in Eastern Siberia (Juhkason et al., 2012). The Seto diaspora experiences a sense of separation from Setomaa, causing their efforts to preserve their language to predominantly focus on the past (cf. heritagization; Kuutma and Annist, 2020). In Estonia in general, urbanization accelerated after the World Wars as people relocated to cities (Tammaru, 2002). Today, many settlement systems, including the Seto region, are experiencing a decline in Estonia (Leetmaa and Väiko, 2015). For example, the Seto population in the Pskov oblast in Russia decreased drastically from around six thousand to just a couple of hundred in the second half of the 20th century (Manakov 2004; 2009). See also Section 3.1.

On the other hand, another significant issue impacting Seto language vitality involves the growing prominence and ascendance of promoted and actively displayed heritage culture in the region. Beyond the Seto heritage has been displayed in over ten local museums on both sides of the border (Piho 2025), the language and culture of the Setos have also become commodified. By commodification, language gains value, especially in key areas such as tourism, marketing, and the performing arts (Heller 2010). Of special relevance in this regard is that Seto heritage culture serves as income in the region, and those in a position to claim and commodify Seto-ness have benefited from heightened access to resources. Yet some ethnographic studies (e.g. Annist 2013, 2018) have also shown certain disapproving sentiments among locals who perceive heritage-centric Seto culture as being imposed upon them. They feel that *setotamine* – derogatively said for creating Seto-ness or Seto-ization as a targeted act and public performance (cf. lived experience by previous generations) – shifts focus away from more pressing current concerns. With the Seto heritage being established by experts, institutional funding excludes other interpretations of local culture (Annist 2009).

Regarding Burgenland Croatian, the UNESCO Convention on Safeguarding the Intangible Cultural Heritage was ratified by Austria in 2009. Burgenland Croatian is not listed among the intangible cultural heritage of Austria in the category of “oral tradition” in contrast to other minority languages such as Roman, the language of the Burgenland Roma, and Slovene in Slovene in Carinthia. Nevertheless, the Burgenland Croatian cultural practices appear in the social practices and their wedding traditions are commonly acknowledged in Stinaz, the so-called Stinatz-wedding. There might have been moments of commodification relating to the “Krowodnrock” of the 1980s, when the stigma of being Croat was shed and started to be considered as “young and cool”. However, unlike the case of Seto, there are no cases of the language gaining value in key areas such as tourism, marketing and performing arts.

Considering Cornish, the identity and culture are increasingly framed through intangible cultural heritage (ICH) discourse. Cornwall Council, along with other organisations, has commissioned initiatives (e.g. Mapping Intangible Heritage) to document and support living cultural practices, including the Cornish language, music, festivals, and customs. These efforts show an intent to build

recognition, visibility, and institutional legitimacy for Cornish ICH. The process of heritagisation underlining the region's distinctiveness is evident in both grassroots and state-led actions, with the recognition of Cornwall's mining landscape as a UNESCO World Heritage Site and its status as a Council of Europe-recognised National Minority. There is also growing evidence of language commodification in which the language is increasingly used in marketing, tourism, and regional branding, especially during events like St Piran's Day or Speak Cornish Week, where it is adopted by businesses and institutions for symbolic value. As is the case in broader trends, symbolic capital can bring visibility, funding, and local pride, but leaves a risk of unequal benefit or superficial engagement. Finally, there is active advocacy regarding implementing the 2003 UNESCO Convention for the Safeguarding of Intangible Cultural Heritage, with Cornish groups arguing for Cornwall's traditions and language to be formally recognised within national ICH inventories.

A significant 'moral argument' suggests that 'as more nation-states ratify the UNESCO Convention, the stature of ICH as a global resource for humanity will increase,' and those that do not sign it miss out on substantial international cooperation (Nic Craith et al. 2019:127). Viewing language as intangible cultural heritage (ICH) might motivate museums and heritage organizations that predominantly emphasize tangible heritage to incorporate ICH into their policy goals (Braber and Howard 2023).

- **Recognizing language as intangible cultural heritage emphasizes its role not just as a communicative tool but as a living expression of identity, creativity, and communal memory. Global frameworks can both empower local revitalization efforts and raise critical questions about commodification, ownership, and authenticity. Balancing heritage preservation with lived experience remains a central challenge for sustaining minority languages in meaningful ways.**

4 Current language and speaker situation

4.1 Speaker situation

Speaker numbers and language skills

According to Spolsky (2004, 2009, 2007:3), language practices – “the real policy” – are the key component of language policies. The following section gives insights into available data to illuminate possible language practices.

According to Estonia's population census 2021, approximately 100,000 Estonian native-speaking residents reported their command of two comprehensively close southern Estonian varieties of Seto and Võro (Statistikaamet 2021). According to 2011 census data (Statistikaamet 2021), there were 12,500 Estonian L1-speaking residents who claimed to understand and express themselves in Seto. Most of them live outside Seto traditional habitat, Setomaa, mostly in urban centres. When surveyed for subskills, there was no generational difference in writing in Seto: all 18+ residents of Seto municipalities scored equally low (Koreinik and Praakli 2013: 138-139).

Burgenland Croatian is estimated to have approximately 60,000 speakers (Hrvatski Centar, nd.). The Austrian minority language laws follow a territorial principle, meaning that the speakers of Burgenland Croatian can only be supported in six out of seven districts of the Burgenland province and not in other provinces or in Vienna, which could be considered problematic as a large number of speakers of

Burgenland Croatian (15 000 according to Hrvatski Centar, 2025) now reside in Vienna. Around 5,000 people can speak Aranese, with another 1000 to 2000 that can either read it or understand it (Generalitat de Catalunya, 2019). According to the British census of 2021, Cornish has 567 speakers in England and Wales (Office for National Statistics, 2021). It has to be taken into account that speaker number estimates do not show language vitality, but rather reflect questions of identifies, affiliations, recognition, and in the case of census also policies underlying their compilation, execution and interpretation also affect these numbers.

However, interview data collected in the Seto community indicates that the number of speakers retrieved from census data covers a broad range of language skills, in some cases reflecting also more of a desired ethnic association, rather than actual communicative skills and practices (Jääts 2015). Speaker numbers may also carry political and symbolic weight, and they might be used to justify funding, rights, and educational programmes.

The speakers of these languages are commonly multilingual and fluent in the language of the dominant neighbouring communities. For example, the Seto are fluent in Estonian, and younger generations most probably also in English (Koreinik and Praakli 2013: 137), older generations most probably in Russian, depending on when they received formal education. Cornish speakers usually speak English as their first language. In the Aranese community, it has been common to be fluent in Aranese, Catalan and Spanish. Kahl (2003) calls the Aromanians chameleons of the Balkan because they had to learn to adjust/assimilate to the political powers they territories they traditionally lived in were occupied by, where they – mor or less voluntarily – moved to. As a result, they are one of the most polyglot groups in Southeastern Europe. Individual and community multilingualism has led to translanguaging practices. Generational differences in language skills and attitudes towards language authorship and authenticity might have led to younger speakers identifying as Seto culturally but feeling linguistically insecure - learning Seto through limited input but lacking full fluency. Differences of opinion over orthographies and standards might also cause frustration and further linguistic insecurities. In the indigenous communities, new speakers may face suspicion or gatekeeping from community members. This varies greatly depending on local contexts, however. While the RISE UP team reports generally positive attitudes towards new speakers in Aromanian-speaking communities (Eppler 2025), this generalization may be overly broad. Given the sociolinguistic pressures, low prestige, and ongoing assimilation affecting Aromanian, attitudes towards new speakers are likely to vary across communities rather than being uniformly positive (Mutavdžić 2010). There are the historical, linguistic, and political debates surrounding the Aromanian language and identity, highlighting competing views on whether Aromanian is a distinct language or a dialect of Romanian (Oczko 2021, Negoită 2022). Negoită (2022) emphasizes the strong role of nationalism, state politics, and external influences (especially from Romania and Greece) in shaping these debates and the internal divisions within Aromanian communities. Overall, it shows that questions of language and identity are deeply contested and closely tied to broader sociopolitical dynamics rather than being purely linguistic issues. For example, in Greece, De Lusignan Fan Moniz (2024) highlights that, without effective revitalization efforts, Aromanian is likely to disappear within one or two generations.

Population density

In densely populated areas, especially when that density includes speakers of dominant languages, the use of the indigenous and minoritized languages often becomes less common. Low density, by contrast, can lead to greater isolation and accompanying language preservation. Yet, when the density

becomes too low and the population becomes small or scattered, social networks weaken and language use declines.

As Setomaa is a rural region in southeastern Estonia, it is characterized by sparse population, limited infrastructure, and distance from urban centres. Whereas in the past, low-density areas may have had fewer outside influences, allowing communities to preserve languages with more authenticity and continuity, far-reaching changes in life arrangements have led to this becoming a disadvantage. Whilst the population density is low in Setomaa, the community is not self-sufficient. Its members have to go out of the community to access public services. Areas with higher population density tend to have better access to education and other institutions that can actively support the preservation of language.

Crises, like the looming of wars nearby, might further affect the population densities of borderland territories like Setomaa. In geopolitically sensitive areas, such as the border territories of Russia, even perceived threats can trigger fear and uncertainty that affect migration patterns.

Migration

The migration of people from rural to urban areas has brought significant shifts in language practices, affecting intergenerational transmission. Language skills might have become receptive or symbolic, overhearers might have turned into rememberers. For the Setos who have moved primarily to Tallinn or Tartu, Estonian is the dominant language (together with English in some spheres of life), for Burgenland Croats moving to Vienna this has led to a shift towards German, etc.

New speakers are few and far between in the Seto community; they are more abundant in the Aranese, Cornish and Croatian communities in which they are perceived positively, and the latter language being offered as a course for adults both in the Burgenland and in Vienna points to this too (Hrvatski centar, 2020).

- **While census data and speaker numbers give an insight into the speakers' and community's language situation, they also obscure the complexities of actual language practices and speaker competences. Language vitality depends not only on the number of people who identify as speakers, but ultimately, preserving these languages requires nuanced understanding beyond statistics, and acknowledging the social, cultural, and political dynamics that shape their use in everyday life.**

4.2 Language situation

Language endangerment

All of the above has led to these languages being considered as endangered: they all can be considered endangered to different degrees, and the specific challenges the communities face with language maintenance might differ. The 2022 Setomaa Development Plan (*Setomaa valla arengukava*) highlights the following challenges (pp. 96-97) related to language vitality: a) limited use of Seto language at home, which leads to difficulties using or learning the language in school; b) differing visions of what should be achieved through Seto language/culture study in schools and what results are expected; c) project-based financing means that each year new funding applications must be prepared, leading to financial instability and making long-term planning uncertain; d) Lack of teacher

training opportunities; e) lack of language learning opportunities for adults, paucity of language products in Seto.

Further, issues of language maintenance are inherently embedded in larger geopolitical power plays and negotiations. As tends to happen, controversy over what fits in the bounds of a particular named “language” and what is “correct” standard language also impacts questions of language maintenance. In Southern Estonia, overlapping identity and language frameworks advanced by Seto and other activist groups come into play. For instance, Võro is another Southern Estonian variety and together with Seto (sometimes as well as Tartu and Mulgi) is often referred to as “Southern Estonian” or “South Estonian” (Meior 2012). Historically, Estonian dialectologists categorized Seto as a sub-dialect of Võro (Pajusalu 2007), and, more recently, the hyphenated Võro-Seto has also been used to describe communicative practices. Language mixing is common, with people combining elements, for instance, from Seto, Estonian, Russian, Võro, etc. in the same exchange (Koreinik 2011). While this, of course, is not in itself problematic, this natural languaging, then, translates uncertainly when attempting to box into hegemonic, normative categories of separate, named languages (see Holsapple 2022 on a problematization of which communicative practices are lauded as “multilingualism” vs. stigmatized as “no language”).

Language use in schooling

The extent to which these languages are used in education varies across the communities. The Seto language is not widely used in education as it is not part of the national education curriculum. Still, the subject “Seto language and culture” is taught in several schools in southeastern Estonia, and since 2021, the Värskas Kindergarten (Värskas lasteaed 2023) has offered a Seto-language group. The South-Estonian Language and Cultural Research Centre (Lõuna-Eesti keele- ja kultuuriuuringute keskus 2023) at the University of Tartu offers Seto (also Võro and Mulgi) language courses, as well as a higher education specialization in teaching of South-Estonian language and culture. Of relevance here is that the Centre refers to Seto, Võro, and Mulgi specifically as indigenous languages (*est põliskeeled*). Further, Estonian Public Broadcasting (ERR 2023) features a weekly news program in Seto, currently hosted by Maria Grünberg. For Seto-language texts see Section 2.3.

Aranese is the Medium of Instruction (MOI) in Early Childhood Education, in primary schools all three official languages are used as MOI and in secondary each of the official languages is taught for two hours per week (Generalitat de Catalunya, n.d.).

A large issue for Cornish in the educational system is the lack of teacher training and the lack of integration of the language into the educational system, as only 40 state-run primary schools out of 238 trialled a Cornish language course. There was a specific programme in place called Go Cornish, which aimed to teach elementary Cornish to pupils of primary schools (Golden Tree Productions 2025).

The situation of schooling is different in all five countries where Aromanian is spoken (Albania, Bulgaria, Greece, North Macedonia, Serbia and Romanian). In Albania, Aromanian is a recognised minority language, and the Albanian state provides support for primary education in Aromanian. In state schools, Aromanian is taught as an elective in four localities. An intensive Aromanian teaching programme (three hours/week for six months) for emergent and proficient Albanian-Aromanian (Farsherot variety) bilingual children between the ages of 12 and 15 was launched in 2015 and is still running, be it with reduced number of students (Stoica, personal communication with Eva Eppler 29/01/23).

In **Bulgaria**, Aromanian is neither taught nor used as a medium of instruction in state schools; there are no official school programmes (Mercator 2024). Between 2003 and 2015, private language courses (approx. 100 hours of instruction) were organised in three locations in Bulgaria with an Aromanian population (approx. 50 participants). The financial support by the Bulgarian government was insufficient to keep the courses going (Kyurkchiev 2023)

In **Greece**, the law does not allow for Aromanian to be used as medium of instruction in school; neither does it make provision for the teaching of the language. The language is thus not taught in schools, but by a number of Aromanian/Vlach associations who offer courses for both children and adults (Mercator 2024). The running of the courses depends on demand.

In **North Macedonia**, the Aromanian language was introduced in the kindergarten in Kruševo in 2021. Currently, the elective 'Language and culture of Vlachs' is taught in state-run primary schools in four municipalities (used to be seven in 2001) with about 500 students. There were also free Vlach language courses available for adults between 2020 and 2023, and a summer school for children which focuses on culture, rather than language (Nikolova 2025).

In **Serbia**, legislation does not provide for the teaching of the Aromanian language in schools. The [Serbian-Aromanian association Lunjina \('light'\)](#) offered Aromanian language courses (once per week) for beginners, advanced students as well as new speakers (Mercator 2024). *Lunjina* furthermore organises lectures on Aromanian culture, the audience of which was larger than that for the language courses. *In Medias Res* is purportedly hosting language classes in Pancevo.

In **Romania**, publicly funded schools can optionally introduce the teaching of the subject 'Aromanian culture and traditions' which also includes language lessons. The course was attended by approx. 500 students in Constanța county in 2017 ([ACR 2017](#)). The Ministry furthermore approved the grade X optional course 'Aromanian Literature' (one hour/week) in 2007, and the elective 'Aromanian culture and civilization' in 2020. The Romanian government grants scholarships to Romanians from abroad (on the basis of 'certificates of Romanian-ship', which can be issued by Aromanian associations in e.g. Albania), and reserves places at higher education institutions in Romania for grant holders. Online beginner and advanced-level Aromanian courses for adults living in the diaspora are available as well. The medium of instruction for these courses is English.

Concerning Burgenland Croatian, bilingual (German/Croatian) schooling was obligatory in bilingual municipalities until 1994 when the newly introduced Minority School Act for Burgenland allowed parents to opt out, which has been seen as a change for the worse by Burgenland Croatian activists.

- **The languages can be considered as facing various degrees of endangerment. While some institutional support exists, challenges such as limited language use at home, insufficient teacher training, fragmented funding, and the lack of language products persist. The boundaries of these languages might be contested, which makes the revitalisation efforts more difficult.**

5 Current language policies

5.1 Local governance and language

Depending on their pasts, states have different levels and jurisdictions of governance: local and/or regional. One important aspect of governance is how much power is allocated to **local governance** and what their jurisdiction is. Another is whether minority speakers are concentrated in their traditional habitat or are dispersed all over or beyond the territories of respective nation-states, which challenges the possibilities of local governance to target their languages and makes it more of a national or international issue. This poses a question, namely should language rights be with territory (traditional habitat) or with people (individual speakers)? Furthermore, administrative reforms, including redistricting, are normative choices made by state polities in their constitutions and through judicially developed principles of redistricting such as reorganising electoral space (Gardner 2019; Weichelt and Webster 2019).

In Estonia, there is a right public administration and information in the state language, Estonian (Language Act § 8), which means that the language of public administration in state agencies and **local government authorities** is Estonian (§10). Permanent residents, belonging to a national minority, non-Estonian speakers in municipalities where they form the majority can use a foreign language alongside Estonian (§8,11). In the area where a regional variety is used, the text of equal meaning in *the respective dialect* may be added to the text that follows the Literary Standard i.e. bilingual signage (§4; our emphasis).

The Seto speaking areas, some of which had a significant share of Russian-speakers, were incorporated to the Estonian Republic in 1920 (see Section 2.1). In 1922, eleven rural municipalities were established from four former parishes in the Pskov Governorate (RT 1922). In 1939, minor redistricting was carried out, and the names of five rural municipalities in Petseri County were Estonianized. The goal of the 1939 administrative reform was to strengthen, centralize, and optimize rural self-government. However, this reform was later reversed by the administrative changes implemented during the Soviet era (Pae and Tammiksaar 2015). The 1950s administrative reform in Estonia, the most radical in history, dismantled the existing system during the height of Stalinism and was preceded by a second mass deportation in the Spring of 1949, which aimed to force rural residents into collective farms (Uuet 2018). On the other hand, the 2017 administrative reform consolidated the three remaining municipalities into a single Setomaa rural municipality in Võru County.

In Estonia the Local Government Organisation Act (KOKS § 2) states that local government is based on the administrative division and is managed by elected legislative and executive bodies. Local issues such as social and welfare services, cultural, sports and youth work, housing and utilities, the supply of water, waste management, spatial planning, public transportation, the maintenance of local roads, pre-school childcare institutions, schools, libraries, community centers, museums, sports facilities, shelters, care homes, health care institutions and other local agencies are addressed through opinion polls and public initiatives. The owner of a municipal school (basic (Grades 1-9) and upper-secondary school (Grades 10-12)) can be, and typically is, a rural or city municipality (PGS). The ongoing educational reform in Estonia is creating state-owned upper-secondary schools, impacting the school network and access to quality education throughout the country. The state government plans to close or consolidate small upper-secondary schools, including Setomaa Gymnasium with its 37 students

(HaridusSilm nd.). The Estonian state began negotiations with municipal governments to reorganize the school network, but the final decision rests with the school owners, namely the municipal governments.

The autonomous community of Catalonia is responsible for minoritized languages within its borders. Val d’Aran also has its own General Council as a representative body with the interests of the Aranese-speaking community at heart. In the Burgenland Croatian case, the local laws have quite a large say regarding education, such as the Minority School Act for Burgenland which allows Burgenland Croatian to be used as the language of instruction in primary schools. Croatian is used in a wide range of primary (and in one middle) school(s) that have implemented bilingual schooling (Tyran 2022b: 10-11).

Estonia has a regional program for the sustainability of Setomaa municipality, administered by the Ministry of Finance since 2020 (in 2016-2019 by the Ministry of Rural Affairs; in 2006-2015 by the Ministry of Interior). Applicants, including the municipality and third-sector organizations, must provide 15% co-financing. The program focuses on developing local entrepreneurship, offering training and education tailored to business needs, preserving traditional skills, producing ecological products from local resources, and enhancing regional marketing. Additionally, it aims to encourage people to settle in the area through targeted campaigns. Moreover, there is the Setomaa Culture Programme 2010-2013, which is a follow-up of the Setomaa Culture Programme funded by the Ministry of Culture in 2003- 2005 and the Setomaa National Culture Programme 2006-2009. Its aim is to preserve cultural and linguistic uniqueness, lifestyle, customs, traditions, and skills. The efforts focus on enhancing the environment for the Seto language and traditional culture, expanding the contexts and domains in which the Seto language is used, and strengthening the community within this cultural region.

According to Tyran (2022a) “Minority language rights in Austria follow the territorial principle and apply only in what is considered as “autochthonous” territory of settlement. Therefore, the Croatian language is legally protected only in six out of seven districts (Neusiedl am See, Eisenstadt Umgebung, Mattersburg, Oberpullendorf, Oberwart, and Güssing) in the federal province of Burgenland, but not in other federal provinces or the Austrian capital, Vienna, where a considerable number of Burgenland Croats also live.” (Tyran, 2022a: 7). The effects of Germanization and pressure to assimilate can still be seen today, especially in the domains of education, media, and public administration. Many top-down measures and initiatives are criticized for being merely symbolic with little impact on the structural challenges of the community (Tyran 2022b).

- **The reforms, such as administrative optimization and nationalization of the school network, impact communities that speak minoritized languages by facilitating outmigration and hindering language transmission.**
- **The schooling in minority languages suffers from similar challenges to their majority counterparts, such as teacher retention, lack of access to quality education, diverse classrooms (which require extra effort and teaching methodologies). Additionally, minority language schooling is placed at the margins of schooling namely at the end of the school day, as an extracurricular activity.**

5.2 State language policies: language acts, legal debates and law dynamics

In his analysis of language legislation types, Dunbar (2002; 2010) considers Estonia, together with the other Baltic nations, Catalonia, and Quebec, to exemplify a promotion regime, where individuals have

the right to access services and to be employed in the national language. In addition, there are requirements concerning public information and enforcement strategies, which include substantial penalties for rule violations and specialized regulatory entities with considerable authority (ibid.). According to him, all promotion regimes have “an official language” of “the nation” spoken by the majority but being still vulnerable due to historical reasons (e.g. Russification and Russian-speaking labour migrants in the case of Estonia).

Clearly, the promotion system in Estonia, along with its constitutional directives, as well as laws governing language, education, and media, influences the preservation of the Seto language. This is because it classifies languages into categories of state language and foreign languages, while the Seto language does not easily align with the established legislative classifications. The main act of law concerning language is the Language Act (Keeleseadus 2011), together with the regulations adopted based on it. It regulates the use of Estonian as the official language, the requirements for proficiency in Estonian in certain domains and the circumstances in which languages other than the official language may be used. The requirements governing the use of Estonian are divided into official language use, which must comply with the Estonian Literary Standard, and public language use, such as in advertisements, announcements and references in which case ‘good practice’ is followed and special regional varieties of Estonian, including Seto, may be used (Keeleseadus § 4(1)). By “regional varieties of Estonian”, the Act refers to dialects of the Estonian language such as Seto traditionally spoken by people in certain regions. Another important provision for the Seto language is that the state must support the protection, use and development of the regional varieties of the Estonian language (Keeleseadus § 3(3), Meiorig 2012).

An in-depth analysis of language-related Estonian policy highlights shows that there are many grey areas and unaddressed contradictions that make it uncertain how language rights function in practice (Meiorig 2012). In 2023, the Estonian Language Council advised the Ministry of Education and Research and the Ministry of Culture to analyse the status of the southern Estonian languages, Võro and Seto, and propose a legal status for them. They also recommended conducting a legal, sociolinguistic, and financial impact analysis, including options for selecting one’s mother tongue in the Population Register, and implementing measures to support language preservation and transmission.

Policy and discourse at the Estonian state level are largely one-way, in that they construct standard Estonian itself as in need of protection, but do not consider the impact that privileging of standard Estonian has on the vitality of other languages or communicative practices. The concentric formations of hegemony that often come into play in language rhetoric and planning are evident in this regard. In the larger Estonian context, privileging of standard Estonian works to marginalize Seto and other smaller languages or language varieties. At the same time, as mentioned earlier, privileging Seto at the municipal level can work to delegitimize alternative visions and expressions of local identity. For example, an ethnographic study has brought to light the non-involvement of local youth when Seto activists have become dominant, to the point of creating a minority within the minority (Annist 2018: 308). Such findings are extremely relevant regarding questions of language revitalization, as they show how exclusionary rhetoric and policy can, in effect, work to demotivate (potential) speakers and learners of Seto.

In Austria, there is a form of financial support for national minorities called “Volksgruppenförderung”: “The Federal Chancellery of Austria, Department for National Minority Affairs (‘Volksgruppenangelegenheiten’) guarantees subsidies for national minorities. According to the

National Minorities Act ('Volksgruppengesetz'), the federal government funds measures and projects that serve to preserve and safeguard the existence of the national minorities, their ethnicity as well as their characteristics and rights. Furthermore, intercultural projects that serve the coexistence of the ethnic groups are also subsidised." (Bundeskanzleramt n.d.)

Aromanian is not considered a minority by the Romanian state, but as previously mentioned, they are considered "Romanians from everywhere", which means that the speakers cannot access funding or state-supported mechanisms for minoritized languages as they are not recognized as such, and the situation is similar in Bulgaria and in the other countries in which Aromanian communities find themselves (Kyurkchiev, 2023).

- **State language policies and legal frameworks, while aiming to protect national languages, might further marginalize indigenous and minoritized languages. Such policies might favour dominant national narratives, often at the expense of inclusivity and effectiveness in language preservation.**

5.3 Other state policies which work as language policies

A clear example of language management is when a nation-state establishes laws that dictate official language use, such as requiring a specific language for instruction in schools or for business with government agencies. Namely, "(s)chooling is by its very nature a domain committed to language management" (Spolsky 2007: 7). Schools often reflect the ideological stance and directions of national governments (Spolsky 2007: 11). "Education in and out of school is a key domain in which language policies perform their social role" (McCarty 2011:3). Thus the central issues of LP include the question of who is taught what, how, and how learning and teaching practices are to be governed, who sets the (national) curricula, and who organizes education from early childhood to post-secondary education, as well as issues relating to teacher training (Spolsky 2017; Hult 2014: 159). Teachers, however, are at the key agents of language policy since the classroom is a key site where policies become action. Moreover, teachers make decisions every day that amount to developing language policies for their classrooms. For instance, teachers decide which language(s) to use during instruction, which language(s) to encourage when students speak to each other, which words are taboo, etc. Policy, then, is not just an area that lawmakers and politicians should care about. In fact, a range of individuals are involved in making, interpreting, and implementing educational language policy other than legislators and education ministers: teachers, administrators, parents, textbook publishers, curriculum developers, and the list goes on.

According to the Basic Schools and Upper Secondary Schools Act (2010), the language of instruction in the whole of Estonia is Estonian. However, schools must provide language and cultural education for basic education to students whose mother tongue differs from the language of instruction, given that there are at least ten students sharing the same language. Schools may increase a student's weekly load by one hour to support this if no teaching hours are available. The Government will outline the conditions for language and cultural education, and schools are responsible for organizing this education and obtaining necessary materials. Each school will also create a curriculum that reflects its unique characteristics while adhering to national curricula. The 20th century brought radical changes to the everyday life of the Seto people: for example, the use of Estonian as the official language and the establishment of an Estonian-language school network during the pre-war Republic of Estonia (Reiman-Otsataru 2025). There are a number of local formal and informal educational initiatives for

transferring Seto language and culture within the curriculum and extra-curricularly, from the 1970s-1990s onward such as *lee/o* choirs and the study of the local history, different events, optional school subjects, creating syllabi and study materials for learning Seto, organizing educational conferences; some of those initiatives were co-funded by the ministries of Education and Research, and of Culture (ibid.).

Furthermore, Cornish is not part of the curriculum in public schools in England (see Broadhurst 2023). There are no legal provisions for or against Cornish due to the fact that Cornish is not mentioned at all. This means that access to education in Cornish is extremely limited, with a prior Cornish GCSE no longer available (Gelderder 2025). However, access to Cornish language education has expanded through projects like Go Cornish and cultural initiatives in primary schools, but coverage is uneven, and quality varies.

The quality of schools that include Cornish depends largely on individual staff interest and external support rather than systemic provision. Moreover, critiques have noted a middle-class bias in who accesses Cornish education, and concerns remain that the revival risks becoming symbolic rather than embedded in everyday (school) life. Significant improvement would require state-backed curriculum integration, teacher training, and long-term investment, with the Government itself having previously stated that education in minority languages should be strengthened. It would seem that there is growing interest for Cornish classes, also in higher education in universities such as Exeter and Cambridge (Gelderder 2025).

An important policy area is the regulation of display of a language in both virtual and physical space, broadly seen as **linguistic landscape** (see Gorter and Cenoz 2023). This includes audio-visual media, such as programs and advertisements, public signage, schoolsapes, and more. Service providers in the audio-visual media sector are required to ensure that any foreign language text is accompanied by an adequate translation into Estonian, both in terms of form and content (Keeleseadus § 18). Although the Seto language is not classified as a foreign language, there have been instances where media content was provided with a Seto-language translation. The orthography of place names which make up an important component of linguistic landscapes should be in accordance with the rules of Estonian orthography and may reflect the local dialectal sound structure of the name (Kohanimeseadus § 10).

There are clear signs in Cornish in the linguistic landscape of Cornwall with the use of bilingual signage (English–Cornish) since at least 2009, supported by formal policy updated in 2015 to also include Cornish in business cards, email sign-offs, and promotional materials. The Cornish Language Strategy 2015–2025 further reinforces this by identifying increased public visibility of the language (including signage) as key to language revitalisation. As a consequence, all new road signs in Cornwall include Cornish, and it is also used by some private businesses, such as Wetherspoons pubs.

The 1993 Act on Cultural Autonomy for National Minorities defines a "national minority" as Estonian citizens with a long-standing connection to Estonia, differing from ethnic Estonians in ethnicity, culture, religion, or language, who seek to preserve their unique identities. While the distinctiveness of the Seto people was recognized in the early twentieth century, in 2002, their representatives declared themselves a separate ethnic group due to concerns about assimilation by ethnic Estonians (Kalkun 2011). Cultural Autonomy Bodies can be established by non-ethnic Estonians of German, Russian, Swedish, and Jewish descent, as well as groups of over 3,000 individuals. Although Seto activists contemplated seeking cultural autonomy, they ultimately decided against it (Lõunaleht 2009). On the

other hand, Cornish activists have chosen to keep seeking more autonomy. Whilst Cornish identity otherwise features modestly in local politics; for example, Mebyon Kernow is a political party that campaigns for Cornish autonomy, calling themselves “the party for Cornwall”. They are the main leaders of the campaign for the greater self-government for Cornwall through the creation of a National Assembly or Parliament for Cornwall (<https://www.cornishassembly.org/>).

- **The presence and visibility of language is crucial for its transfer. While both language of instruction and language as subject relate to language acquisition planning, the display of minority languages in schoolscapes and outside school may have an impact to learning too.**

5.4 The EU policies and other international organizations and initiatives related to language

There are many national, regional and minority languages in the EU, but only some of which have some recognition and support from national language policies (Agarin and Hornsby 2012). Yet, there are several EU funding programmes, many of which are targeted to cooperation, but also require state approval. In the EU, language policy in its narrow meaning is the sole responsibility of member states.

One of the cross-border cooperation programmes is the Estonia-Latvia programme which is implemented under the European territorial cooperation goal (Interreg). The project “Surrounded by heritage” (2024-2026; 300,000€ from ERDF), aimed to raise awareness of the local language and culture among children and young people in Setomaa. Within the project, the space, i.e. the physical learning environment will be designed to represent and promote local heritage culture and language in 7 pilot schools and 7 pilot kindergartens of Estonia and Latvia, including in Setomaa Gymnasium and Setomaa Kindergarten (<https://www.setoinstituut.ee/eesti-lati-projekt-surrounded-by-heritage/>).

There have been calls for stronger European language political involvement e.g. for establishing the EU position of European Languages Commissioner or Ombudsperson and for the new UN Convention to protect minoritized, endangered, and indigenous languages (Suay and Hicks 2020) or otherwise filling the gaps between the EU policies and the reality (Laakso et al. 2016: 8).

There is a certain European ambivalence toward the recognition and promotion of its own linguistic diversity (Moore 2015). Perhaps its colonial and (ethnolinguistic) nationalist past may be the reason why discussions about language rights in Europe and the protection of its minority languages have remained largely theoretical in the form of declarations set up by national governments and supranational organizations (Perrino and Leone-Pizzighella 2019:1; Tender, Vihalem 2009).

The Council of Europe (founded in 1949) is an international organisation of 46 member states committed to further human rights and democracy in Europe. Its **European Charter for Regional or Minority Languages** (ECRML; 1992) is the convention for the protection and promotion of (non-migrant) languages used by traditional minorities. The safeguarding of traditional minorities is tied to its Framework Convention for the Protection of National Minorities (FCPNM; 1995). Despite recognition, such as through FCPNM, national minority cultural spaces are often unknown or poorly understood in Europe (Hodsdon et al. 2025). ECRML is ratified by 25 states, including the UK for **Cornish** and Spain for **Aranese**. In general, Cornish has benefitted from the ratification of ECRML – it gained societal acceptance but, on the other hand, the ratification contribute little for language transfer and “without a meaningful presence in education, the revival of Cornish is likely to remain a very slow and gradual process” (Tresidder 2015: 217). In Spain, at the time of ratification, it was stated that the

provisions of ECRML would be applied only to official languages by the Statute of Autonomy of the Basque Country, Catalonia, the Balearic Islands, Galicia, Valencia and Navarra. Aranese was declared an official language in the Catalan Autonomy Statute in 2006 (Núñez Martínez 2013: 120).

In the early 2000s, activists created an NGO known as the Estonian Bureau of Lesser Used Languages and lobbied for signing and ratifying the Charter and including Southern Estonian language, but were denied (Lokk 2015: 375-380). For reasons mostly related to fear of its application by the country's numerous Russian-speaking minority (Tender 2010: 35), Estonia has not signed the ECRML. This is of relevance to the Seto case, as engagement with the European Charter's broader frameworks might compel Estonia to grant Seto the status of regional language, rather than dialect. Language activists and beyond argue that positive image – both within and outside the community – is imperative for language revitalization efforts.

Austria has signed and ratified the ECRML which includes **Burgenland Croatian**. The reports and recommendations made by the EU following the monitoring procedure relate to issues that are relevant to the community, such as issues regarding support for speakers in the capital. While Romania has also signed and ratified the ECRML, but it does not include **Aromanian** in the list of languages covered under the charter.

Unlike a human or minority rights approach, the ECRML took the cultural rights approach to language protection, namely it is designed to protect languages but not the speakers of these protected languages (Suay and Hicks 2020: 23). While this approach may have appeared appealing at the time of the ECRML was drafted, 25 years later, it has become evident that such a cultural approach alone is not enough and that the speakers themselves need to be protected collectively in terms of actual language rights (ibid. 24-25). Nevertheless, the ECRML has obvious benefits for protected languages and speakers such as the reporting mechanism and changes in legislation: ratification means recognition (ibid). Its **limitations** apply to many domains of European legislation: there is **no executive power** to sanction those states who avoid the ratification or ignore recommendations (ibid. 35).

Following its initiatives of World Atlas of Languages (2010) and the International Year of Indigenous Languages (2019), **UNESCO** launched the International Decade of Indigenous Languages (2022-2032), which aims to ensure the right of indigenous peoples to preserve, revitalize and promote their languages, and to integrate aspects of linguistic diversity and multilingualism into sustainable development efforts. In the past, the rights of indigenous peoples have received little attention in European legal debate, which has focused instead on individual human rights and on the protection of national minorities (Grote 2006: 443). In 2022, representatives of self-identified Indigenous communities in Estonia, including the Seto, issued the Värskä Declaration, asserting that their languages qualify as Indigenous languages. This declaration is primarily a response to UNESCO's 2019 announcement of the 2022-2032 International Decade of Indigenous Languages. It emphasizes the need to revitalize traditional communicative practices in Estonia within the framework of international indigeneity. The declaration calls on the Estonian government to legally recognize Indigenous languages and to create a national action plan in line with the UNESCO program.

International regulations established to safeguard cultural and linguistic diversity often confine languages (and cultures) to geographic areas and link languages with ethnic identities (Mowbray 2012); in the past, the opposite took place, and nations were imagined around their (print) languages

(Anderson 1991). These legal frameworks seldom account for demographic shifts resulting from global changes, like migration, and view languages as singular, uniform entities (Bialostocka 2017).

- **While the EU regulations lack the executive power, increased visibility and recognition enable communities to cooperate and share their best practices.**

6 Conclusions

This report has explored the multifaceted challenges and opportunities surrounding the five minoritized language communities in Europe (Aranese, Aromanian, Burgenland Croatian, Cornish and Seto), emphasizing how language policies have shaped both the suppression and preservation of cultural and linguistic practices.

Communities residing in peripheral and marginalized regions have faced the paradox of both cultural isolation and preservation: historical and on-going marginalization and shifting political powers have paradoxically shielded some communities from rapid assimilation while also restricting their access to political recognition and resources. Migration patterns, both inward and outward, have reshaped settlement areas, weakening language cohesion in some contexts while introducing new dynamics through revival movements and new speakers. Additionally, the politics of language classification and group naming reveal how sociopolitical forces and historical narratives influence legitimacy, visibility, and identity within and beyond these communities.

The report highlights how language activism functions as a crucial tool for reclaiming space and recognition in the face of marginalization, often aligning with broader political and cultural movements. At the same time, the adoption of narratives of ethnolinguistic affiliation can serve as both a means of validation and a risk to local uniqueness. The framing of language as intangible cultural heritage underscores its role as more than a communicative medium—it is a vessel of memory, identity, and creativity. However, such framing also opens questions about commodification, ownership, and authenticity, especially when heritage preservation is often driven more by institutional recognition than lived linguistic experience.

In its analysis of contemporary language practices and policies, the report argues that speaker numbers do not capture the lived experiences of (mixed, multiple) language use and transmission. Furthermore, the report identifies various factors contributing to language endangerment, including the reforms of centralisation and efficiency, such as administrative redistricting, and school consolidation. While some institutional support exists, efforts to revitalize and sustain minority languages often face challenges like insufficient resources, and vague language definitions. Although EU regulations may lack direct enforcement mechanisms, their recognition and visibility afford communities a platform for transnational collaboration and exchange of best practices, pointing to the importance of both top-down support and grassroots engagement in the ongoing effort for the maintenance of these communities.

All in all, the report raises questions, firstly, about how to handle societal and linguistic change while maintaining diversity and authenticity. Secondly, it is a major question how to implement policies aimed at preserving language and community when the speakers are on the move. Thirdly, at multiple scales (EU, national, and local) there is a tension between integration and differentiation, centralization and autonomy. Societal and media fragmentation add further challenges.

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